

# Far and Away: Three Authors from Yunnan

Writers >  
China

Zhang Xiaohong profiles the work of three prominent Chinese writers who live and work in the remote Yunnan province of China. The interview with Hai Nan is extracted from a series of conversations on contemporary Chinese literary trends and women's writing, which took place in Kunming in 2002.



Courtesy of the Michigan University Museum of Art

By Zhang Xiaohong

Yunnan province lies on the Yungui plateau, at an average altitude of 2,000 meters. The remote Chinese province is reputed for its beautiful landscape, rich natural resources, mild climate, and above all, for its ethnic diversity. Its mysticism has been a continuous source of inspiration for authors from home and abroad.

Kunming, Yunnan's capital city, is home to many renowned writers, artists and composers. Three prominent young authors, Li Sen, Hai Nan and Chen Chuan have an unusual solidarity. They share the same passion for and commitment to literature. They meet regularly in a shabby, mud-floored restaurant close to Yunnan University campus to exchange books, opinions, and perspectives. Well informed on foreign literature and art, they share an admiration for foreign authors such as Borges, T.S. Eliot, Kafka and Kundera.

## Li Sen

Li Sen, the group's uncrowned leader, is deputy dean of the College of Art at Yunnan University. Li Sen writes poetry, fables and critiques. He is best known for his two poem-series 'Rip It Off' (*Sikai*) and 'The Chinese Windmill' (*Zhongguo fengche*), commended by critics as among the best Chinese poetry of the 1990s. Influenced by Wallace Stevens, Li Sen's poetry strikes a balance between classicism and modernism, intellectualism and lyricism. He uses fables to present his views on life, society, politics and history. Like Kafka's allegorical rendering of animals, Li Sen often uses animals to represent bureaucratic political figures, speculative poets, seasoned scholars or social underdogs. Li Sen is also an established columnist and reviewer of foreign writers and artists for the Guangzhou-based literary journal *Flower City* (*Huacheng*). His essay collection *Shadows on the Canvas* (*Huabu shang de yinying*, 2000) provides lyrical interpretations of paintings by Millet, Monet, Van Gogh, Cézanne, Gauguin and many others.

## Chen Chuan

Born into a tradition where white hair is symbolic capital, Chen Chuan's youth somewhat works against his literary aspirations. Following his 'discovery' by the editor of Kunlun Press, his prose works *Last Village Pastoral Song* and *Knock Open the City's Door* were published in 2002. *Last Village Pastoral Song* (*Zuihou de xiangcun muge*) is a collection of prose about events, attitudes, people and material culture, all situ-

ated in rural China. Written in fluid, lucid and slightly sentimental language, Chen Chuan's prose defamiliarises the familiar and shatters the stereotyped countryside scenes of popular Chinese cultural imagination. His characters represent abstract symbols rather than living beings. The countryside is a mixed site of memories, fantasies, perceptions and nostalgia.

Having grown up in the country, he assumes the role of an observer or discoverer in *Knock Open the City's Door* (*Qiaokai chengshi de men*). His narrator captures a grey, monotonous, self-enclosed castle-like city in which trivial and shadowy figures roam on the margins or within subculture groups. Chen Chuan's renderings are reminiscent of Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* (*Les Fleurs du Mal*), albeit with a milder tone. Nevertheless, much of his representation is characterised by a desire to discern the bright in the grey, the beautiful in the ugly and the kind in the brutal. This gives Chen Chuan's prose a humanist aspect.

## Hai Nan

Hai Nan has been a controversial public figure since the publication of her poem series 'Woman' (*Nüren*) in 1987. A

prolific poet, Hai Nan has published four poetry collections: *Organ and Woman* (1992), *Fabricated Roses* (1995), *What Lies Behind* (1997) and *The Colour of Lips* (2000). *Fabricated Roses* is the finest and most illustrative of her collections. Hai Nan's best poetry is characterised by seeming nonsense and near-nonsense, semantic gaps, repetition, the collage of disjointed contexts, fragmentary syntax and allegories.

Hai Nan has also published fifteen novels. Her most radical fictional work, *A Man's Biography* (*Nanren zhuan*) (2000), is a language game that challenges established Chinese literary conventions and frustrates interpretative efforts. Her novels have become more realistic, however. *How Has a Butterfly Become a Sample* (2000) maintains a closer link with external reality than *A Man's Biography*. The female narrator closely examines the story-making or creative process. The image of butterflies chains the entire narrative and constitutes its thematic core of psychosis, love and destiny.

**Zhang Xiaohong** is a research assistant at the Research School of Asian, African and Amerindian Studies, Leiden University, the Netherlands. She has published literary and cultural studies in English and Chinese and is finishing her PhD research on contemporary Chinese women's poetry.  
x\_zhang@let.leidenuniv.nl

## How Has a Butterfly Become a Sample; Conversations with Hai Nan

Zhang: It seems that your poetry underwent a radical change during the 1990s, from complexity and undifferentiation to clarity, from outpouring to self-restraint. What caused this change in your writing?

Hai: This question is of great importance. When I attended the Youth Poetry Recital sponsored by the journal Poetry at the Lu Xun Literary Academy in 1988, many participants, including [the deceased poet] Luo Yihe criticised my poetry. Some of my poet friends suggested that I write with more self-restraint. My poetry was indeed chaotic – I was then twenty-five years old. I wrote poems every day, but discarded most of them that were chaotic and full of 'outpouring'. In 1990 I started writing poems that were later published in *Fabricated Roses*. I wrote three or four twelve-lined poems on a daily basis. Moments of clarity followed those of chaos. I remained composed in class, with Duras's *The Lover* and Eliot's *The Wasteland* on my desk. I was enchanted with *The Wasteland* and absorbed in the atmosphere of 'April is a cruel month.' This kind of writing exercise served to polish my poetic language. Without exaggeration, *Fabricated Roses* can be considered my best poetry collection.

Zhang: Have you been pursuing a 'language utopia', a term you employed in your prose work entitled 'Elegies of the Heart', through experimental writing? Aren't you sometimes worried that this desired 'language utopia' will daunt readers whose reading takes place in specific socio-historical contexts?

Hai: I seldom take readers into account in the course of writing. Once setting my pen to paper, I fall into a forgetful state, not consciously, but automatically. Writing is an autonomous act. It is like a labyrinth. Authors who have entered their self-created labyrinths are no longer connected with external reality.

Zhang: My next question concerns the image of butterflies in your novel 'How Has a Butterfly Become a Sample' and in your namesake poem. The butterfly is semantically ambiguous. For instance, it denotes 'beautiful', 'flying', 'fragile', 'happy', 'psychic', 'transient' and 'changeable.' The image symbolises loyal and tragic love in Chinese literary tradition. Why do you constantly evoke this almost clichéd image?

Hai: This has to do with the Butterfly Spring in Dali, Yunnan province. I was attracted by the beauty of the samples exhibited at the Butterfly Sample Museum of Dali. No other animal specimens are as beautiful as butterfly samples. The museum is virtually a prison for the life and beauty of butterflies. The living butterflies' indeterminate beauty is not at all free; their samples are displayed as 'beautiful captives' in a prison-like museum. Human existence is as fragile and vulnerable as the fate of butterflies.

Zhang: Your most famous poem-series 'Woman' imposes a strong psychological shock on readers. I felt that you turned psychological impulses into natural linguistic impulses. I also have the impression that you employ the medium of language to cure psychological wounds. Do you agree?

Hai: You are perhaps right, though I have never thought about it. In fact, the therapeutic effect of language is not confined to unhappy childhood experiences. Human beings suffer from wounds throughout their lives, especially women, who experience pain almost daily. Language is indeed the best therapy. Women can use writing to cure all sorts of wounds.

Zhang: Current Chinese poetry criticism attaches great importance to the thematic/semantic content of women's poetry, rather than form and structure. Do you see any gender-specific poetic form in women's poetry?

Interview



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Hai: Zhai Yongming has her own 'gendered specificity', as do Yi Lei and I. No woman poet can avoid talking about her own gender experience. Only on the basis of experience can guesses, hypotheses and fictionalised things be represented.

Zhang: Thank you for your time and insights. <