

# Gender in post-Mao China

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Post-Mao gender discourse readjusts a politicized vision of gender based on Maoist ethics. While rejecting revolutionary concepts of sex equality, contemporary Chinese women embrace a notion of femininity through the revision of a traditional conception of womanhood as well as the construction of new role models. Women poets participate in this construction process with a fresh, powerful voice to express their gender consciousness. In their efforts to (re-)define womanhood, they present by poetic means radically gendered perspectives.

## **Reflections on Maoist ethics**

Gender discourse has taken shape in post-Mao China since the 1980s, covering a wide range of gender-specific issues. One of its key concerns is to re-assess the profound impact of Maoist ethics on Chinese womanhood. It seems that Chinese women enjoyed ‘high’ social status during the Maoist regime, as measured by indexes of employment, appointment in high-level positions, education, etc. In essence, a superficial form of equality was achieved through the elimination of gender features, that is, ‘revolutionary sex equality’ (suggestive of a class-based abstract humanity devoid of gender positions). Women were subjected to the larger purpose of socialist construction in the 1950s and of class struggle during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). A historical survey can provide a meaningful context for sketching the purpose and the extent of contemporary interpretations of gender.

### *General socio-political atmosphere*

Women’s roles changed when different political campaigns set different demands on womanhood after the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. From 1949 to 1954 there existed two major trends: to politicize household work and to transform ‘women in the household’ (*jiating zhong ren*) into ‘women

in society' (*shehui zhong ren*).<sup>1</sup> Housewives were told to contribute to socialist society with good housework. On the other hand, women were encouraged to enhance their social status and to realize gender equality through their participation in productive labour, rather than to confine themselves to re-productive labour.<sup>2</sup>

The Great Leap Forward was launched in 1958 to accelerate the pace of socialist construction in general and the production of goods in particular. This movement led to a boom of female employment in urban areas. On a broad scale, former housewives were involved in urban enterprises, especially weaving, shoemaking, food-processing and service industry. During these years, some women emerged into leadership positions. Such a socio-political reality alarmed the central leadership and stimulated an ideologically oriented debate on the role of women. This debate constituted the backdrop of the Socialist Education Movement (1962–65), which lent tacit support to the traditional positioning of women within the confines of the household.

Politics played a predominant role in social and family life after the Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966. Political correctness became the only acceptable norm of social behaviour. Former discussions of women's roles ceased due to their incompatibility with the dominant perspective of class struggle. To a greater or lesser extent, the Anti-Lin and Anti-Confucius Campaign of 1973–76 targeted traditionally sanctioned womanhood within the public domain. It started with a severe, nationwide critique of the Vice-chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Lin Biao, Mao's former comrade-in-arms, now cast as a conspirator and traitor. Later, the campaign developed into an assault on Confucian ethics, characterized as feudal remnants. Women were called on to ignore feudalist ideas and to fight against gender inequality under political guidelines. Confucius's gender discrimination was exposed in his notorious statement: 'Only women and petty men are difficult to deal with. When you let them get close, they are insolent; when you keep them at distance, they complain.'<sup>3</sup> Under these circumstances, traditionally established femininity came under ruthless public criticism.

### *Illusory women's emancipation*

Unlike in Western countries, there has never been a women's movement independent of national and social movements in modern China. The category of woman has always been subsumed under the larger nationalist agenda and operates within the state discourse.<sup>4</sup> Women's emancipation was regarded as part of social reform and revolution and could only be materialized through the leverage of social movements both in the Republic of China and in the PRC. Women's ultimate goal was to serve the state and the people rather than to fight

for gender equality. On Chinese women's part, this resulted in the dominance of their 'social awareness' over their 'individual awareness.'<sup>5</sup>

In the post-1949 era, Chinese women constituted a huge human resource for Mao Zedong's grand socialist project. For this reason, the CCP made continued efforts to mobilize women as a workforce for nation building. As Mao Zedong proclaimed, 'Time has changed. Whatever men comrades can do, women comrades can too.'<sup>6</sup> Mao Zedong seemed to suggest that women's participation in productive labour was the key to women's emancipation, but his remarks virtually justified the exploitation of women's physical strength as well as men's for the revolutionary cause.

Large-scale female employment during the Maoist regime happened on a clearly unequal basis. Urban women 'were often assigned to the least-skilled, lowest-paying jobs in neighbourhood-run enterprises that offered fewer benefits than the state-owned sector'.<sup>7</sup> Rural women got involved in most cumbersome labour, e.g. woodcutting, tractor-driving and dam-building. The idea of 'equal labour, equal pay' (*tong gong tong chou*) turned out to be a failure. For instance, the implementation of the work-point system was a clear indicator of inequality in rural areas. On average, women earned less than 6–7 work-points (out of 10) even if they performed the same tasks within the same time as men did.

Women's equal rights in political, economic, cultural and family life were guaranteed by the 1950 Constitution of the PRC. Likewise, state laws (e.g. Marriage Law, Labour Law) offered equal rights and protection to women. In addition to the unprecedented degree of female employment, female literacy was on the increase, ordinary women enjoyed the freedom to choose their marriage partners, to divorce, and to seek legal and official help in time of trouble. On this basis, Zhou Yi (1996) claimed:

In comparison with developed countries in the world, China's women's emancipation movement has amazing achievements... Needless to say, Chinese women have realised [the goals of] emancipation in many respects.<sup>8</sup>

Does Zhou's observation represent a true picture or is it merely a 'revolutionary myth'? The truth is that gender equality has never been a key concern of state policy. It seems to me that the enactment of laws often runs into difficulty in reality. There exists a huge gap between the professed ideology of equality and all the forms of inequality faced by women: in education, on the job market or in family life.

### *Revolutionary sex equality*

Gender awareness, an easy target for public criticism of petty-bourgeois

sentiment, was basically screened out of the Chinese mindset. As Harriet Evans pointed out, ‘A kind of androgyny, a sexual sameness, based on the de-feminisation of female appearance and its approximation of male standards of dress, seemed to be the socialist ideal.’<sup>9</sup> Indeed, during the Cultural Revolution, ‘political correctness consisted partly in women wearing the same clothes as men, keeping their hair short and using no make-up,’ but not the other way around.<sup>10</sup> Women in those times wore army-style green to display their right political stance (otherwise indicated by the colour red) and in distinction to the silks and satins of the favourite traditional attire.

Official role models were established for ordinary women to imitate and emulate. In spite of the various official titles, such as ‘three eight red flags bearers’ (*san ba hongqi shou*), ‘advanced workers’ (*xianjin gongzuo zhe*) and ‘model workers’ (*laodong mofan*), these heroines were highly archetypal: revolutionary zeal, selfless character, masculine strength and plain dressing. A political message was sent out by these official models: their biological condition did not determine their destiny, women could become men’s equals through hard work and their conformity with male standards. A team of young women known as the ‘Iron Girls’ from China’s model agricultural brigade, *Dazhai*, served as a telling example. These peasant heroines won nationwide attention in the mid-1960s with their masculine strength, inexhaustible energy and surging revolutionary spirit.

Under the banner of the slogan ‘Serve the workers, farmers and soldiers; serve politics’, gendered literature was considered at odds with politics. Female-authored novels invariably came to terms with the mainstream representation. For instance, Cao Ming’s novel *The Head of the Train* (*Huoche tou*) written in the early 1950s depicts the life of railway workers whose ultimate goal is to serve the country, the people and the revolutionary cause of socialist construction. In a similar vein, her work *Brave the Wind and the Waves* (*Chengfeng polang*) portrays a wild scene of steel-smelting and steel-making in the late 1950s. Female images created by men and women alike projected a de-feminizing tendency in the PRC. Fang Haichen, the female protagonist of the revolutionary model opera *On the Dock* (*Matou shang*), is illustrative of ‘standard’ womanhood acclaimed by the CCP.

Maoist ethics superimposed the notion of class struggle on human nature and that of the collective on the individual. The individual self was considered trivial, insignificant, non-essential when compared with the larger and ostensibly more lofty goals, such as the emancipation of humankind and socialist construction. This kind of political education propagated self-effacement and self-abandonment, which, in the name of politics, negatively affected humanity and interpersonal relationships.

### Contemporary re-inventions of gender

Mao Zedong's death and the dismantling, in 1976, of the Gang of Four, the faction headed by Mao's wife Jiang Qing, signalled the end of ultra-left politics. Deng Xiaoping's open-door policy and economic reform implemented in 1978 brought about fundamental changes in Chinese society. Apart from new problems arising from a rapidly changing society – e.g. female infanticide, female unemployment, extra-marital relationships, an increasing number of unmarried women – the old controversy over women's productive and reproductive roles remains at the heart of post-Mao public debate. Gender is open to re-interpretation, within and beyond the confines of official ideology. The re-appraisal of traditional ethics marks a widespread refusal to comply with political dominance in general and over womanhood in particular. There are conflicting role models for contemporary Chinese women for the purpose of gender reconstruction. All of them, however, are radically different from the received role models of Maoist times.

#### *State versus individual*

In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, contemporary Chinese women are confronted with a complex socio-historical reality. They feel compelled to recover the gender features eliminated by politics while risking falling into the old pitfall of traditional femininity. They are generally fed up with -isms (socialism, communism, Maoism) yet unable to dissociate themselves from ideological control. Their lives, if not shaped completely by history, are in no way separable from China's past, distant or immediate. In this regard, Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter argue:

In both periods, gender issues were subordinated to 'more important, larger' issues—class struggle during the Cultural Revolution, modernisation [of agriculture, industry, science and technology, national defence] during the 1980s. In both periods, women were told they could succeed by overcoming their own natural limitations. The Cultural Revolution formula for success challenged the sexual division of labour and put women to work at such tasks as repairing high-voltage lines. In the 1980s, the sexual division of labour was supported by state policy, but women were still told that success lay in daring to think and act like men.<sup>11</sup>

This observation points out an often-neglected or shrouded linkage between present-day China and the period of the Cultural Revolution. Post-Mao women are still placed on the pendulum of state policy. Women's roles switch with switching national interests. A chain of new policies (concerning family planning, rural household responsibility system and industrial responsibility system, return-home policy, shareholding system, etc) has left an indelible mark on

contemporary Chinese women's lives. Women's lingering dependence on state initiatives has somewhat undermined the autonomy of their gender reconstruction.

However, a significant change has taken place in post-Mao China, i.e. the shift of public attention from the collective to the individual. For a period of time, signposts such as 'self-discovery', 'self-analysis', 'search for self-identity', 'exploration of self-value', 'restorations of self-dignity and integrity' dominated public debate in the wake of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>12</sup> This emphasis on the 'small I's' (*xiao wo*) instead of the big 'I' (*da wo*) as a synonym of the collective marks an interesting turn in post-Mao gender discourse. In the early 1980s, the All China's Women's Federation publicized the 'Four Selves' campaign: self-respect, self-confidence, self-determination and self-realization, partially echoing the official re-adjustment to the (re-)emergence of individuality under new circumstances.

The separation between public and personal life has been obscured since the 1980s, when the central government somewhat loosened its control over normal social activities. Aspects of personal life not permissible during the Cultural Revolution due to their 'political incorrectness' found an entry into public discourse. Women's problems, ranging from biology to psychology, from education to profession, from adolescence to courtship, from marriage to motherhood, have been open to public discussion mediated by the media, state-controlled or otherwise.

#### *A new notion of femininity*

Gender has become a hot issue in post-Mao public debate, centring on 'women's ideal and ideal women' of the late 1980s, 'role conflicts of professional women' of the mid-1990s, 'women returning home' of the late 1990s.<sup>13</sup> The debate hinges on the controversy over women's roles in contemporary society as well as on the notion of femininity, with contradictory views springing from different interpretations. Nevertheless, all parties involved in the debate agree that 'virtue' (*xianhui*) and 'kindness' (*shanliang*) remain two desirable components of Chinese womanhood.

The criterion of 'virtuous wife and kind mother' (*xianqi liangmu*) epitomizes, in part, the essence of traditional role division, 'Men plant, women weave' (*nan geng, nü zhi*) and 'Men are in charge of outside affairs, and women of inside affairs' (*nan zhuwai, nü zhunei*). Such a positioning of men and women helped to structure the societal hierarchy in traditional China and to shape the boundary between high and low, and between public and private. In accordance with traditional ethics, Chinese women were lumped into two categories, 'good' and 'evil'. Those who lived up to their household responsibility were good; those who failed were bad.

There is a tendency to appropriate the old notion of femininity in answer to the

new problems originating in contemporary Chinese society. Ideal womanhood is now reinterpreted as ‘new virtuous wife and kind mother’ (*xin xianqi liangmu*) or ‘super-virtuous wife and kind mother’ (*chao xianqi liangmu*), as a counterbalance to the political androgyny advocated during the Cultural Revolution. New elements are instilled to revise traditional female restrictions and to address the more complicated role assumed by contemporary Chinese women.

The label of ‘new virtuous wife and kind mother’ is characteristic of the valuation of women’s responsibility in the household next to their social function. Again, the modern version of femininity projects dual demands on women. First, they are supposed to be career-minded and capable at work. Second, they should fulfil their traditionally defined roles as ‘good wives’, ‘good mothers’ and ‘good daughters-in-law’. Ideal women are those who can maintain a balance between society, family and self. At best, the dual societal expectation endorses gender specificity and women’s social role. At worst, it makes women confront ‘role conflicts’ and a ‘split personality’.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Four categories of model women*

Role models established in Maoist times have lost their appeal in contemporary China. New models are constructed to address the complexity and profundity of contemporary womanhood. Informed by, yet differing from, the formulation of Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter, I identify four categories of female role models in the place of the Maoist formulaic, monolithic model: (1) model workers from all walks of Chinese life; (2) famous personages or celebrities; (3) virtuous women; (4) foreign role models.

Li Suli is exemplary of the first group. She is a Beijing-based bus conductress on bus No. 1333 along the route No. 21 from the newly built Beijing Western Railway Station to Xizhi men. According to Ren Zhen, there is nothing really heroic in Li that has earned her the honorary title as a model worker from service industry.<sup>15</sup> The key to Li’s success is her high professional ethics: warmth, sincerity, diligence and devotion, regardless of her dirty, crowded working environment. In addition, she has studied English and sign language in her spare time. In the years 1996–97, she was a front-page figure across the country. In Beijing, banners with the inscription of ‘Learn from Li Suli; offer first-rate service’ hung on all the buses. What makes Li different from old-time models is her strong self-awareness as a woman. She dresses elegantly and wears light cosmetics on formal occasions. Her picture on the cover of the official magazine *Chinese Women* (*Zhongguo funü*) is reminiscent of a fashion model rather than of a model worker.

The second category projects a dominant aspect of post-Mao society where economic reform has caused increasing materialism and consumerism. A new generation of ‘star fans’ (*zhui xing zu*) has emerged from the Chinese cultural landscape. Never before has Chinese society thrown such a spotlight on famous personalities, such as actors and actresses, popular singers, authors and athletes. The movie star Gong Li has risen to prominence because of her successful performance in the movies directed by Zhang Yimou, e.g. *Red Sorghum* (*Hong gaoliang*, 1987), *Judou* (*Judou*, 1989), *Raise the Red Lantern* (*Da hong denglong gaogao gua*, 1991) and *To Live* (*Huo zhe*, 1994). Presumably, her popularity also stems from her extraordinary physical beauty. She is one of the most popular Chinese actresses whose image and stories frequently appeared in magazines, the press, and TV programmes in the 1990s.

The third category echoes a resurgence of traditional values to counterbalance the de-feminizing trend visible during the Cultural Revolution. One example I have in mind is Liu Huifang, the female protagonist of the 50-episode TV series *Longing* (*Kewang*), which was a nationwide sensation in the early 1990s. Controversy surrounded this image cast from traditional feminine virtues: good-tempered (*he*), gentle (*rou*), loyal (*zhen*), obedient (*shun*), benevolent (*ren*), wise (*ming*), filial (*xiao*) and kind (*ci*). In spite of criticism of her conservatism and blind obedience, Liu has been acclaimed by many Chinese as the symbol of ideal Chinese womanhood.<sup>16</sup>

China’s open-door policy has provided opportunities for large-scale cultural communication. Western ideas and values have breathed new air into Chinese society. Along with a surge of cultural imports in the 1980s came the recognition of foreign role models who had been ignored or were unacceptable during the Maoist regime. Chinese schoolgirls were told to emulate Madame Curie – the only woman scientist in the world that won the Nobel Prize twice. Interestingly, Chinese reports pinpointed Madame Curie’s feminine aspects, notably her loyal and deep love for her husband.

Western intellectual elites (men and women alike) are held in esteem in post-Mao China. For instance, the great popularity of the Chinese translation of *The Second Sex* in the 1980s made Simone de Beauvoir an intellectual icon for Chinese women artists (e.g. the sculptress Jiang Jie) and authors (e.g. the poet Zhai Yongming), who were fascinated not only with her work but also with the way of life she represented, and others.

The idea that women should dress, look and act in a womanly way, rather than strive for a unisex appearance and behaviour, is ‘part of the re-assertion of gender as a natural and valued division in society.’<sup>17</sup> Beyond that, the different role models represent the multi-faceted demands on womanhood both by the state and individuals.

### The exploration of gender in women's poetry

In the general atmosphere of renaissance in literature and art, a constellation of female authors has emerged on the Chinese literary scene since the 1980s. Wang Anyi, Tie Ning, Zhang Kangkang, Can Xue, Lin Bai and Chen Ran are prominent fictional writers. Famous women poets include Shu Ting, Zhai Yongming, Yi Lei, Tang Yaping and Hai Nan. These female authors enjoy a high degree of social recognition. They propel the shaping of a new gender discourse beyond the pale of orthodoxy with their extraordinary literary output and with their active participation in the wide social debate on gender.

Contemporary Chinese women's poetry is an important medium for shaping a gendered identity. Women poets find it essential to explore the meaning of gender rather than to submit to cultural-historical restrictions imposed on womanhood. The act of writing comes about as a result of self-questioning: what does it mean to be a woman? How can femininity be defined and re-defined? By what means can gender experience be translated into writing? Their exploration and self-questioning give rise to a particular type of self-expression by women and for women in post-Mao China.

#### *Poetic role models*

Contemporary women authors have no immediate predecessors to identify with, except for a classical, male-dominated feminine tradition and a limited amount of women's writing from the New Culture Movement in the 1910s and 1920s, with little more than superficial societal regard for gender and related issues. In their renewed contact with foreign literature, Chinese women poets encountered a fresh, enlightening and powerful voice in American confessional poetry, notably that of Sylvia Plath. Chinese women poets learnt from Plath that poetry and death are two sides of the same coin: poetry is meant to be self-expression; death (mostly symbolic) is a piece of personal belonging and a means of self-determination.

Plath's work served as an eye-opener for Chinese women poets in their search for creative freedom after a long-term political dominance over literature in contemporary China. Exposure to Plath's poetry informed the writing of Zhai Yongming's poem-series 'Woman' (*Nüren*) and Lu Yimin's poem 'American Women's Magazine' (*Meiguo funü zazhi*). These texts in turn found a ready echo in Tang Yaping's poem-series 'Black Desert' (*Heise shamo*), Wang Xiaoni's 'One Bottle of Nestlé Coffee Makes Me Wander to the Far Ends of the World' (*Yiping quecao kafei shi wo langji tianya*, 1985), and Hai Nan's poem-series 'Woman'. Plath's poetry left textual traces in these canonical female-authored Chinese texts, which constituted the mainstream of women's poetry in the 1980s.

The overwhelming popularity of Plath's work among Chinese women poets has helped shape an alternative women's poetics, other than orthodoxy.

Sylvia Plath is a particularly prominent role model for post-Mao women poets. In addition, these poets make reference to a multitude of earlier texts, be they female-authored or male-authored, foreign or Chinese. Inter-culturally, R. M. Rilke, T. S. Eliot, Ted Hughes, Adrienne Rich and Wallace Stevens are exemplary on the long list of canonized foreign poets in China. Intra-culturally, post-Mao women's poetry contains abundant reworkings of the work of Bai Juyi (772–846), Li Qingzhao (1084–ca. 1151), Bing Xin (1900–1999), Ai Qing (1910–1996), to name but a few. Chinese women poets often invoke foreign role models for new inspirations and representations beyond the pale of traditional Chinese gender discourse. On the other hand, they return to an indigenous literary tradition to subvert female archetypes and to redefine womanhood.

Unlike the aforesaid social role models – who mainly serve political, pragmatic purposes – contemporary Chinese women poets are frontline figures in the cause of gender construction. With an acute gender consciousness they probe into the complexity and ambiguity of gendered selves and articulate in a more radical, more autonomous, and more individualistic manner.

### *Gender awareness*

The gender consciousness of post-Mao women poets is characterized by the assertion of gender differentiation. This stance challenges the gender-free ideal of Maoist ethics in the perspective of class struggle. For contemporary Chinese women poets, poetry means the revelation of gender-specific experience and psychology that was distorted or eliminated by orthodoxy. Take Zhai Yongming's 'Living' (*Rensheng*) for example:

Walking like the wind, black-haired daughters  
 Quiet and silent, use incurable  
 Charm to shake summer's blood  
 Full of secrets, night steps into your heart

Night frightens us. We look for arms  
 Immeasurably beautiful, immeasurably wonderful  
 With the figure of the moon, and with traces of fallen leaves  
 Night lets us learn to tolerate and enjoy<sup>18</sup>

Night and summer, both from the category of time, are absorbed in the speaker's consciousness, as if they exist as a vehicle of her sensibility. The metaphor of 'summer's blood' has a positive connotation since summer invites associations with heat, enthusiasm and passion. The action of shaking 'summer's blood' carries a strong erotic overtone on account of its collocation with 'incurable charm',

‘secrets,’ ‘night’, and further away in the poem, with ‘arms’, ‘beautiful’ and ‘wonderful’.

Beneath the surface arises a female voice, speaking about women’s physicality and sexuality. The voice is anchored in various semantic ambiguities; for instance, the unspecified image of ‘arms’. The key image ‘night’ heightens these ambiguities to the extent that it harbours passion and seduction, pleasure and fear. The subject suffering from fear remains a subject who aspires to tolerate and enjoy her sexuality. The moon is endowed with tangibility and sexuality, given its proximity to the human figure. A self-celebratory tone surfaces in the following stanza:

I am the seducer, who displays fabricated light  
And blends with dust in such a perfect way  
The road turns up in a real manner  
Divinity stays above, letting you do as you please

The seducer belongs to the world of night, a world too self-sufficient to resign to the daytime world. The road leads to a world of free will. In this stanza, the formerly assertive ‘we’-speaker assumes the voice of the ‘I’-speaker, standing back from the addressee ‘you’. The three pronouns – ‘we’, ‘I’ and ‘you’ – refer to women in general, a singular woman speaker, and women readers respectively. The use of ‘we’ reassures readers that the speaker is aware of their existence and identifies with them. The use of the second person plural sounds supplicatory or exhortative: ‘I’ as a woman reminds ‘you’ of ‘our’ gender differences or of ‘our’ individuality. With disguises and evasions, Zhai Yongming suggests that the essential meaning of womanhood is to live with their own sexuality in a self-enclosed night world. This poetry indeed sets a sharp contrast with any Chinese women’s writing from pre-modern and modern times; in particular that produced during the Maoist regime.

### *Strong self-articulation*

Contemporary women poets refuse to acquiesce in either Maoist ethics or biased traditional Chinese literary representations of femininity. Rather, they are intent on subverting the female archetypes of Chinese cultural history, be it the obedient, virtuous, voiceless woman in traditional representation or the unwomanly, revolutionary and selfless heroine in Maoist discourse. They touch upon the complexities of their gendered selves, through conscious dialogues with earlier texts both from Chinese and foreign literary traditions. Yi Lei writes in ‘Black Hair’ (*Hei toufa*)

Black hair  
Luxuriant wild grasses

Suck heartily in the humble soil  
 Vacillating  
 She grows wild fantasies  
 And becomes disillusioned in the days of disillusion  
 Yet, black hair does not know it

Black hair's experience  
 Is my experience  
 Let me die at this moment  
 From now on, from now on, my beautiful hair is like a cloud

Black hair  
 Like flowing water  
 Cannot, cannot! Cannot ... be regained  
 And will soon collapse

... Black hair  
 Exhausted wild fire  
 At the last moment howls miserably and beautifully

Black hair  
 A soft black flag  
 The woman's last pride  
 In the wind of March  
 Is torn apart and wound-ridden  
 Yes, she betrays her dignified blood  
 Without the aura of chastity  
 Her last pride, in March  
 Smiles freely

If it be a waterfall, it will soon be exhausted  
 If it be a black cloud, it will disperse  
 Black hair opens her terrified eyes  
 Begging eyes  
 Waiting at the hands of you men  
 To crystallise into a rock<sup>19</sup>

Yi Lei displaces and rewrites Chinese connotations of black hair. She reuses the traditional motif of hair rendered as 'cloud' and 'waterfall', and then guides the reader to respond critically to the conventional restraints. The poem casts black hair into a speaking subject who transgresses her 'dignified blood' and the traditional virtue of 'chastity'. Nevertheless, her subversion does not lead to triumph, but ends up as metamorphosis into an unfeeling, genderless rock. Here the reader discerns the speaking subject's failed attempt to define herself sexually.

The metaphor of 'wild fire' forms an echo of the metaphor of 'luxuriant wild grasses' in stanza 4. The timing of the poetic event, i.e. springtime, together with these two metaphors, brings to mind the well-known verse 'Grass on Ancient Plain: A Song of Farewell' (*Fu de guyuan cao songbie*) by Bai Juyi:

Spreading there, spreading there, the grasses on the plain,  
 A cycle, a year of flourishing and decay—  
 Wild fires burns but cannot kill them off,  
 When spring wind blows, they grow again.  
 Faraway fragrance overruns ancient roads,  
 Bright emerald tint spreads to ruined walls.  
 Again it's time to bid farewell,  
 Lush growth teams with my parting thoughts.<sup>20</sup>

Yi Lei strategically veils her borrowing from an ancient Chinese poem from the late Tang Dynasty. First, she displaces textual elements borrowed from Bai Juyi's poem. Second, she plays down the celebratory tone of the pre-text. Instead of paying homage to the vitality of wild grasses, Yi sees in 'black hair' a symbol of women's temporary emancipation but eternal passivity.

The line 'At the last moment howls miserably and beautifully' contains an explicit reference to 'Howl' by Allen Ginsberg whose poetry strikes Chinese poets with its emotional explosiveness, its unashamed self-preoccupation and its metrical expansiveness. In the face of the repressive socio-political reality in the 1970s and 1980s, male Chinese poets, especially some so-called 'Obscure poets' (*menglong shiren*), were fascinated by the works of American Beat Generation authors, such as Kerouac's *On the Road* and Ginsberg's 'Howl'. Likewise, Chinese women poets see in 'howling' a powerful articulation of their sexual drives suppressed by politics and patriarchy. Their feminized way of howling in the manner of a shriek is reminiscent of Plath's articulation in 'Elm':

Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs  
 A wind of such violence  
 Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.<sup>21</sup>

In the Chinese translation of Plath's poem, the word 'shriek' is translated as *jiansheng haojiao* [howl in a shrieking voice].<sup>22</sup> This volcanic self-expression releases anger, repression and tension felt by women from different cultural traditions. Back in the context of Yi Lei's 'Black Hair', howling, beautiful and sad, works as the last resort of the lyrical speaker, exhausted emotionally and physically.

Women poets from the contemporary PRC are generally fed up with roundabout language about womanhood and sexuality. Among contemporary women poets, Yi Lei stands out because she writes about shockingly personal subject matter. Yi Lei prefers directness. In her two poetry collections *Rebel Hands* and *The Age of Womanhood* one startling signifier is the female body. Yi transforms a stereotyped desire-free female into one with strong self-awareness and desires. In her poem 'The Bedroom of a Single Woman' (*Dushen nüren de woshi*) she writes:

This small room contains too many portraits of nudity  
 One fellow happens to push the door  
 Crying out 'a Turkish bathhouse'  
 He does not know that I lock my door in summer  
 I am a real customer of the bathhouse  
 And look at my reflection with admiration—  
 My limbs are long, and my figure is slim  
 My buttocks are tight, and my shoulder narrow and slant  
 Every muscle is full of passion  
 I am my own model  
 I create art; art creates me  
 Picture albums pile up on my bed  
 Socks and underwear lie on the desk  
 Winter jasmines in the glass bottle have withered  
 Faint golden yellows bloom on the floor  
 Soft mats and cushions are scattered everywhere  
 I can fall asleep in every corner  
 You do not come and live together with me<sup>23</sup>

In its canonical sense, 'a room of one's own' as depicted by Virginia Woolf represents material independence that lays the ground for inner liberty. Yi Lei sets physical emancipation as the precondition for spiritual freedom. For her, self-awareness begins with the body; the severance of the body from socio-historical restrictions is the first step towards women's emancipation. The foregrounding of female sexuality challenges the highly acclaimed virtue of female chastity in traditional China. Besides, she questions the traditional view that women are just artefacts but unable to create art. Thus, the writing of the female body in Yi Lei's 'The Bedroom of a Single Woman' means to celebrate self-articulation, the right of speech reclaimed from tradition and society and enjoyed by this self-modelled speaking subject.

### **Concluding remarks**

Various contradictions between official ideology and private discourse, between socialist and traditional orthodoxy, between gender equality and differentiation are restructuring the lives of Chinese women. From a socio-historical point of view, there coexist elements of continuity and discontinuity with regard to gender and related issues. Official ideology, albeit obscured, continues to exert influence in contemporary Chinese society. To combat previous political efforts to efface individuality and gender, contemporary Chinese women seek ways to express their gender consciousness. One option is to replace the revolutionary female archetypes with new role models, and among them, foreign role models, such as Simone de Beauvoir and Sylvia Plath.

Intellectual women play a pivotal role in contemporary gender construction.

Women poets join in this intellectual drive with a self-assured, powerful voice radically different from that in much of traditional women's writing and in previous socialist literature. Their self-articulation in the form of self-portrayal can be seen as a transgressive, self-empowering gesture against political shackles and male-dominated discursive power. Writing about the self and for the self informs the pursuit of an identity not pre-determined by social, cultural and historical bonds. This expansion of gender consciousness and female subjectivity constitutes a driving force of contemporary Chinese women's writing.

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