

Sex and Chanel: Young Female Writers in China

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China

Contemporary female-authored literary discourse from the People's Republic of China is fraught with confession, the portrayal of privacy, and writing about the female body. Conventionally subversive topics (e.g. nudity, menstruation, sexual intercourse, abortion, and miscarriage) have gained new ground in Chinese texts by women since the mid-1980s, when various social taboos and gender stereotypes were subjected to revision and subversion. These phenomena signalled the emergence of a new women's poetics, celebrating female sexuality and subjectivity, *vis-à-vis* the politically oriented writing of the early 1980s. Antipolitical stances, manifest in the work of Shu Ting, Lin Zi, and the earlier Wang Anyi, switched to radical critiques of superficial societal views of gender. This gendered mode of writing has been characterized as 'body poetics' or 'gender politics'. From my point of view, the rise of body poetics articulates a twofold meaning. Firstly, the female body offers a new avenue for probing gender-specific experiences and literary alternatives. Secondly, it indicates an area of resistance against accepted gender values in the pursuit of a new gender identity.

By Zhang Xiaohong

Introspection sets the tone of contemporary Chinese women's literature produced between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s. For women authors, writing is meant to address the complexity and ambiguity of their gendered selves, and most well-known texts are endowed with both social and psychological significance. Women's consciousness is often explored from a psychosexual perspective, as in Wang Anyi's love trilogy, Chen Ran's *Toast to the Past*, Zhai Yongming's poem-series *Woman*, and Tang Yaping's poem-series *Black Desert*.

Inward perspectives turn outward in the work of newly emerging women novelists like Wei Hui, Mian Mian, Jiu Dan, An Dun, and Chun Shu. These labelled, or self-labelled, 'beauty' or 'alternative' writers strip off any delicate cover of privacy and expose private details to the public with little concern for major issues or the complication of mundane matters. An alternative lifestyle is highly celebrated: casual sex, drugs, homosexual practice, and violence. Fictional settings switch from bar to café, from disco to mall, and from bedroom to bathroom. Through literary metamorphosis day-to-day life feels like a dazzling shopping mall, which is too good to be true. The real become ultra-real or surreal, when the aforesaid authors exploit reality and play with it. The female body is turned into a trademark, a signpost, and a fashion label: gender politics transforms into commercialized exhibitionism.

Just like their male colleagues, contemporary Chinese women authors turned to the West for role models to imitate and emulate. This has led to the huge popularity of women authors from Western cultures. Sylvia Plath has been a particularly empowering role model for Chinese women poets. Her work propelled the phenomenon of 'black hurricane' after the official publication of Zhai Yongming's poem-series 'Woman' (*Nüren*) in 1986. Under the speculative spell of Plath, dense black imagery and representations of death developed into a shared mode of expression in Chinese women's poetry. In another instance, Wei Hui's scandalous quotation of Plath's 'Daddy' was believed to be one of the triggers of the official ban on her novel *Shanghai Baby* (1999). The line 'Every woman adores a fascist' is recycled from 'Daddy' to dramatize the lovemaking scene. *Shanghai Baby* contains abundant references to Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Duras's *The Lover*. Each new chapter begins with one or more epigraphs by canonized foreign authors, such as Henry Miller, D. H. Lawrence, Allen Ginsberg, and Milan Kundera. Yet, references to foreign literature and culture add no more significance to *Shanghai Baby* than do fashion and exoticism. All foreign literary and cultural elements are dealt with on a superficial level and ask for little interpretative effort. Foreign authors read no different than foreign brands like IKEA, Esprit, Calvin Klein, Christian Dior, and Chanel.

The discourse of contemporary Chi-

nese women's writing is loaded with gendered perspectives and private preoccupations. This inward orientation is countered by an opening-up to literature from distant cultures and to commercial trends, which this author would like to call 'an outward orientation'. This double orientation makes women's writing a fascinating area to explore such debatable hermeneutic issues as literary authenticity and originality.

Literary authenticity has much to do with the issue of originality. The notion of intertextuality originates from the common knowledge that originality does not exist in the abstract. A text is always related to other texts, intraculturally or interculturally. The notion of intertextuality calls into focus the discourse, the writing process, and the limited reservoir of literary and linguistic options. To apply intertextual readings to women's writing helps us to analyse its distinctive features: its texts, intertexts, contexts, and meta-texts. In particular, intertextual phenomena can illustrate how the selection of specific role models by women authors affects the typology of the discourse.

The notion of intertextuality suggests that there is no fixed hierarchy between texts. No text is intrinsically better than other texts. A text is just one possible form of verbal expression, and is authentic or original only in the sense that it is created by individual beings out of their own experiences, memories, and imagination, in relation to those of other individuals documented in earlier texts. The value a text is supposed to have is fully attributed to external agents and conditions, and results from individual judgment in a particular context and on the basis of particular criteria. Meanwhile, an individual's reading cannot be detached from the prevailing literary convention to which he or she is related. Literary convention, together with individualized readership, determines how and why certain texts are successful among a certain reading community. The success of female-authored Chinese texts must be measured against this background. Women authors' portrayal of private experience caters to the common taste of a Chinese readership that is sick of revolutionary and historical allegories. ◀

References

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