On September 3, 1940 Liu Na’ou (1905-1940), the Taiwan-born, Japan-educated leader of the Shanghai Neo-Sensation School, was killed by an unknown gunman. He had just succeeded to the directorship of National Subjects Daily after Mu Shiying (1912-1940), a fellow Neo-Sensation writer and filmmaker who had likewise been assassinated on the job.

It is unknown whether these two murders were connected. National Subjects Daily was a news agency run by Wang Jingwei’s puppet regime collaborating with the Japanese. It could be the Japanese who had Liu killed for allegedly playing double agent for the Chinese Nationalist Party or, conversely, the latter who retaliated against him for collaborating with the Japanese. A third speculation is that the gangsters were trying to collect unpaid gambling debts from him. As a scriptwriter and film director, Liu had made an anti-Japanese spy thriller for the Central Film Studio of the Nationalist government in Nanjing and several romantic comedies for various leftist film companies. In 1939 he was hired as manger of the China Film Studio established by Japan’s Asia Development Board. With such complex involvement in the entanglement of semicolonial politics, Liu was already walking on thin ice.

Born into a landlord’s household in colonial Taiwan, he attended high school and college in Tokyo from 1920 to 1926. Then he entered the special French program at L’Université L’Aurore in Shanghai, where he met Dai Wangshu, Shi Zhicun, and Du Heng. Together these young talents would make a name for the Neo-Sensation School, famous for its modernist penchant amidst the rightist and leftist mainstream realism in the literary circles of Shanghai. A contemporary critic Lou Shiyi pointed out in 1931 that his coterie “transported Neo-Sensation to Shanghai from Japan.” In April 1934 the cartoonist Guo Jianying, acting as editor-in-chief of *The Women’s Pictorial*, acknowledged the label: “Mr. Hei Ying is a newcomer to the modern Chinese Neo-Sensation School.” By that time the pictorial had become the organ of Liu’s coterie, combining photographs, cartoons, and the “palm-of-the-hand stories,” mini stories that centered on the dazzling image of the modern girl and were made famous by the Japanese Neo-Sensation writer Kawabata Yasunari.

The Japanese learned the palm-of-the-hand story (conte) from Paul Morand, the French modernist writer. The genre generally features a dandyish male narrator ogling a sexy modern girl, who is sexually free, capricious, and enjoys torturing her suitors. But Liu’s diary in 1927 discloses that the descriptions of the modern girl more than merely reflect the dandy’s desire. How he described his wife—also his first cousin—is revealing in this regard. He married her through a traditional prearrangement when he was seventeen. Dissatisfied with her intellectual inferiority, Liu took her as a representative of “woman,” or even femme fatale, while disclosing a deep ambivalence through male chauvinism and misogyny. In April he returned to Taiwan for a few weeks for his grandmother’s funeral. When she lured him for sex, he called her a “vampire” that sapped man’s energy and blood, immediately calling attention to Baudelaire’s poem “Le Vampire” collected in The Flowers of Evil.

A dandy like Liu distrusts the modern girl for her intellectual inferiority and infidelity, but adores her body and enhancing adornments as the quintessence of modernity. As described in his diary, Liu trawls the streets and back alleys, moving from one café or dance hall to another, always looking for apt candidates who fit the bill. Like Baudelaire’s poem “To a Passer-by,” they were passers-by, or chance encounters in a café or a brothel, unknown to the seeker. Yet all of them possess an intensity of desire that draws out their beholder’s passions more than their own. The French word “la modernité,” the emblem of Baudelairean aestheticism, appears twice in Liu’s diary, both in connection with prostitutes. Under the dandy’s gaze, they were instantly transformed into the symbol of modernity.

In Shanghai Liu led the life of a dandy. Amply provided for by his widowed mother, besides establishing two bookstores and publishing journals and books, he even invested in real estate in Shanghai. He built the block of houses where his family (wife and five children, two being born in Shanghai) lived after moving from Taiwan, and bought nearly a whole block in a business area. Liu and his coterie worked as a team in his bookstores, and after work they would frequent dance halls and brothels, ogling women together. Nicknamed as “The Dancing King,” he would tango solo in the dance hall, while the others make room on the floor for him.

Despite his profligate lifestyle, Liu was serious about his literary career. Besides writing stories, he published a volume of translations of Japanese proletarian and Neo-Sensation stories. He also translated, via Japanese, the Russian Marxist critic Vladmir Friche’s The Sociology of Art. He later turned to film theory and became the first serious film theorist in China. In 1932 he wrote an article, “On Cinematic Art,” analyzing the techniques of montage and kino-eye that were developed by Russian filmmakers. In 1933, he founded the film magazine, Modern Screen, and contributed a series of articles on movie techniques. The magazine was famous for hosting the “Hard Films and Soft Films” debate against the leftist film critic Tang Na. Liu’s coterie complained that the leftist “revolutionary movies” had “hardened” the soft celluloid of the film and drove away audience with meaningless slogans and didacticism. They claimed that “Movies are the ice-cream for the eye, and the sofa for the soul,” emphasizing their entertainment value. Their modernist stance of valorizing the autonomy of art was poles apart from the politicized aesthetics of proletarian literature.

Born in colonial Taiwan, making his name in Shanghai, and then assassinated in that city, Liu Na’ou was not re-established in Taiwan as a man of letters until more than half a century later. His death was for decades a taboo subject among his family members. His children would not know of his literary legacy until the publication of his five-volume *Complete Works* in 2001.

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