Xi Xi's Playful Image-texts: Ekphrasis, Parergon, and the Concept of Toy

Keywords: play in literature, ludic, image-text, ekphrasis, parergon, toys in literature, Hong Kong literature

What does the ludic have to do with Xi Xi's writings and creative concerns? Since Jacques Ehrmann's *Game, Play, Literature* (1968) and Warren Motte's *Playtexts* (1995), critical discussions about play have expanded significantly beyond video game studies and child pedagogy to literature and aesthetics. Critics such as Espen Aarseth and Astrid Ensslin (2014) focus on how the reader becomes a player and argue for the importance of "ergodicity", or "non-trivial" (Aarseth 1997: 1) effort that ludic literature demands from readers; Katherine Hayles (2007) discusses how intermediation in digital literature creates ludic effects in the dynamic switching between different interfaces and media; whereas Mihai Spariosu (1997: xv) identifies playful literary discourse as a "liminal mode of being". These studies highlight text-reader interactivity and play as a destabilizing and self-justifying movement at work in literature and aesthetic experience. Nevertheless, they have – as well as most discussions of literary ludicity – focused on literature produced in Europe and North America. This essay thus aims to contribute to existing criticism by exploring how Xi Xi's works offer us new articulations of play.

As one of the most distinguished writers from Hong Kong, Xi Xi (born 1937) attracts a "cult-like following in the Chinese-speaking world" (Walsh 2018) and increasing international critical attention.[1] She has a special place in Hong Kong

---

[1] Cited from web post: Megan Walsh, 3 May 2018, *Literary Hub*, <https://lithub.com/a-rare-conversation-with-the-cult-chinese-writer-xi-xi/>, accessed 29 Sept 2020.

literature, being a figure who contributed to making Hong Kong duly recognized as a flourishing literary and cultural hub rather than a merely financial one. This is not least because she founded with friends Su-Yeh Publications in 1979 to support local authors' creative writing; and due to her iconic representations of Hong Kong, especially *My City*, chosen after 45 years of its first publication as the Book for 2020 by One City One Book Hong Kong community reading project.[2] Xi Xi also has a significant readership in Taiwan, where her main publisher Hong Fan shudian is based; in mainland China, the number of critical essays on Xi Xi increased considerably after 2000 and her works have been reprinted since 2010.[3] A versatile writer who spans diverse genres, Xi Xi has not only won multiple literature prizes in Asia but also gained international recognition, most recently by being awarded the 2019 Newman Prize for Chinese Literature and the 2019 Cikada East Asia Poetry Prize from Sweden. Nevertheless, existing anglophone scholarship on her works does not yet match her renown. The present essay attempts to mitigate this critical shortfall by focusing on Xi Xi's "little prose pieces", or *xiaopin sanwen*, which exist as a third category of Xi Xi's writing besides her fiction and poetry. I approach these prose pieces from the critical perspective of play, which I argue is crucial to understanding the nature of Xi Xi's creative work.

The ludic is highly relevant to Xi Xi because besides their innovativeness and strong resonances with the European avant-garde and magic realism, Xi Xi's writings are also remarkably playful. They encompass themes and techniques ranging from floating cities à la Magritte, fantastic and comical figures such as a plastic dinosaur-litterbug, reinventions of children's literature, collage and photomontage, wordplay in poetry, to her post-2000 turn to the material culture of leisure including toys and

---

[2] See <https://www.onecityonebook.hk/book-for-2020>, accessed 29 Sept 2020.
[3] As evidenced by statistics for publications on Xi Xi on CNKI and Wanfang databases.

decorative artefacts. This ludic characteristic has not gone unnoticed by critics, who have frequently described Xi Xi's works as "witty", "playful", "humorous", "game-like", and full of "marvellous intrigue" (*qiqu*).[4] The importance of the playful spirit is also manifest in the oft-mentioned symbolism of the pen name Xi Xi (her real name being Cheung Yin). She creatively interprets the character *xi* 西, conventionally meaning "west", by emphasizing the character's imagic combination of 兀 and 口, which resembles the legs of "a girl in a skirt playing hopscotch", with the repetition of 西西 evoking a movement between different film frames (Feeley 2019: 5). The pen name itself is an image-text, i.e. neither an image with a dispensable text added to it nor a text that should be read independently of the image, but an intermedial work conceived and understood as a whole.

That the intermedial image-text should be the site of Xi Xi's ludic aesthetics is not accidental, the present essay will argue. A cursory glance over Xi Xi's diverse works suffices to affirm the enduring presence of image-texts that notably involve playful creative techniques such as collage and leisure objects. These include earlier collections of Xi Xi's weekly columns (*zhuanlan*) such as *Scrapbook* 剪貼册 (1991), *Picture/Storybook* 畫/話本 (1995), *Jigsaw Puzzles* 拼圖游戲 (2001), all comprising mini-essays each with a matching image, printed in the format of the text and image mirroring each other on opposite pages. More recent image-text publications have involved themes of animals and toys, for example: *The Teddy Bear Chronicles* 縫熊志

---

[4] See Jennifer Feeley, "Xi Xi", *Chinese Literature Today*, 8:1 (2019): 5; Tammy Lai-ming Ho, "Xi Xi, the Poet of Hong Kong", *Chinese Literature Today,* 8:1 (2019): 6-9; Xi Xi and Ho Fuk Yan, *The Topic of Time* 時間的話題 – 對話集 (Hong Kong: Suye, 1995): 8; Li Xiaohan 李筱涵, interview with Xi Xi, "遊於藝, 說人間: 西西大玩於世 的人生視野", *Unitas* (聯合文學), 9 Jan 2020, <http://www.unitas.me/?p=12441>. The term *qiqu* also appears in Xi Xi's "An Addendum to *Cosmicomics*" (宇宙奇趣補遺) and *Looking at Houses* 看房子 (Taipei: Hongfan, 2008).

(2009), which includes biographical sketches of historical and mythical figures impersonated by Xi Xi's handcrafted teddy bears, shown in photos; *Chronicles of Apes and Monkeys* 猿猴志 (2011) in a similar vein; and *My Toys* 我的玩具 (2019), an essay and photo collection of Xi Xi's columns on toys written for *Ming Pao Weekly*. These works all take the image-text form, and are written as *xiaopin sanwen*. Prompted by their explicit references to objects and activities of play, we may ask: how specifically are Xi Xi's image-texts constructed in game-like ways? What modes of play do they engage with? And what playful experience do they offer to readers and viewers?

These are the central questions explored in this essay, with the afore-mentioned works forming the general scope of examination. On the one hand, to shed light on the image-text's intermediality, my discussion involves two key concepts in art history: ekphrasis, generally denoting literary writing that represents and expounds (*ekphrazein*: explain, recount, speak out) images and artworks; and the parergon, understood not only as visual framing (after Derrida's interpretation of the term) but also by its more ancient, Kantian meaning as "ornament" and "supplement" to the artwork. On the other hand, to address Xi Xi's representations and engagement with material playthings, I will also consider the concept of toy and how toys are approached in her late works, with an eye to the evolution of Xi Xi's relation to the ludic over time. While existing scholarship has focused on Xi Xi's experimental fiction, fairytale-like style, and representations of Hong Kong,[5] here I emphasize the ludic dimension of her intermedial prose works and argue for its significance. As Xi Xi states (2019: 206), "I play very seriously" ("我玩得很認真").[6] An argument for literary ludics is necessary not

---

[5] See special issue on Xi Xi in *Chinese Literature Today*, 8:1 (2019): 4-67; and Yu Fei 余非, *Changduanzhang* 長短章: 閱讀西西及其他 (Hong Kong: Suye, 1997).

[6] All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

least because fascination with play and leisure is both a rarity in modern and contemporary Chinese literature and a less understood literary enterprise that risks being dismissed by accusations of triviality, infantilization, and unseriousness.[7] Against these depreciating views, this essay seeks to clarify what the ludic means for Xi Xi and maintains that literary play produces aesthetically sophisticated and significant works which engage readers on multiple levels of creative reading and seeing.

Youxi and *wanshang*: Two modes of play from *Scrapbook* to *My Toys*

To start with, the titles of Xi Xi's image-text collections provide two key Chinese terms that suggestively frame the different modes of play underpinning Xi Xi's works. One is *youxi*, appearing prominently in the book *Pintu youxi* (*Jigsaw Puzzles*); the other is *wan*, as in *Wo de wanju* (*My Toys*), which in extension calls to mind the expression *wanshang* 玩賞. These expressions offer two contrasting critical frameworks for play: *youxi* evolves around gaming activity, abstraction, technicality, verbal play, and dynamic movement between text and reader; *wanshang* correlates with the notion of leisure, or play as the negative definition of work, focusing on material objects such as Xi Xi's teddy bears and toys collection that bring pleasurable aesthetic experience.

More specifically, firstly, *youxi* implicitly encompasses and contrasts both game-play – or rather formalistic play in a set format determined by rules – and informal free play, the realm of spontaneity and randomness where rules are either absent or unclear. The title *Pintu youxi* indicates a jigsaw game that offers a bigger picture where every piece of the puzzle finds its own place. As the French Oulipian writer George Perec

---

[7] Xi Xi herself mentions this risk of being criticised for "玩物喪志" ("playing with trifles saps one's will") in 我的玩具 (Taipei: Hongfan, 2019): 206.

(1978: 20) observes, the jigsaw implies a mastermind figure behind the game, giving it a rigid design where everything must fit together seamlessly. Despite this evocation of rule-based play, none of the images used in *Jigsaw Puzzles* is actually a jigsaw picture but results from the collage and juxtaposition of pictures without any apparent rule. This reflects the ambiguity of the phrase *pintu*, which can be understood as both "collage" or "assembling pictures" and "fitting a jigsaw puzzle". In *My Toys*, Xi Xi (2019: 122) states that her choice of *youxi* depends on "the various changes in the game" ("游戲的各種變化"), whereas a "ready-made" ("現成的") game is not good. This contrast between game-play and free play is in fact inherent in the term *youxi*, since besides its modern Chinese use as a noun denoting "game", when taken as two verbs it refers to informal and oscillating playful movements that do not fit into a preconceived game format. *You* denotes "playful wandering, travelling, spontaneous and unobstructed movement", whereas *xi* denotes jocularity produced by jokes, puns, dissimulation and their associated cognitive and psychological effects of humour and fun.[8] Unlike the strict distinctions between game-play and free play in most theories based on European literatures and cultures, such as Roger Caillois's (1958: 52) famous opposition between *paidia* as spontaneous and unstructured play and *ludus* as rationalized and rule-based play, *youxi* encapsulates both modes of play and blurs their boundaries.

Secondly, the *wanshang* mode of play evokes through the character *wan*, with *yu* 玉 for "jade" as its radical, the image of playfully caressing a piece of jade. As a verb *wan* means to play and enjoy, as a noun it denotes a precious object, for instance in the word *guwan*, "antiques". The concept of *wan* therefore highlights the act of savouring,

---

[8] As in expressions such as *xiyan* 戲言 and *xixue* 戲謔. Etymologically, *xi* also refers to military flags and implies contest, which relates back to the idea of games as competition.

repeated perusal, admiration, lighthearted movement, particularly in the context of aesthetic "appreciation" (*shang*) for a marvellous, well-crafted, or precious object. *Wanshang* is therefore a leisurely activity that cultivates aesthetic sensibility towards material objects, offering a contrast with the cognitive and more abstract games and wordplay denoted by *youxi*. *Wanshang* is also more personal and contemplative, so that writing about it is a display of one's taste and sharing of aesthetic experience rather than a demand that the reader becomes an active participant in the text itself. Simultaneously, writing about *wanshang* suggests an understanding of ludic literature as literature about pleasurable objects. This is particularly appropriate in the context of the toys which Xi Xi writes about, from her own teddy bears to her collection of curiosities.

Both *youxi* and *wanshang* reflect the specificity of the Chinese linguistic and conceptual framework underpinning Xi Xi's image-texts. I will therefore pivot my following discussion of playfulness in Xi Xi's image-texts around these two terms and their connotations, arguing that we can discern an aesthetic and ludic trajectory that moves from a *youxi* mode of play – corresponding to Xi Xi's earlier image-texts (*Scrapbook* to *Jigsaw Puzzles*) to a *wanshang* mode of play, manifested in Xi Xi's more recent works such as *The Teddy Bear Chronicles* and *My Toys* in particular.

Playing with ekphrasis

In this section, I argue that Xi Xi's image-texts engage playfully with ekphrasis, this important literary device that puts text and image into interplay and destabilizes any straightforward relation between them. To examine specifically how ekphrasis relates to Xi Xi, we should first consider her image-texts' format. They are constructed and

printed in ways that suggest inter-dependence as well as tension between their textual and visual sides. Each image-text comprises a topical title, e.g. "Onions" or "Van Gogh's Chair", a mini-essay on the topic roughly fitting into one page, and a matching image closely relating to this topic on the opposite page. This format is particularly standardized in *Scrapbook*, *Picture/Storybook*, and *Jigsaw Puzzles*, where the image is usually a photograph of an artwork or object, e.g. Matisse's *Les oignons roses*; or a collage of different images arranged by Xi Xi; or a reproduction of a photograph, e.g. Henri Cartier-Bresson's photo *Tivoli*. In *The Teddy Bear Chronicles* and *My Toys*, images and texts are not always matched one-to-one and page-to-page, but each text is still a mini-essay and matched with at least one image. The intermediality offered by these works may be understood in several different ways. In his *Picture Theory* (1994: 89), W. J. T. Mitchell "employ[s] the typographic convention of the slash to designate the 'image/text' as a problematic gap, cleavage, or rupture in representation. The term 'imagetext' designates composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text. 'Image-text,' with a hyphen, designates *relations* of the visual and verbal".[9] Here, my use of the "image-text" for Xi Xi's *xiaopin wen* covers both Mitchell's synthetic "imagetext" and relational "image-text", since I emphasize the aspects of interactivity, contrast, and complementarity in Xi Xi's works. These intermedial relations elicit a constant to-and-fro movement between word and image, which is, as discussed below, a toying oscillation that is facilitated by ekphrasis and crucial to the creation of ludic movement in *youxi*.

---

[9] I do not agree with Mitchell on the "image/text" as another category besides his "image-text", since I see representational gap and rupture as a relation between text and image too. Nevertheless, the question of rupture is not my focus here, although differences between representational media are alluded to in Xi Xi's ekphrasis.

Upon first impression, one might wonder why these works cannot be simply understood as illustrated books without involving the notion of ekphrasis, which is typically used in the absence of pictures and real artworks so that they can be vividly imagined through ekphrastic description. Although some images in Xi Xi's *xiaopin* prose works play an illustrative role, once we read their accompanying texts we realise that illustration is not the most important aspect because the images rarely offer a visual narrative or validation of the textual content as illustrations do. Xi Xi's images also lack the seriality of illustrations which one finds in children's picture books and comics, so that there is no sense of images themselves sustaining a narrative or illustrating an event.[10] Moreover, Xi Xi states in her preface to *Jigsaw Puzzles* that she did not write texts and then add illustrations to them. Rather, the "pictures were primary, whereas words were secondary" ("以圖為主, 文字為副", Xi Xi 2001: 9). In *Scrapbook*, Xi Xi (1991: 2) also describes her writing as "speaking about images" ("看圖説話"). The texts are therefore written subsequently and *in response to* the images,[11] establishing an important connection to ekphrasis as writing that is essentially concerned with eliciting responses to images and art. What kind of response do we therefore find in Xi Xi's image-texts? How do they engage with ekphrasis to create a ludic aesthetics?

---

[10] In contrast, Xi Xi uses images illustratively in her fiction, where the contextualization of images within a storyline creates images' narrative function. Notably, "Strange Tales from a Floating City" 浮城誌異 (1986) creatively employs Magritte's paintings to illustrate various situations and scenes of the floating city. We also find images in "An Addendum to Cosmicomics" and *My City*, hand-drawn by Xi Xi herself and giving the impression of a children's storybook format. The chapter "Yanse hao" 顏色好 in *Mourning a Breast* 哀悼乳房 (1992) also includes images of artworks and architecture which relate loosely to the theme of breasts, serving as a springboard for Xi Xi's slightly melancholic thoughts about the female breast's symbolism in history and her subtly didactic warning against excessive human intervention in nature (such as breast implants). These writings attest to Xi Xi's inclination to incorporate pictures in her texts though I am not including them in my scope of examination because firstly, they fall outside the non-fictional *sanwen* genre I focus on here; secondly, the relations between image and text in these fictional writings are straightforwardly complementary and do not involve much of the cognitive and intermedial ludicity as in *Jigsaw Puzzles* and *Picture/Storybook*; finally, Xi Xi's fiction has attracted much criticism already, including on its text-image relations, see Ling Yu 凌逾, "难以叙述的叙述 –《浮城志异》的图文互涉", 文艺争鸣, 2 (2010): 79-84.

[11] Or written after the artefacts and teddy bears were already made, as in *My Toys* and *Teddy Bear Chronicles*.

I begin by clarifying what ekphrasis is, focusing on a few understandings of ekphrasis that are particularly relevant to Xi Xi. Originating from ancient Greek poetry, ekphrasis typically refers to detailed and vivid description of an artwork that is either fictional or real but physical absent. Nevertheless, what ekphrasis means, what it is for, and how ekphrastic writing is done remain much debated. Some concrete examples of ekphrasis and the abundant scholarship they have generated may offer us important clues. Famous instances of classical ekphrasis include the *Iliad*'s description of Achilles's shield – a wondrous artefact that exists only in literary imagination, and the Palatine Anthology's 36 epigrams on Myron's ingeniously sculpted cow, which is a lost artwork. As for modern examples, Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror" are often cited. The classical poems show a focus on verisimilitude and the artist's wondrous skill to create illusions, epitomizing Aelius Theon's famous definition (Theon *Progymnasmata* 2.118.7-8, Spengel edn): "Ekphrasis is descriptive speech, bringing what is portrayed clearly before the sight."[12] It has the particular virtue of creating "clarity and a vivid impression of all-but-seeing what is described" (Theon *Progymnasmata* 2.119.27-29). "All-but-seeing" is significant, because it means that "Theon does not conceive of ekphrasis as actually being able to bring absent objects 'before the eyes' of listeners" (Chinn 2007: 268), and that the audience of ekphrasis "*almost* become viewers" (Goldhill 2007: 3). This brings out two critical points about what ekphrasis does: firstly, ekphrasis enables its audience to picture something in the mind, i.e. it is an exercise of imagination that characteristically describes "what does not exist, save in poetry's own fiction" (Hollander 1988: 209), or something that is physically absent. Secondly, ekphrasis makes up for the absence of the

---

[12] Tr. George Kennedy 2000.

image or visual object. Indeed, ekphrasis is fundamentally about absence, for ekphrastic discourse depends on the absence of the object represented in order to recreate its presence – albeit as an illusion. But ekphrasis does simultaneously less *and* more than making up for physical absence: less because the visual lack is still there, for ekphrasis is never a perfect substitute for the object depicted; more because ekphrasis always goes beyond detailed and factual description: it offers interpretations of images and objects and selects particular perspectives of seeing, so that in an extended sense, art history itself is ekphrasis, as Jas Elsner proposes (2010: 10-27).

Keats's and Ashbery's poems are typically seen to exemplify modern ekphrasis that no longer affirms verisimilitude but calls into question the idea of art as representation.[13] Ekphrasis becomes a critical method to explore representational methods, whether pictorial or linguistic. James Heffernan (1991: 299) proposes to define ekphrasis as "the verbal representation of graphic representation". This idea of representing representation, or using "one medium of representation to represent another" (Heffernan 1991: 300) is the third understanding of ekphrasis I'd like highlight as relevant to Xi Xi, to be discussed shown in detail later. As with all intermedial crossings, however, the ekphrastic endeavour to overcome the otherness of visuality through language precisely reveals crucial differences between these two media. One prominent divergence, as Heffernan observes (1991: 301-302), is the narrative impulse in ekphrasis in contrast to pictorial stasis. Images and objects do not tell stories or make arguments,[14] which only language can articulate. Ekphrasis, however, often takes the image as a springboard for storytelling and establishing connections suggested by the

---

[13] See Richard Stamelman, "Critical Reflections: Poetry and Art Criticism in Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror'", *New Literary History*, Vol.15, No.3 (1984): 607-630.
[14] Here I mean independent static images such as a painting or photograph, not a series of images that can create the sense of linear narrative.

image. This fourth point about ekphrastic narrative is also present in Xi Xi's image-texts, which has been observed by Xiaoming Ai (though she does not use the term "ekphrasis"), who argues that Xi Xi's mini-essays "build upon" their matching images to elaborate on narrative possibilities (Ai 1995: 123). Finally, ekphrasis does not necessarily reiterate the intentions of the artist who created the object of ekphrastic discourse. As an interpretive device that crucially involves the writer's response to the visual object, ekphrasis has little obligation towards stylistic and conceptual fidelity to its object. An aesthetic response could range from anything such as critical reflections, personal memories, to coincidental connections. Though these expositions are far from exhaustive, they suffice to show how ekphrasis asks rather than defines how one writes about images and objects, opening up a potentially productive critical space where Xi Xi's works can be explored.

We may now consider how Xi Xi's image-texts engage with the above aspects of ekphrasis. Firstly, many image-texts are constructed to arouse imagination and play with different representational media. For example, "Experiment" 實驗 in *Picture/Storybook* (Xi Xi 2003: 64-65) features a painting by Jackson Pollock (Figure 1), whereas the text proceeds from ekphrasis to reverse ekphrasis, i.e. from verbal representation of paintings to a painterly representation of verbal representation. [insert "fig.1"]

Figure 1. From *Picture/Storybook*, p65.

The text proposes that writers reinvigorate their lack-lustre writing by seeking inspiration from painting, which encompasses wondrously "vibrant and diverse" ("燦爛多姿多彩") forms (Xi Xi 2003: 64). Suggested painterly models include Picasso, Chagall, and Seurat, whose style is described as "like a scattered pile of multicoloured sesame seeds glued one by one to the canvas, but resulting in that the sesame seeds lose their original sense of volume" ("如灑了一大堆七彩的芝麻逐一糊在畫布上卻又叫芝麻們失落它們原有的體積", Xi Xi 2003: 64). If Seurat's style is transferred to writing, "perhaps we would need to separate each word from every other word to avoid words clustering together" ("把一個字一個字隔開不准它們三五成群聚居在一起", Xi Xi 2003: 64). Xi Xi not only represents Seurat's style through language via the simile about sesame seeds but also performs a *reductio ad absurdum* of the ekphrastic endeavour to describe the

artwork meticulously and vividly by proposing that words should literally adopt the material format of Seurat's paintings.

Additionally, the text goes on to ask self-reflexively:

If you ask what painter and which of his painterly styles I am currently imitating by writing this, oh well that would be Jackson Pollock's style. Because his paintings are very abstract and their most distinct characteristic is a morass of continuously extending, sometimes black and white, sometimes multi-coloured noodles on the canvas.

或者你開始要問此刻我在這裏這樣寫是在模倣哪一位畫家以及想表現該畫家的哪一類風格。喔那是賈遜浦洛克的風格因爲他畫的畫十分抽象而最具特色的是畫布上全是一條條連綿不斷亦黑亦白或者七彩的一堆麵條。[15]

The ekphrastic direction bends back on itself and moves, after the previous move from the shape of Seurat's images to the shape of writing, back to the shape of images, this time using the pictorial, – i.e. Pollock's action paintings, – to represent Xi Xi's own essay style. This to-and-fro movement between linguistic and graphic representations is a playful wandering, or *you* as in *youxi*, between word and image. It also creates a sense of "cognitive ludicity" (Ensslin 2014: 28) via its medium switching, which is similar to interface switching in digital literature as Hayles (2007) describes. Playfulness is further accentuated by the matching image that reproduces a Pollock painting: at its bottom right corner the images of a fruit bowl and a spoon and fork are added. This collage of food and cutlery is a visual pun (*xi*) prompting viewers to see Pollock's painting from a culinary perspective, i.e. their graphic lines are like a "morass of

---

[15] Xi Xi 2003: 64-65.

noodles", as Xi Xi humorously suggests. This image-text can thus be understood as an "experiment" in playing with ekphrasis, pushing the limits of the classical idea of ekphrasis as presenting a near-perfect verisimilitude of the real image and creating a mutually mirroring relation between different representational media.

Secondly, Xi Xi's image-texts often develop the narrative potentiality of static images, creating a dynamic between the visible and the readable. This is shown in *The Teddy Bear Chronicles*, where photos present Xi Xi's handmade teddies that embody historical and legendary figures such as Cao Zhi and the Goddess of Luo River or Beauty and the Beast, whereas the accompanying essay tells a story about these historical figures and describes details of their attire. For instance, in "The Gallant Trio" 風塵三俠 (Figure 2), while the photo shows three teddies standing together looking at each other, one ostensibly a lady in a pale violet robe and the other two male teddies in scholarly clothing, only the text clarifies that they represent Li Jing, Lady Red Whisk (Hongfu), and Curly (Qiuranke). [insert "fig.2"]

Figure 2. From *The Teddy Bear Chronicles*, p57.

The text narrates the famous story, originally found in the Tang legend "The Curly-Bearded Hero" (*Qiuranke zhuan*), of how Red Whisk elopes with Li Jing and forms a sisterly friendship with Curly. Moreover, Xi Xi explains in detail the dress style of the three teddies, with reference to historical facts about Tang fashion, for instance the high waistband of Red Whisk teddy's skirt and Li Jing teddy's leather belt and pendant pouch.[16] A chain of representations is put into effect: Xi Xi's crafting of teddies to represent through material artefacts the three characters in "The Curly-Bearded Hero";the photo that shows these teddy bears; Xi Xi's description of their imagery and retelling of the Tang story, which recontextualizes the three teddies into this narrative. This is an ekphrastic move that returns to the original Tang story of the Gallant Trio but rewrites it as an ekphrastic text. From text A – artefact – image of artefact – back to text

[16] See Christina Sanderson's translation in "The Teddy Bear Chronicles: Selected Excerpts", *Chinese Literature Today*, 8:1 (2019): 36-39.

B, which is a reformulation of text A, a circular structure emerges and cleverly creates a series of likenesses, adding a gamelike feeling to Xi Xi's *Teddy Bear Chronicles* project, which already involves the therapeutic and pleasurable activity of handicraft.[17]

Thirdly, Xi Xi's image-texts actively extend and question ekphrasis's ability to make up for the absence of the depicted object, producing a lively alternation between absence and presence. This is most clearly demonstrated in her image-text "Faun" 牧神 (Xi Xi 2003: 48-49), which engages with a double ekphrasis: the ekphrasis of images and musical ekphrasis. In the image (Figure 3), we see three different soundwave charts representing the amplitude and instrumental arrangement of the three sections in Debussy's symphonic poem *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune.* The charts are already image-texts themselves that include visual forms and annotations, doubling the ekphrastic effect of Xi Xi's own text.[18] [insert "fig.3"]

---

[17] Xi Xi started to make teddy bears partly for therapeutic purposes after medical treatment limited her right hand's mobility.

[18] The sound charts are a good example of Mitchell's synthetic "imagetext". Here, they are contextualized within the larger image-text "Faun"as a smaller image-text.
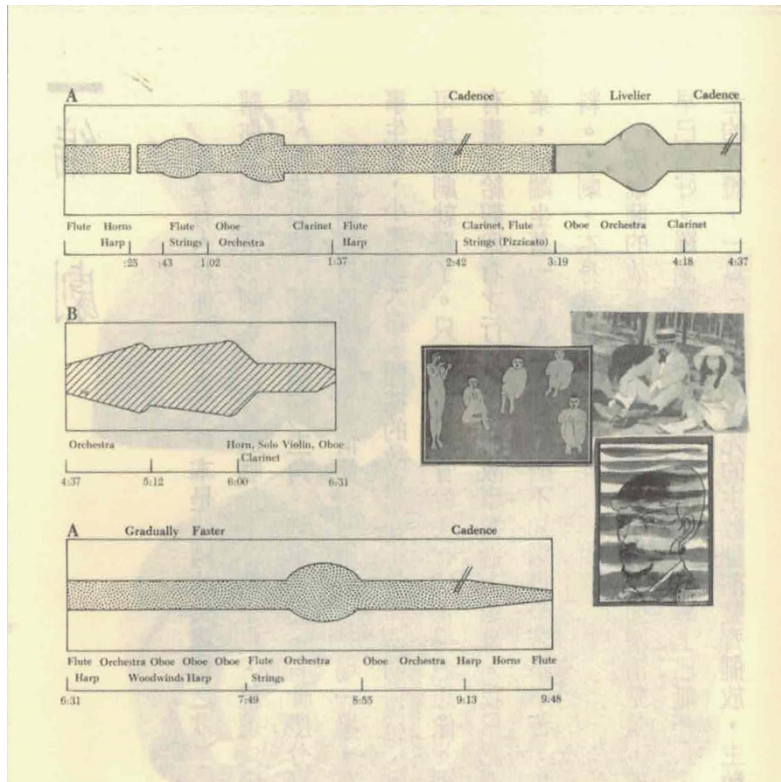
Figure 3. From *Picture/Storybook*, p49.

Besides the three sound charts, there is a collage of three pictures reproduced in black-and-white: Matisse's painting *La Musique* (1910), showing five nudes, one playing the violin, one playing a double pipe resembling the double-aulos, and three others singing with mouths wide-open; a 1915 photo of Debussy and his daughter Claude-Emma picnicking; and a drawing of Debussy's portrait with soundwave-like stripes. This tripartite collage not only indicates the author of the musical composition represented by the soundwave charts, but also evokes the pictorial depiction of a music ensemble via Matisse's painting. The painting both echoes and differs from the soundwave charts: it graphically depicts music too but through imagining a music-making scene instead of visualizing sound measurements.

Considering Xi Xi's text, it observes that Debussy's *Prélude* was itself composed as a musical illustration of Mallarmé's poem *L'après-midi d'un faune*, i.e. *Prélude* is

musical ekphrasis. Debussy's ekphrastic response is converted into image-texts via the soundwave charts, which are then described by Xi Xi's explanation of the charts:

> What are the egg-like things in the charts? They show the music's amplitude. The strongest part is at the necktie-like section (in chart B). The end part of the snake-like figure (in chart 3) tapers away, meaning that the music becomes pianissimo and fades.
>
> 一個個鷄蛋似的又是什麼呢？是音樂强弱的意思，最强的是領帶那部分，長蛇最末愈來愈細窄，既是說，音樂漸漸微弱消失。[19]

From poetry to music to graphics and finally to prose text, a relay of different representations takes place. It resembles a game of chain translations, producing a contrast between presence and absence: the presence of the new translation (representation) substituting the absence of the translated text (the represented). But the visualisation of music and Xi Xi's description of it also make the reader doubly aware of the absent musical sound: it cannot be actually replaced by other media. Rather, it is a wholly new and interesting experience to imagine "listening to music through reading images" ("看圖聽音樂"), in Xi Xi's words (2003: 48-49), for it enables us to "visualize" the structure of musical composition. This idea connects back to Matisse's *La Musique*, suggesting that ekphrasis depends on absence to activate its audience's creative mind.

Finally, many of Xi Xi's image-texts develop in a rather unexpected direction and do not really describe their accompanying images. Although such texts may not be considered ekphrasis proper, they do engage with an extended understanding of

---

[19] Xi Xi 2003: 48.

ekphrasis as writing in response to images. Typically, the images in such image-texts

function as a critical stratagem to prompt higher reader-text interactivity and a level of

cognitive ludicity similar to what Aarseth defines as "ergodicity" in texts that become

games for readers to play. For example, in "Onions" 洋蔥, which presents a photo of

Matisse's *Les oignons roses* (1906), Xi Xi (2003: 2-3) does not describe the painting but

uses the onion as a metaphor for Deconstruction. She humorously remarks that in the

first half of the twentieth century, the "most celebrated among fruits and vegetables"

("最出風頭的蔬果", Xi Xi 2003: 2) was the apple, represented by big names such as

Cézanne, Magritte, and Foucault. Whereas in the latter half of the twentieth century, the

onion became the new superstar because unlike the apple which still has a core, the

onion peels off layer after layer until it disappears, coreless. This is precisely the

"decentering" ("去中心") and absence of origins expounded in Deconstruction, Xi Xi

observes humorously (2003: 2), punning on the concrete "core" of a fruit and the

figurative "centre" of language and discourse. This is why postwar fiction is no longer

apple-like but onion-like: the narrative has no central structure and everything is

"process"; "you read a novel and no longer take a ride with the protagonists in the

adventure, but you become yourself the adventurer in the text" ("你讀小説, 不再隨著主

角冒險, 而是自己去文本中冒險") (Xi Xi 2003: 2). Notably, Xi Xi signals that the onion-

text turns the reader into a player. Xi Xi ends by turning to *Les oignons roses* and

observing that Matisse was ahead of his time painting onions in 1906, when apples

were all the rage. No details of thepainting are described. The painting itself does not

suggest any narrative about literary and intellectual developments in the twentieth

century. Paradoxically, the painting is a still life, i.e. the passive object of contemplation

par excellence. Nevertheless, Xi Xi performs a "détournement", a hijacking of Matisse's

painting so that it suggests instead a dynamic reader-text relation, sparking off a critical analogy using apples and onions as metaphors for the structure of fiction and literary criticism. Ling Yu (2007: 13-17) argues that Xi Xi's narrative structures "extend and proliferate" ("蟬聯增殖"), which may equally apply to Xi Xi's image-texts that develop an image far beyond its immediate symbolism into a theoretical metaphor. The onion analogy here offers an amusing and vivid explanation of Deconstruction while signalling to the reader that she needs to participate in the onion-text as an active player. In sum, Xi Xi's image-texts not only engage with ekphrasis but also probe its boundaries and prompt the readers to understand these image-texts ekphrastically. This ekphrastic endeavour brings out many aspects of *youxi* such as dallying movements between different media encouraging the reader to switch between different cognitive modes, puns and the psychological humour they produce, and certain image-texts' game-like design. This is crucial for conveying a sense of playfulness.

The Parergon as Ludic Method

While ekphrasis brings out ludic intermediality and mirroring movement between different artistic media and representations, Xi Xi takes recourse to the parergon to highlight framing and visual contextualisation in her image-texts. It is therefore worth exploring how the parergon might relate to ludic aesthetics too. To begin with, we need to consider Xi Xi's own explanation of the parergon in her preface to *Jigsaw Puzzles*:

> In Greek "parergon" means, according to Kant's analysis, whatever is attached and supplementary to the artwork but is not part of its core meaning. For

example: the frame of a painting, palace colonnades, the drapery of sculptures. They delineate the borders of the artwork but are not part of the work itself. They simultaneously resemble and differ from the artwork. They "bracket" the artwork, but also "connect with the world outside the work", so that external attention is directed to concentrate on the work itself.

希臘語中的 parergon, 依康德的分析，是指所有附屬於藝術作品之上，又不屬於它內在意義的東西。例如：一幅畫的畫框、宮殿的柱廊、雕像上的披佈。它們是包圍作品的邊界，而非作品的一部分。它們與作品相似，卻又不同。它把作品"括弧"起來，卻也同時"與外界相通"，使外界的注意力集中在作品身上。[20]

Xi Xi's exposition reiterates Kant's (2000: §14) views on the parergon and his examples, which focus on the parergon's ornamental and supplementary functions. As Paul Duro expounds (2019: 23-33), the early modern understanding of the parergon includes background trivia and anything that is not the subject of the picture, establishing a clear sense of hierarchy between the *ergon*, i.e. the proper subject of painting, and the *par(a)-ergon*: subordinate miscellanea. This relates directly to the hierarchy of genres, where dramatic action of human beings claims artists' primary attention while landscape and inanimate objects are painted to "[fill] up the empty Corners" (Edward Norgate cited in Duro 2019: 26). Xi Xi touches upon this pre-Derridean interpretation of the parergon as an addendum and by-work, but puts more emphasis on the Derridean understanding of the concept as "framing" and "borders", made famous by Derrida's *La Vérité en peinture.* Craig Owens's essay "From Work to Frame" on Derrida's parergon summarizes in its title the major shift of viewers' attention from the artwork proper (*ergon*) to the

---

[20] Xi Xi 2001: 9.

boundaries of artworks and how different ways of framing change perception.[21] In extension, the parergon offers opportunities to play with different frames, experiment with frame-breaking, and explore the liminality offered by framing borders. How do Xi Xi's image-texts square with these theories of the parergon which she evokes? And does the parergon offer an interpretive approach to these image-texts to create the effect of fun, wittiness, and creativity?

Starting with the pre-Derridean understanding, I consider how Xi Xi's image-texts involve ornamental and background elements as well as explore the idea of painterly hierarchy. The image-text "Van Gogh's Chair" 梵高椅子 offers an intriguing example (Xi Xi 2001: 88-89). The image part (Figure 4) includes a collage comprising a cut-out of Van Gogh's painting *Van Gogh's chair* (1888) minus its background and a photo of David Hockney in his Los Angeles studio.[22] [insert "fig.4"]

---

[21] Craig Owens, "From Work to Frame, or, Is There Life After 'The Death of the Author'?" in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, edited by Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock (California: University of California Press, 1994): 122-139.
[22] Photo taken by Richard Schmidt, © 2015 David Hockney.

Figure 4. From *Jigsaw Puzzles*, p89.

This collage is set against a white background, which replaces Van Gogh's painting's original background. Hockney is positioned between three of his chair paintings, two of which were painted in homage to Van Gogh: *Van Gogh's Chair* (1988) on the left, *Gauguin's Chair* (1988) on the right.[23] In the centre stands Hockney's *Chair with a mind of its own* (1988). In Hockney's background inside the photo, we see ten paintings hanging on his studio walls. The cut-out chair from Van Gogh's painting covers the photo's bottom-left corner and joins borders with Hockney's 1988 painting of the same title. The composition of the whole image thus involves three backgrounds: Hockney's photo as a background to Van Gogh's chair cut-out; Hockney's studio interiors as the background in Hockney's photo; and the white background containing the collage. As the image-text's topic strongly suggests, this image's main subject, or *ergon*, is Van

---

[23] *Gauguin's Chair* shown in the photo was probably still work-in-progress, for the seat is block-coloured yellow whereas the finished version shows a green seat with yellow stripes.

Gogh's chair painting, which is visually most prominent and comes before Hockney's photo. Consequently, Hockney's photo exists parergonally to Van Gogh's painting, not only because the photo is reproduced on a small scale so that everything in it looks smaller than Van Gogh's chair, but also because Xi Xi's text narrates how Hockney's love for Van Gogh led him to paint two recreations of the Dutch artist's chair paintings. The relation between Van Gogh and Hockney is that of inspirational source and influence, though Xi Xi emphasizes that Hockney's paintings are by no means mere imitations but take an eccentric "reverse single-point perspective" ("反向透視", Xi Xi 2001: 88) that warps space. We could therefore understand Hockney's Van Gogh-style chair paintings as an addendum to Van Gogh's original paintings.

Simultaneously, this relation between *ergon* and parergon is cleverly repeated in Hockney's photo, where *Chair with a mind of its own* and other paintings hanging on the walls are parerga in relation to the subject matter of Hockney's Van Gogh chairs. Xi Xi's text confirms this focus on Hockney's Van Gogh-inspired paintings as the *ergon*, for it does not mention the third chair painting and the rest of the studio. Nevertheless, these non-essential elements in the photo are like embellishments – especially given the bright colours of the hanging paintings – that make the photo more interesting and emphasize Hockney's artist identity and workplace. Finally, we also find in this image-text a suggested critical reversal of the hierarchy between the *ergon* and parergon: Xi Xi's text gives an account of Hockney's paintings rather than of Van Gogh's painting, though the latter is posited as the departure point. This implies Xi Xi is more interested in the parergon than the *ergon*: despite the less prominent way Hockney's photo is positioned in relation to Van Gogh's chair, the real subject matter of this image-text *as a whole* is in fact Hockney, not Van Gogh. This challenges the view that the parergon is

necessarily subordinate to the *ergon*, or that the derivative is inferior to the original. In short, this image-text is constructed like a toy for readers to experience. Thinking about it via the parergon reveals several layers of parergonal relations in its design that resembles Chinese nested boxes, and a critical move to blur and reverse the *ergon*-parergon hierarchy. This reversing move is key to the emergence of ludicity, for one typical effect of play – as in *xi*, i.e jokes and dissimulation or in the carnival (Robert Wilson 1986: 80) – is to disrupt normal order by turning things upside-down.

What about the parergon as frame and borders? The critical reversal of the *ergon*-parergon hierarchy already points to the ludic use of the parergon as frame, for shifting relations between the primary and supplementary crucially involves playing with different ways of framing. As much postwar scholarship shows, the discussion of frames is not limited to material picture-frames but extends to the figurative sense of visual and cognitive framing. This is crucial for the parergon's ludic potentiality. Gregory Bateson's "A Theory of Play and Fantasy" points out that "no form of communication can be understood without reference to its metacommunicative frame" (Edwards, McCann, Poiana 2015: 3). Bateson emphasizes how the same fact or gesture can be interpreted differently when they are contextualized in different cognitive frames (Bateson 1954: 177-193), for instance a joke when taken seriously can be a calamitous statement, and vice versa. The message 'This is play' (Bateson 1954: 179) is therefore an *interpretive frame*. As Katarzyna Zimna (2020: 63) argues, in fact play is nothing but a frame, "it does not possess any content of its own" so it can turn anything into play by framing it so. In this sense, play can be understood as the parergon that frames and brackets reality, something both outside and beside work, i.e. the *ergon*. The *ergon*-parergon relation is then analogous to the relation between work and play, between the work of art as "proper function" and the "play of art" as "playing with the

proper function" (Zimna 2020: 62). When the audience interacts with artworks, – and in extension when readers interact with literary texts, – play functions parergonally and the framing parergon is play.

Xi Xi pays particular attention to the parergon's "bracketing" function (mentioned in the citation above), which highlights the intermedial ludicity of her image-texts. Visually and cognitively, bracketing something in or out changes the field of vision and audience perception. These changes caused by framing affirm the importance of contextualization and suggest that the interaction between the inside and outside, – or "out-of-field" (*hors-champ*) – is an opportunity for playfully changing the appearance and function of a text. Thinking of Xi Xi's image-texts in light of this, firstly, the fact that many of them – from *Scrapbook* to *My Toys* – were originally written and published as magazine columns (*zhuanlan*) rather than for book publication is significant. As columns these image-texts occupy a specifically delineated space on the magazine page (*lan* literally meaning "fence") and border upon other texts and pictures. The length of the text, -- typically 300-800 characters, -- and image size are tailored to fit within this limit. This means that Xi Xi composed the image-texts with particular frames in mind. When they were republished in book collections they were like newspaper cut-outs that were re-arranged into a particular sequence. The rearrangement of image-texts' borders is already a re-bracketing parergonal move that recalls Xi Xi's book title *Pintu youxi*, literally meaning "games of joining pictures together". The bordering relation of these image-texts to each other in the books is therefore parergonal, and Xi Xi's changes to the framing (parerga) of these image-texts is also a game of *pintu*. The shift in publication format changes the visual and interpretive context: readers easily forget that the book collection itself – the *ergon* – is already an exercise of collage and reframing, i.e. playing with *parerga*.

Simultaneously, readers are encouraged to participate in their own picture-joining games, which is explicitly signalled by some image-texts that highlight the importance of framing and borders. For instance, the image-text "Jigsaw puzzles" 拼圖游戲 (Xi Xi 2001: 58-59), carrying the same title as the overall book, discusses how new images and poems are created by collage methods. The image (Figure 5) shows six human figures cut and spliced together, each constituted by four fragments. [insert "fig.5"]

Figure 5. From *Jigsaw Puzzles*, p59.

The text explains that these figures are taken from a collage picture book probably intended for children, which reproduces twenty-two well-known figures in art, but each

figure is cut into four pieces: head, bust, lower body, feet, -- so that there are 88

fragments for the player to experiment with, potentially yielding 234,256 different

combinations.[24] This is a game of combinatorics using collage to produce visually

striking images by juxtaposing incongruous body parts together, as Xi Xi's six figures

show. The normal borders of each figure are broken and each fragment is

recontextualised within the framework of another image. Xi Xi extends the game to the

realm of writing by observing that anyone could write poems in the same way (2001:

58): "parse sentences into the subject, object, etc. and write these grammatical elements

onto paper pieces" ("把句子分主詞賓語等等寫在紙片上"), which are then put into

separate boxes. The writer, now turned into a player, could then randomly draw paper

pieces from different boxes and combine them to create poems. Making poetry

therefore involves the same activity the collage story book involves, the player treats it

like a kaleidoscope. This game recycles typical ludic methods in Dada and Surrealist

automatism, as well as in Oulipian combinatory literature. It points out how playing

with the borders of images and words is central to Xi Xi's *Jigsaw Puzzles*, and proffers

this parergonal play to the readers.

The borders of an image are thus a site where interactions between inside and

outside, presence and absence take place. This is a liminal space that opens up to the

"liminoid" experience of play, which Victor Turner (1974: 83) famously argues to be

transitional, a "multiplicity of optional[s]" that is fundamentally multivalent and

resolves nothing. The oscillating movement between two contrasting sides – work and

frame – is crucial to creating this sense of playful liminality. It is also similar to the

ekphrastic swings between word and image discussed above. Indeed, sometimes the

---

[24] 234,256 is the number Xi Xi quotes, although my own combinatory calculation is 2,672,670 (allowing partial repetitions).

parergon and ekphrasis overlap with each other, for instance in the picture title: it is both an ekphrasis and a device that frames the content of the picture and viewers' expectations. Derrida's question (1978: 19) "What if parergon was the title?" points out the liminal nature of the parergon as something "detached from and attached to the artwork" (Pirinen 2013: 244), which also characterises the picture title and much ekphrastic writing. Xi Xi's image-text "Signature" 簽名 (2003: 188-189) reflects upon this liminality by bringing our attention to something similar to the picture title: the artist's signature, more precisely the photographer's signature here. The image (Figure 6) reproduces Henri Cartier-Bresson's photograph *Tivoli, Lazio* (1933) but does not show the photograph's frame. [insert "fig.6"]

Figure 6. From *Picture/Storybook*, p189.

The matching text invites its readers to participate in a game:

Let's play a game: you be the detective. [...] I give you a photo, please find some clues in it. [...] This photo is signed, please try to find the signature. Why are you squashing your nose against the watermelons [in the photo]? – Please don't crush the eggs. It's not there. On this side you may see words on those old newspapers padding the boxes, [...] they are not the artist's signature either. [...] Well, let me tell you, the clues are in the frame surrounding the photo. At that time there was only one photographer who left space for frames, [...] he was Cartier-Bresson. This is his signature.

來玩一個游戲吧，你做偵探。[...] 我只是提供一幅照片，請你找尋綫索。[...] 這張照片是簽了名的，你且找找看。你怎麽把鼻子碰到西瓜上去啦，小心別把鷄蛋壓碎了。那邊沒有。這邊鋪在箱板上的是舊報紙，上面有字，[...] 都不是作者的簽名。[...] 還是讓我告訴你吧，綫索就是圍著照片的邊框。當時只有一個人的照片留框邊，[...] 他就是卡提埃布列遜。這就是他的簽名[...]。[25]

The text blithely guides the viewer's gaze on the photo, joking about how the viewer draws the image closer to her eyes to discover the hidden signature. Then taking a surprising turn, Xi Xi tells you that the signature is on the photo's frame, i.e. it is not in the photo and we cannot see it. The deictic "this is his signature" points to something absent: the parergon as frame. The deictic statement can also read as the Batesonian frame "This is play", i.e. "this is a joke I [the author] pulled on you readers because I led you into a detective game to find something that does not exist here". Xi Xi makes us aware that neither the frame nor Cartier-Bresson's signature is part of the photo, but they simultaneously define the photo as it is: i.e. this is not just a photo by anyone but by

[25] Xi Xi 2003: 188-189.

Cartier-Bresson. The artist's signature works parergonally like a picture title: it frames our understanding of the work and creates the tendency to attribute the artist's signature style to the work (e.g. we expect to see masses of dots for Seurat paintings, strong and thick brushwork for late Van Gogh, wrapped-up landscapes for Christo and Jeanne-Claude). The frame is not only the material frame delineating the photo, but also the cognitive frame of authorship and of the ludic activity in Xi Xi's image-text. The parergon as frame becomes the site of play, a playing that changes something into something else by its framing: a photo (the *ergon*) is made into a playground for the detective game; whereas the photographer's signature becomes the parergon.

The parergon is not only a critical perspective that Xi Xi adopts in her construction of image-texts but also an interpretive method offered to the readers so that they perceive and appreciate Xi Xi's playful intent and literary strategies. Moreover, thinking through the parergon points towards the overlap between the parergon and ekphrasis when it comes to texts that are attached to an image, such as the picture title, the artist's signature, and artwork labels. Indeed we might ask whether, for Xi Xi's image-texts, the text part accompanying the image is itself a parergon, for it is not unlike an extended form of the artwork label. Is the main work (*ergon*) the image or the text? Xi Xi suggests (2001: 9) that the image is the *ergon*, for the text is "secondary". Nevertheless, this relation between *ergon* and parergon is constantly in flux and Xi Xi is more than happy to reverse their hierarchy (as in "Van Gogh's Chair") and shift the focus to the marginal parergon. The very liminality of the parergon allows readers to play games of *you* (wandering, oscillation) and *xi* (puns, jokes) with picture borders and cognitive frames, as discussed above. This creates suspense in the reading and viewing experience that resembles riding a see-saw, which is an effect of "play…function[ing] on the edge" (Rafael Schacter 2014: 222).

The Image-text and the Toy

I have so far argued for the idea of the image-text *as* toy, and a toy that elicits *youxi* movements in particular. In the form and design of Xi Xi's image-texts shown above, the critical concepts of ekphrasis and parergon are integral to constructing the image-text as a game in which both the writer and reader can participate. As a literary and visual artefact with a material presence, the image-text functions like a toy that can be played with in different ways, as suggested by Xi Xi's cut-and-paste combination of human figures in Figure 5. Xi Xi emphasizes creativity, experimentation with literary techniques and different visual perspectives, and the possibility for improvisation. Playfulness here is the creation of aesthetic effects of indeterminate movements, novelty, surprise, serendipity, and fun, by employing particular literary techniques and stimulating the audience's own imagination. The concept of play as aesthetics, i.e. something intrinsically valuable and pleasurable for its own sake is implied here.[26] This correlates with the understanding of *youxi* as an activity and process that create aesthetic pleasure, especially in *you*'s connotations of spontaneous and pleasant movement. This mode of playfulness operates in many of Xi Xi's earlier image-texts (as in afore-mentioned examples) collected in *Scrapbook*, *Picture/Storybook*, and *Jigsaw Puzzles.* Here, it is important to note that the image-text as toy defines what the image-text is and how it functions. This corresponds to the two aspects of *youxi*: it is both a game and the reader's own acts of *you* and *xi*. What the image-text is *about*, or what it represents, is a separate issue. Certainly, an image-text as toy can be about toys too, but it is necessary to clarify that this is an overlap between two different ways in which the

---

[26] That aesthetics is fundamentally play is a well-established idea, stretching from Schiller to Huizinga and Warren Motte.

image-text engages with playfulness. We may therefore ask: what about Xi Xi's image-texts that are ostensibly *about* toys?

Such image-texts are concentrated in her recent works, from *The Teddy Bear Chronicles* to *My Toys*, since their subject matter range from stuffed dolls, children's toys, to leisure objects that Xi Xi collects as her hobby. Compared with Xi Xi's earlier works, we see a transition from her earlier constructions of the image-text as a ludic literary object itself, involving both author and reader in *youxi* activities, to her post-2000 move to three-dimensional playthings by handcrafting dolls and writing columns about her toys. This recent move involves less complex text-image relations and readers can more easily notice Xi Xi's ludic intent and references, due to Xi Xi's showcasing of her playful objects. Xi Xi's epilogue to *My Toys* suggests an explanation of this apparent shift. When asked to write weekly columns that would be accompanied by images in colour, Xi Xi thinks about toys as a topic she has not written about before. But then she reflects:

> I have always been playing with toys, but I haven't yet written weekly columns about toys. Of course, the weekly columns which I wrote for most of my life in the past, on whatever subject matter, are in fact simply my toys.
>
> 我一直玩玩具，可沒有寫過玩具專欄，當然，過去寫了大半生的專欄，無論什麼主題，其實也只是我的玩具。[27]

Although her earlier columns are not about toys, they are treated *as* toys by Xi Xi. The subject matter may have shifted in Xi Xi's most recent *My Toys*, but her interest in play

---

[27] Xi Xi 2019: 206.

and toys is enduring. This confirms a continuity between her earlier and recent image-texts instead of rupture.

So what can these image-texts *on* toys tell us, in addition to what the image-texts as toys do? To start with, the Chinese term for "toy", *wanju* (literally "play object", "play device"), offers much food for thought. As mentioned above, *wan* evokes both leisure culture and aesthetic appreciation for material objects, as in *wanshang*. As Craig Clunas remarks (2004: 84), *wan* in the Ming context meant "pleasure" not in the denigrating sense but as "a cherished value", for it evokes the Chinese literati's fascination with objects of leisure (i.e. *wanju*, also called *wanqi* sometimes), ranging from curiously-shaped stones, jade artefacts, decorative art objects, to trinkets, painting, and calligraphy. Collecting and playing with these objects are not only the literati's leisurely pastime, they also reflect sophistication and elegance in taste. Considering Xi Xi's toys, which encompass a dizzying range of objects including handcrafted dolls, millefiori glass paperweights, Mexican peck papertoys, Wuxi clay figurines (*a'fu*), wooden Shaker boxes, ceramics, etc., we understand that her toys stretch well beyond children's toys in the conventional sense and are very similar to the kinds of curiosities and precious things collected by premodern Chinese literati.

Likewise, Xi Xi's appreciation for her toys is not unlike Mi Fu's lithophilia, Wen Zhenheng's enjoyment of "superfluous things" in his *Treatise* (*Changwuzhi*, 1621), and Zhang Dai's descriptions of entertainment and artisanal objects in his *Dream Recollections of Tao'an* (*Tao'an mengyi*, c.1665), a text which Xi Xi refers to in an interview about her thoughts on play.[28] In the same interview, Xi Xi specifies that "good

---

[28] Li Xiaohan 李筱涵, interview with Xi Xi, "遊於藝, 說人間: 西西大玩於世的人生視野", *Unitas* (聯合文學), 9 Jan 2020. http://www.unitas.me/?p=12441

wanju are creative work that provokes thought" ("好的玩具, 本身是一種創作, 啟發人思考") and should be called "Art Toys".[29] The image-texts in *My Toys* and *The Teddy Bear Chronicles* therefore extend the concept of "toy" to include any material objects that one enjoys making, collecting, admiring, and contemplating. The playfulness that emerges therefrom certainly involves aesthetic experience, just as Xi Xi's earlier image-texts do, but they additionally highlight the importance of leisure, i.e. play as the negative definition of work. Here, the enjoyment of objects expressed in *wanshang* extends to the notion of *xianqing* 閒情, translated approximately as "leisurely interest" and "carefree mood", indicating a mode of play that evolves around the freedom to explore one's hobbies and cultivate one's aesthetic taste in a relaxed mindset.

Specific image-texts on toys give us a better idea of the different ways in which Xi Xi approaches them. Firstly, some objects evoke personal memories and curiosity from Xi Xi in their cultural histories. For instance, the image-text entitled "Tops" 陀螺 (Xi Xi 2019: 118-121) describes both peg-tops and whipping-tops, toys that have become rather rare nowadays when children play on screens much more. Xi Xi reminisces about herself watching whipping-top games as a child, observing how this kind of outdoor play no longer exists and tops one could buy now will not bear marks from whipping and clashing against each other (Xi Xi 2019: 121). In contrast, the image-text "Sewing-machine" 縫紉機 (Xi Xi 2019: 58-61) focuses on an object that is not originally designed for leisure purposes but which can now, -- because people tend to buy clothes rather than make them at home by using sewing-machines, -- be experienced as a toy. Xi Xi reflects (2019: 58-59) on how her mother made clothes for the family by using a

---

[29] Ibid.

sewing-machine, which in turn was used by Xi Xi as her writing desk. Later when Xi Xi started handcrafting teddy bears, she finally started using a sewing-machine. Readers are also shown two toy sewing-machines besides the real sewing-machine – one of which is a music-box (Figure 7) – in the matching images, gifted to Xi Xi by friends.

[insert Figure 7]

Figure 7. From *My Toys*, p60.

Not only can a tool for work be employed in a way it was not intended for (sewing-machine converted to desk), as the technology and methods of work and play change over time, a tool can also become a means for leisure activities (i.e. making dolls as a hobby) rather than a labour task. The music-box that imitates a real sewing-machine further shows how the tool loses its original function and becomes a decorative toy for entertainment.

Secondly, Xi Xi is keen to underline the importance of improvisation and bricolage in playing with objects, observing that she likes the "process of change" ("變化的過程") in games rather than rigid "given" ("既定的") formats (Xi Xi 2019: 122). Not only can toys be played in ways other than they are meant to be played, toys can be combined with other objects to produce new meanings and amusing effects. In the image-text "Pillow" 枕頭 (2019: 134-137), Xi Xi first describes an unusual folk handicrafts-style pillow embroidered with two faces on its two ends (Figure 8): one a girl's face, another a cat-like face. [insert "fig.8"]

Figure 8. Handicrafted pillow, from *My Toys*, p135.

Later, when Xi Xi made a teddy bear to represent Zhuangzi, the maverick legendary Chinese thinker, she remembers this two-faced pillow and uses it to prop up (Figure 9) the teddy's head to evoke Zhuangzi's famous butterfly dream ("想到夢為蝴蝶的莊子得有個好枕頭，不然怎會做出個哲學的夢", Xi Xi 2019: 135).

[insert Figure 9]

Figure 9. Zhuangzi teddy bear on pillow, from *My Toys*, p136.

Reflecting on the symbolism of being two-faced, the text then mentions Janus, shown in an image of a Roman coin (Figure 10), and the idea of double identity. In extension, we may understand Zhuangzi as a "Janus-faced person" ("雙面人") (Xi Xi 2019: 136): "he lives simultaneously in the world of reality and wanders in virtual space" ("他既活在現實的天地，又遊走於虛擬的空間"), he is both Zhuangzi and the butterfly.

[Insert Figure 10]

Figure 10. Janus, from *My Toys*, p136.

Resting the pillow under the teddy bear's head produces the image of sleep, which makes it much more obvious that the teddy is Zhuangzi. This is one layer of meaning created by connecting the pillow to a doll. The symbolism of Janus, echoed by the two faces on the pillow, adds the idea of ambiguity and brings out the double life that the butterfly dream suggests. This produces a new interpretive context where being "Janus-faced" loses its pejorative meaning and instead points towards the philosophical possibility of existing in both real and dream worlds. This image-text shows how Xi Xi connects and recontextualizes three disparate objects: the pillow, a teddy bear, and Janus's image, to form a new idea. As Mary Harlow observes (2013: 322-340), a toy could become a non-toy such as a ritualistic object or religious symbol when placed in a different context. Similarly, Xi Xi's bricolage of objects playfully transforms non-toys into toys and toys into philosophically laden symbols.

The personal, reflective, and lighthearted tone in *My Toys* goes hand in hand with the literary form of these image-texts: mini-essays, or *xiaopin wen*, focusing on miscellaneous trivia and the author's own aesthetic enjoyment of them. Literally meaning "minor appreciation", *xiaopin* is precisely the genre in which literati like Zhang Dai who wrote about playing with (*wan*) interesting artefacts excelled in. In Charles

Laughlin's words (2016: 88), "the *xiaopin wen* connects back not only to late imperial written antecedents, but also a whole system of practices and knowledge, including appreciation of the performing arts, [...] art and antique connoisseurship, [...] interior decoration". In the Republican era, *xiaopin wen* was promoted by writers such as Lin Yutang and Zhou Zuoren as a genre that celebrates the personal, lyrical, and quotidian without any obligation to show concern for big social and political issues (Tam 2012: 36-37). Xi Xi's image-texts on toys involve both these dimensions of *xiaopin wen*: as *xianqing* literature articulating a leisurely mode of play that features lifestyle and material culture, especially objects collected and enjoyed by the author; and as introspective writing that eschews direct engagement with politics and ambitions to transform the world. Notably, Xi Xi declares her intellectual attitude in *My Toys*'s epilogue:

> When I play with toys, what I appreciate is the creative mind. This is a small world that is simple and pure, allowing you to leave behind temporarily the big world that is complicated and increasingly not fun.
>
> 我玩的是玩具，但我欣賞的是那種創作的心靈，那是單純的小世界，讓人稍稍離開複雜，而且日漸不好玩的大世界。[30]

The contrast between small and big worlds, with a clear preference for the former, echoes the typical tenets of *xiaopin wen* writers. Although Xi Xi's image-texts engage widely with European literary and critical references as well as avant-garde techniques such as collage and automatic writing, their textual format and subject matter show more continuity with both premodern and modern Chinese literary traditions than one

---

[30] Xi Xi 2019: 206.

would first think. The evolution of Xi Xi's ludic approach from her earlier more postmodern-like and experimental intermedial works to her recent focus on material objects attests to this continuity and demonstrates a return to premodern Chinese literati notions of play as *wanshang* and *xianqing*.

Xi Xi's recent image-texts featuring toys thus introduce another dimension of ludic aesthetics to her work: the representation and appreciation of material objects, experienced *as* toys even if some of them were not originally designed so. Compared with Xi Xi's earlier image-texts where the image-text itself is typically constructed as a game, the image-texts about toys generally involve a simpler relation between word and image, since the image part – always unmodified photos of the objects mentioned in the text – is more illustrative than images in *Picture/Storybook* and *Jigsaw Puzzles.* Xi Xi's articulations of ludicity has shifted from the notion of *youxi*, "games", "puns" and spontaneously playful movement that highlight intermedial complexities of the image-text itself to the experience of *wan*, "caressing" and "enjoying" three-dimensional objects. Nevertheless, there are critical and stylistic overlaps between earlier and recent image-texts: the latter also engage with ekphrasis as they describe the visuality of toys, and add personal responses and explanations of how toys are played with, which the photos themselves do not show; the former invariably take the *xiaopin wen* form and focus on formalist topics in arts and personal responses rather than socio-political issues. Overall, Xi Xi's image-texts past and present affirm how seriously she treats play in a sustained manner in her creative work.

By constructing playful intermedial relations and interacting with interesting objects for creative purposes, Xi Xi's image-texts actively engage with their readers. Despite their light format, they are formally sophisticated literary artefacts that employ

and inspire different ways of critical reading, seeing, and playing, as my discussion on ekphrasis, the parergon, and the concept of toy shows. The fusion between *xiaopin wen* and European experimental techniques in the context of weekly column writing – a genre that flourishes particularly in the Hong Kongese literary scene (Kim 2008: 297-310) – also confirms Xi Xi's image-texts as a site of transcultural confluence. More importantly, their focus on ludic aesthetics brings out several modes of play and their associating values: the *youxi* mode, encompassing the idea of literature and art as a game with particular techniques and rules, and literary ludicity as a dynamic and liminal experience for readers; the *wanshang* mode, which posits play as leisure and the cultivation of style and taste, as well as the space of temporary withdrawal from the world of obligations, shifting from problems that demand one's attention to things that *attract* one's attention. Both ludic modes affirm play as aesthetic experience and something undertaken and enjoyed for its intrinsic value. We are prompted to recognise the broader significance of Xi Xi's playful image-texts: they attest to the power of literary language and images to go beyond the utilitarian function of communicating messages and providing information. As Schneider-Mizony argues (2005: 163), ludic writing exemplifies linguistic mastery and demonstrates the level of sophistication language can achieve. In this case, the ludic lies at the heart of the unique literariness of literature. Moreover, while there is no shortage of contemporary Chinese literature on topics of the utmost gravity such as trauma, socio-political turbulence, economic inequality, and illness, the number of writers in the Chinese language who pay attention to exploring play seriously is nowhere comparable to those who focus on suffering. In Xi Xi's conversation with Ho Fuk Yan, the difficulty of writing about pleasure is mentioned:

Xi Xi: The situation now is this: there are too many tragedies, and they are all the same. I want to write things that are more upbeat [...] happiness is not currently a trendy emotion.

Ho: Didn't Han Yu once say, "It is difficult to master the expression of pleasure but easy to express poverty and sadness?"[31]

西: 現在的情況是，當悲劇太多，而且都這樣寫，我就想寫得快樂些。[...] 快樂是目前不風行的情感 [...]。

何: 韓愈説過: "歡愉之辭難工，而窮苦之言易好。"[32]

While the profundity of grief and suffering is taken for granted, the aesthetic and intellectual dimensions of pleasure and fun are easily overlooked. Against this broad literary and intellectual landscape, we may better appreciate Xi Xi's image-texts. They offer an excellent example of how literary articulations of the ludic do not necessarily mean superficial feel-good literature but constitute a serious project that stimulates imagination, philosophical insight, and aesthetic experience.

Glossary

a'fu 阿福

Changwuzhi 長物志

---

[31] Translation by Tammy Lai-Ming Ho, "Chatting about Fairy Tales: Excerpts from a Conversation with Xi Xi", *Chinese Literature Today*, 8:1(2019): 20.
[32] Xi Xi and Ho Fuk Yan 1995: 159.

Cheung Yin 張彥

guwan 古玩

Hongfu 紅拂

Li Jing 李靖

Lin Yutang 林語堂

Mi Fu 米芾

Ming Pao 明周文化

qiqu 奇趣

Qiuranke zhuan 虯髯客傳

Tao'an mengyi 陶庵夢憶

wanju 玩具

wanqi 玩器

wanshang 玩賞

Wen Zhenheng 文震亨

xianqing wenxue 閑情文學

xiaopin sanwen 小品散文

Zhang Dai 張岱

Zhou Zuoren 周作人

zhuanlan 專欄

Bibliography

Aarseth, Espen. 1997. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press.

Ai Xiaoming 艾曉明. 1995. "Kantu shuohua: Xi Xi chuangzuo zhong de tuwenhushe chutan" 看圖說話: 西西創作中的圖文互涉初探 (Picture Description: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Intertextuality between Picture and Writing in Xi Xi's Creative Work). *Xiandai zhongwen wenxue pinglun* 4: 113-131.

Bateson, Gregory. 1954. "A Theory of Play and Fantasy." In *Steps to an Ecology of Mind.* New York: Ballantine, 177-93.

Caillois, Roger. 1958. *Les Jeux et les hommes*. Paris: Gallimard.

Chinn, Christopher. 2007. "Before Your Very Eyes: Pliny Epistulae 5.6 and the Ancient Theory of Ekphrasis." *Classical Philology* 102, no.3: 265-280.

Clunas, Craig. 2004. *Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 1978. *The Truth in Painting*. Tr. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Duro, Paul. 2019. "What is a Parergon?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 77.1: 23-33.

Edwards, Natalie, Ben McCann, and Peter Poiana, eds. 2015. *Framing French Culture*. Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press.

Ehrmann, Jacques, ed. 1968. *Game, Play, Literature*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Elsner, Jas. 2010. "Art History as Ekphrasis." *Art History* 33, issue 1: 10-27.

Feeley, Jennifer. 2019. "Xi Xi." *Chinese Literature Today* 8:1: 4-5.

Ensslin, Astrid. 2014. *Literary Gaming.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Goldhill, Simon. 2007. "What Is Ekphrasis For?" *Classical Philology* 102, no.1: 1-19.

Harlow, Mary. 2013. "Toys, Dolls, and the Material Culture of Childhood." In Judith Grubbs and Tim Parkin, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Childhood and Education in the Classical World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 322-340.

Hayles, N. Katherine. 2007. "Intermediation: The Pursuit of a Vision." *New Literary History,* 38: 99-125.

Heffernan, James. 1991. "Ekphrasis and Representation." *New Literary History* 22, No.2: 297-316.

Ho Fuk Yan 何福仁 and Tammy Lai-Ming Ho 何麗明 (translator). 2019. "Chatting about Fairy Tales: Excerpts from a Conversation with Xi Xi." *Chinese Literature Today* 8:1: 18-25.

Ho, Tammy Lai-Ming. 2019. "Xi Xi, the Poet of Hong Kong." *Chinese Literature Today* 8:1: 6-9.

Hollander, John. 1988. "The Poetics of *Ekphrasis.*" *Word & Image* 4:1: 209-219.

Kant, Immanuel. 2000. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, tr. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kim, Hye-Joon 金惠俊. 2008. "Xianggang zhuanlan sanwen de shanbian yu weilai" 香港專欄散文的嬗變與未來 (The Metamorphosis and Future of Column Writing in Hong Kong). *Xiandai zhongwen wenxue xuebao* 8.2 & 9.1: 297-310.

Laughlin, Charles A. 2016. "Leisure and Chinese Culture: A Symposium." *The Chinese Historical Review* 23:2: 87-95.

Li, Xiaohan 李筱涵. 2020. Interview with Xi Xi: "Youyuyi, shuo renjian" 遊於藝, 說人間: 西西大玩於世的人生視野 (Wandering in Arts, Discussing the Human World). *Unitas* (*Lianhe wenxue*), 9 Jan 2020. <http://www.unitas.me/?p=12441>, accessed 26 March 2020.

Ling, Yu 凌逾. 2010. "Nanyi xushu de xushu" 难以叙述的叙述 –《浮城志异》的图文互涉 (Narrating What is Hard to Narrate: Word and Image in *Fucheng zhiyi*). *Wenyi zhengming* 2: 79-84.

—. 2007. "Xi Xi yanjiu de xin luxiang" 西西研究的新路向 (New Directions in Research on Xi Xi). *Shijie huawen wenxue luntan* 3: 13-17.

Mitchell, W. J. T. 1994. *Picture Theory.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Motte, Warren. 1995. *Playtexts: Ludics in Contemporary Literature.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Owens, Craig. 1994. "From Work to Frame, or, Is There Life After 'The Death of the Author'?" In Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock, eds. *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*. California: University of California Press, 122-139.

Perec, Georges. 1978. *La Vie: mode d'emploi*. Paris: Hachette.

Pirinen, Mikko. 2013. "Parergon, Paratext, and Title in the Context of Visual Art." In Nancy Pedri and Laurence Petit, eds. *Picturing the Language of Images*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 241-250.

Sanderson, Christina. 2019. "The Teddy Bear Chronicles: Selected Excerpts." *Chinese Literature Today* 8:1: 36-39.

Schacter, Rafael. 2014. *Ornament and Order : Graffiti, Street Art, and the Parergon*. Farnham Surrey: Ashgate.

Schneider-Mizony, Odile. 2005. "Le jeu baroquiste avec la langue." In Sylvain Santi, ed. *Le Jeu*. Chambéry: Université de Savoie, 147-168.

Stamelman, Richard. 1984. "Critical Reflections: Poetry and Art Criticism in Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror'." *New Literary History* 15, No.3: 607-630.

Tam, King-fai, ed. and tr. 2012. *A Garden of One's Own: A Collection of Modern Chinese Essays, 1919-1949*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.

Theon, Aelius. 2000. *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition Introductory to the Study of Rhetoric.* (Spengel edition). Tr. George Kennedy. Fort Collins, Chez l'auteur.

Turner, Victor. 1974. "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual." *Rice University Studies*, 60 (3): 53-92.

Walsh, Megan. 2018. "A Rare Conversation with the Cult Chinese Writer Xi Xi." *Literary Hub*, 3 May 2018. < https://lithub.com/a-rare-conversation-with-the-cult-chinese-writer-xi-xi/> accessed 27 March 2020.

Wilson, Robert R. 1986. "Play, Transgression and Carnival: Bakhtin and Derrida on 'Scriptor Ludens'." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, Vol.19, No.1: 73-89.

Xi Xi 西西. 1991. *Jiantie ce* 剪貼冊 (*Scrapbook*). Taipei: Hongfan shudian.

—. 1995 (2003 edition). *Hua/huaben* 畫/話本 (*Picture/Storybook*). Taipei: Hongfan shudian.

—. 2001. *Pintu youxi* 拼圖游戲 (*Jigsaw Puzzles*). Taipei: Hongfan shudian.

—. 2009. *Feng xiong zhi* 縫熊志 (*The Teddy Bear Chronicles*). Taipei: Hongfan shudian.

—. 2011. *Yuanhou zhi* 猿猴志 (*Chronicles of Apes and Monkeys*). Taipei: Hongfan shudian.

—. 2019. *Wo de wanju* 我的玩具 (*My Toys*). Taipei: Hongfan shudian.

Xi Xi and Ho Fuk Yan. 1995. *Shijian de huati – duihuaji* 時間的話題 – 對話集 (The Topic of Time: Collection of Conversations). Hong Kong: Su-yeh.

Yu Fei 余非. 1997. *Changduanzhang: Yuedu Xi Xi ji qita* 長短章: 閱讀西西及其他 (Long and Short Writings: Reading Xi Xi and Others). Hong Kong: Su-yeh.

Zimna, Katarzyna. 2020. *Time to Play: Action and Interaction in Contemporary Art.* London: Bloomsbury.