

None of our Business

—In Lieu of a Preface—

*A sin it is for women to play with the pen,
Let alone eulogizing the moon and praising the breeze.
Grinding through iron inkstones is none of our business,
But praises are high if our sewing needles break with wear.*

—Zhu Shuzhen 朱淑真

A History of Suppression

It seems that no ancient culture in the world has ever encouraged its women-folk to indulge in literary pursuits, but the ancient Chinese were probably among the world-leaders in the suppression of female literary talents. The saying that “a virtuous woman is one who is without talent” 女子無才便是德 had such strong backing that literary talent was, for women, like an albatross round the neck. There were two major reasons given for forbidding women to enter the world of letters: firstly, literacy would have become a tool for meddling in public affairs, from which it was only right that the inferior sex be excluded; and secondly, it was commonly believed that talented women all suffered crueller fates than their less gifted sisters. Thus the lesson went: if you were a woman mindful of social morality and aware of the limitations of your sex, and if you did not want to end up leading an unhappy life or garnering bad karma, you would be wise to stay away from the writing brush.

“Stubborn Weeds”

Be that as it may, Chinese literature has never been able to rid itself completely of women. These “stubborn weeds” have always found a way to break through the cold ground, and because they had to survive in such a hostile environment they were a special and hardy crop. Of course there are those who believe that all literature, and for that matter, history, originated with women, and that men distinguished themselves in various fields out of love, hatred or disgust for the women around them. But even if we disregard such feminist views and only consider the works written by women themselves, the list is still impressive.

The earliest reliable records of famous literary works by women date from the Han dynasty. The heart-rending poem “A Grey-haired Woman’s Lament” 白頭吟 by Zhuo Wenjun 卓文君, which moved her famous husband Sima Xiangru 司馬相如 to desist from taking concubines, and “Barbarian Reed-whistle Song in Eighteen Stanzas” 胡笳十八拍 by Cai Yan 蔡琰 which tells with great forcefulness the pain of separation from her children, are examples illustrating that though “love” was often the theme of women’s writing, the style of women writers was not necessarily

confined to the stereotypes of “refinement and gentleness”. Also from the Han dynasty, the aunt and niece of the Ban family—Imperial Concubine Ban 班婕妤 and Ban Zhao 班昭—were staunch defenders of Confucian morality and earned themselves social recognition and respect, while in the Five Dynasties, the Taoist nun Yu Xuanji 魚玄機 stunned the world with her poetic talent and amoral behaviour, and Xue Tao 薛濤, forced by circumstances into the ranks of courtesans, attracted the admiration of many literary men among her contemporaries by virtue of her poetic and artistic talents. The most famous poetesses in the history of classical Chinese literature are of course Li Qingzhao 李清照 and Zhu Shuzhen 朱淑真 of the Song dynasty. Li is remembered for her extraordinary poetic talent as well as the blissfully happy life she led with her equally literary-minded husband Zhao Mingcheng 趙明誠, a happiness cut short by Zhao’s early death. Zhu, on the other hand, turned her marital unhappiness into celebrated *shi* and *ci* poetry. In the realms of poetry, songs and drama, women writers again played a part, albeit a minor one, in the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties.

A Turning of the Tide

Despite the work of such brave and outstanding pioneers, there is no denying that the history of classical Chinese literature was dominated by men. The single event which changed the Chinese literary landscape was the May Fourth Movement. It marked the turning point for the literary careers of women, whose works were, at that time, still relatively few. But instead of being treated as products of an abnormal species they were then considered rare items worthy of value and respect. Thus the names of most women writers were suffixed with the word *nǚshì* 女士, a word which showed that women writers were still a rare breed, but at the same time that it was acceptable, at least to the more enlightened members of society, for a woman to write and be published.

And once the wheel started turning it rapidly gained speed. If we look at the current literary scene in Chinese societies such as mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, we are immediately struck by the conspicuousness of women writers, be it in terms of quantity, quality or innovation. It has happened that for months the ten best-selling literary works in Taiwan have all been by women; and of the Hong Kong writers who have established an international reputation, over half are women. It can hardly be denied that among the younger generation of writers to emerge in China in the last decade, the women are stealing the limelight.

Women Writers: China, Taiwan and Hong Kong

In China there has been an upsurge in literary productivity by women writers since 1979. But prior to this upswing, the post-liberation years had not provided particularly fertile ground for women writers. One of the reasons was of course that literature was treated as a tool for the promotion of communism, and thus

literary creativity of both men and women was restricted. Moreover, “struggles”, be they class, social, political or military, were almost the only staple element in the first thirty years of communist rule, and in the words of the critic Li Ziyun, it is doubly difficult for women to write about the “struggles” of a male world.¹ It is thus not surprising that the more liberal policies adopted by the Chinese government since 1979 were particularly welcome to women writers, who have at last found an outlet for their creative talent.

Women writers such as Zhang Jie 張潔 and Shen Rong 謹容, who picked up their pens in the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, have tended to concentrate on the emotional sufferings of their protagonists, especially on the pain of loveless marriages and the importance of real love in life. However, love is not the be all and end all for Chinese women writers, as is witnessed by the social criticism and social satire of the works of Zhang and Shen, and of the younger generation of women writers who have emerged in the early 1980s, among whom are Liu Suola 劉索拉, Wang Anyi 王安憶 and Zhang Xinxin 張辛欣. What is most exciting about the works of mainland Chinese women writers today is perhaps the diversity in style, form and content; a diversity which has come about as a result of a greater measure of freedom and less *dirigiste* literary policies.

The situation in Taiwan is somewhat different. Since the 1950s, women have played a significant part in the development of popular as well as serious literature, so much so that short essays written for newspapers were at one time known as “housewives’ literature”.² The lyrical and often nostalgic writings of Lin Haiyin 林海音 are representative of the best of the sixties.

The influence of Eileen Chang 張愛玲 on this generation of women writers was particularly significant as she was one of the few established Chinese writers who was not censored in Taiwan. But as Chen Ruoxi 陳若曦 has pointed out, Taiwan’s women writers are far from being mere imitators. In the exploration of the relationships between men and women, particularly sexual relationships, they have always been pioneers.³ The immense public interest and, in some circles, public indignation, aroused by Guo Lianghui’s 郭良蕙 *Xin suo* 心瑣 (*Bondage of the Heart*) published in the 1960s and Li Ang’s 李昂 *Butcher* 殺夫 published in 1983 bear out Chen’s assertion that women played a pioneering role in Taiwan fiction, and are still in the lead when compared with their mainland sisters. Chen herself is of course a pioneer of another sort. She was the first Chinese writer to bring to public attention the suffering of innocents in the Cultural Revolution.

In Hong Kong the case is again different. Though there has never been a lack of literary works by women, Hong Kong women writers really came into their own in the late seventies and early eighties. Now the fiction of Xi Xi 西西, Xinqishi

¹ Li Ziyun, “The Characteristics of the Works of Mainland Chinese Women Writers in the Last Seven Years”, a paper delivered at the International Conference on Contemporary Chinese Literature held in Shanghai in November 1986.

² Chen Ruoxi, “The Characteristics of Taiwan Literature”, *Hong Kong Literature* No. 33 (1987.9) p. 28.

³ *Ibid.*

辛其氏, Peng Cao 蓬草, and Zhong Xiaoyang 鍾曉陽, to mention just a few, are familiar to Chinese readers not only in Hong Kong, but also in Taiwan and Southeast Asia. While many critics have pointed to Zhong Xiaoyang's indebtedness to Eileen Chang, Xi Xi and Xinqishi are notable for their unusual perception and fresh narrative points of view.

Old Problems and New Directions

In the last few decades women writers have indeed progressed by leaps and bounds. However, despite the fact that equality for men and women is now advocated in almost all Chinese societies, many women writers still feel the ineluctable pressure of traditional and social values. Wang Anyi, for example, tries to explore the difficulties in life, and particularly in love, faced by women and comes to the following conclusion:

Women are born to suffer and to be lonely, patient and humble.
Glory always belongs to men; magnanimity is a male attribute.
Would you believe me if I told you that through their endurance of loneliness and hardships, women may have long surpassed men in terms of human nature?⁴

The spiritual strength of women in the face of major crises has indeed been an important theme in Wang Anyi's recent works, particularly the novelettes known popularly as *San lian* 三戀, excerpts from one of which are included in this issue. During the anti-bourgeois liberalisation campaign of 1987, though Wang Anyi was not mentioned by name, some accusing fingers pointed to *San lian*, condemning these stories as examples of how even "female comrades" had degenerated into writing about sex. Nothing could more plainly reveal the die-hard attitudes that: 1. sex is a taboo subject; and 2. it is worse for women than for men to break taboos. Actually the three novelettes are, as Wang has repeatedly pointed out, about human nature, not sex.

Women writers are breaking new ground not only in terms of subject matter, but also in terms of language, literary form and technique. Zhang Jie once said, "Why must there be a plot in every story? Why must there be characters?"⁵ This is not just a rebel speaking against traditional literary concepts, but an innovator testing the limits of her own creativity. Zhang Jie has often been noted for her sense of social justice, but equally notable are her experiments with different literary techniques.

⁴ Wang Anyi, "The Man and the Woman, the Woman and the City", afterword in *Love on a Barren Mountain* (Hong Kong: Nanyue chubanshe, 1988).

⁵ In a private conversation during the Conference on Contemporary Chinese Literature held in Vienna in July 1987.

And from the younger generation of mainland Chinese women writers, Liu Suola has emerged as one of those with a keen interest in experimenting with new ideas and literary forms. She makes extensive use of her musical knowledge and applies musical forms and compositional techniques in her literary works. She has said of her experiments: "I see new possibilities, and have started experimenting. I may not succeed, but others may be inspired by my example and really break new ground."⁶ Can Xue 殘雪, whose short stories have garnered both praise and criticism, and who is regarded by many as the foremost "modernist" fiction writer in China, is another representative of the literary pioneers in the ranks of Chinese women writers.

The success of women writers in Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China seems to indicate that women have at long last secured their place in the previously male-dominated world of letters. But far from being satisfied with their present achievements, many Chinese women writers are looking further ahead in the hope of setting new literary standards and criteria. Li Ang, for example, argues that perhaps the greatest contribution women writers can make to literature is to present the woman's world view and to explore creative areas hitherto neglected by men. Instead of emulating their male colleagues, women writers should establish a new set of standards through their own writing.⁷

In the words of Zhang Xinxin, literature embodies interpersonal relationships. Without such relationships there will probably be no grounds for mutual understanding.⁸ The driving force behind all Chinese women writers is perhaps the wish to arrive at a better understanding of life, of their world, of men, and of themselves. For women writers, literature is very much their business.

The most striking characteristic of the works of contemporary Chinese women writers is perhaps the diversity in their interests and style, and in their basic outlook as *women* and *writers*. It is precisely this remarkable diversity that we hope to reflect in this special issue of *Renditions*. Limited by the constraints of both space and time, we may not be able to do full justice to the achievements of contemporary Chinese women writers, but it is our wish that this special issue will bear witness to their talent as well as be a tribute to their tenacity and courage.

—E.H.

⁶ Liu Suola, "Music and Literature", a paper delivered at the Conference on Modernism and Contemporary Chinese Literature held in Hong Kong in December 1987.

⁷ Li Ang, "On my experiences in writing novels", a talk delivered at the Conference on Modernism and Contemporary Chinese Literature.

⁸ Zhang Xinxin, "My experiences as a writer" *Hong Kong Literature* No. 23 (1986.11) p. 15.