Femininism/Femininity in Chinese Literature

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ABSTRACT

An overall assessment of the concept of feminism and femininity in the literature of Chinese writers from the Ming and Qing periods to the twentieth century can be gleaned from the examination of the interdisciplinary studies carried out by the scholars in this remarkable collection. While Kang-i Sun Chang provides a valuable assessment of the dramatic rise in the number and reputation of women poets during the Ming and Qing dynasties, Li Xiaojiang's essay deals with contemporary Chinese women's literature, particularly its historical and political origins. Peng Hsiao-yen provides an indepth examination of the appropriation of western sexual and pyschological theories in a single Chinese text, while Li Ziyun offers a broad perspective on the disappearance and revival of feminist discourse in China in the twentieth century. Kuei-fen Chiu discusses the works of three major female authors in Taiwan to demonstrate the role of women writers in shaping the Taiwanese intellectual and political culture of the 1990s, and Margaret Hillenbrand offers a necessary examination of the male perspective on marriage and divorce in recent Chinese fiction.

KEY WORDS

feminism
femininity
gender studies
Taiwan fiction
Chinese literature
Ming-Qing poetry
androgyny
women's roles
May Fourth Movement
patriarchy

The present volume of the *Tamkang Review* is a collection of selected essays on the topic of feminism and femininity in Chinese literature. Although feminism has been a hot topic in Chinese literary circles in recent years, this remarkable collection represents one of the first of its kind to be published in English. The collected essays have been composed by well-known scholars and feminists ranging from Kang-I Sun Chang of Yale University, to Li Ziyun, a writer and feminist in Shanghai, China. The following essays are inter- and multi-disciplinary, and cover several historical periods in poetry and fiction (from the Ming-Qing periods to the twentieth century). In particular, the development of women's writing in the New Period (post-1976) is examined in depth. The articles, through their range of topics, thus offer the reader a composite and broad perspective of feminism and the treatment of the female in Chinese literature. As this remarkable new collection attests, the voices of women in China have begun calling out loudly, in ways which challenge prevalent views about the Chinese female persona.

As mentioned above, this collection does not simply represent the modern or contemporary period. As Kang-I Sun Chang relates in "Ming-Qing Poets and Cultural Androgyny," the dramatic rise of women poets during the time of the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911), especially after the seventeenth century, demonstrates a hearty and mature development of female writing existing in China even before the twentieth century concepts of "liberation" and "women's rights." As Chang herself points out, the phenomenon of more than three thousand women poets with published collections was unheard of in an era where in other national literatures women

are underrepresented or unnoticed. Chang's article questions why, until very recently, this phenomenon went unnoticed by scholars of Chinese literature and history. In response, Chang analyzes the Chinese concept of "talent" (*cai*), and the idealized picture of woman not only as beautiful, but talented in poetic composition as well, a uniquely Chinese idealization of the talented woman (*cainü*) which has existed since the Six Dynasties period in China. Chang further demonstrates the male literati enchantment with femininity as representation of male poets' own marginalized state, and the tendency of the female poets to adopt educated male cultural norms. This phenomenon she labels "cultural androgyny"—a state of balance suggesting the joining of *yin* and *yang*.[1] Chang especially notes the prevalence of literary skill among widows, whom, she claims, pursued a literary and intellectual life as though they were male scholars. She concludes that these women poets, rather than functioning in a separate sphere, created a "cultural androgyny" through which they could be assimilated as true literati, regardless of their female sex. In her conclusion, she uses the term *qing* (spiritual purity), previously a term applied almost exclusively to males before the Ming-Qing period, as a defining point by which these women achieved true androgyny, for during the Ming-Qing period, this term had become commonly applicable to female poets as well. Thus, Chang takes this *qing* as a literary metaphor for the cultural androgyny she examines.

Professor Li Xiaojiang's "Resisting While Holding the Tradition—Claims for Right Raised in Literature by Chinese Women Writers in the New Period" discusses the historical conditions and political origins of contemporary Chinese women's literature. Compared to the literature of the May Fourth Movement (the 1919 watershed independence movement in China), which the author argues was never a true establishment of sexual equality, women's literature actually began its greatest liberation in 1949. Li argues that this post-1949 period was the actual time in which socialism marked a new age in the lives of both men and women—women were awarded legal rights, women entered the workplace, women were able to acquire political power (albeit limited), etc.

Li's essay deals primarily with two main periods in recent Chinese literary history: the late seventies to mid-eighties, in which works such as Zhang Jie's *Love Must Not Be Forgotten* (1979) highlighted the awakening of a woman's consciousness, and a second period, beginning from the late eighties—which coincided with certain urban reforms in 1986—which featured new images of women with a sense of Self. In these periods, the question of certain women's rights is grappled with—not women's rights in the sense of sexual equality (already "guaranteed" by the Chinese legal system), but a new definition of Chinese women's rights to live as women. As Li outlines, these rights include 1) a woman's right to love and be loved (including extra-marital love, lesbian love, etc.), 2) a woman's right to sexual expression, 3) a woman's right to choose her own lifestyle, and 4) a woman's right to self-development. Through the analysis of such works as Ma Zhongxing's *I Wish I Were a Wolf* (which catalogues the dilemma of a woman caught between the demand of work and family) and Wang Anyi's *Brothers*, Li chronicles the difficult choices Chinese women face in the present age.

Li presents an intriguing conclusion: after presenting the struggles for independence documented by writers in the New Period of Chinese literary history, she advocates a greater tolerance for conventional relationships and moderation in changing values. Contemporary Chinese women who love in a "traditional" fashion are commended by Li for displaying courage and vision. For, she concludes, the liberation of women requires patience and tolerance toward men: "Humanity, after all, is comprised of both women and men. If men cannot be liberated, can there be a women's liberation or human liberation. Without women's tolerance and love, is the liberation of men possible?"

The question of feminism and of women's novels in Taiwan merits further examination, as is the conclusion of Kuei-fen Chiu in her article on the literature of Taiwan. Kuei-fen Chiu posits the premise that Taiwanese literature already claims an ambiguous position within the field of Chinese literature, while the question of Taiwanese wonem's literature is further marginalized. David Wang's *Hsiao-shuo*

Chung-kuo discusses the "geopolitics of center" as related to the current feminist enthusiasm in the west for Chinese women writers. However, the women writers in Taiwan have been neglected, for except for Professor Pang-yuan Chi's introductory essay on women's writing from 1949 to the early 1980's, there is little or no discussion of women writers' influence on the whole direction of Taiwanese literature.

Kuei-fen Chiu's essay selects works by Li Ang, Chu T'ien-hsin, and Su Wei-chen to demonstrate the huge advances made in the political voice of female writers in Taiwan during the present decade. While women's fiction in the 1980's was relegated to a heterosexual, inside-the-home focus, these three writers have dealt with the questions of national identity and gender identity—a response to contemporary political and public events in Taiwan. The three works she deals with, *The Maze Garden*, *Remembering My Brothers in Those Old Military Village Days*, and *Island of Silence* have gained well-deserved critical attention from scholars of literature as well as critics of cultural politics. As Chiu ably demonstrates, Taiwanese women writers of the 1990's are breaking through traditional roles to become full participants in the shaping of Taiwanese intellectual and political culture.

Li Ziyun offers further analysis of the issue of women's voice in China in "The Disappearance and Revival of Feminine Discourse." In this essay, Li discusses the development of feminine discourse in China in the twentieth century, from the seeds of the May Fourth movement, through nearly fifty years of repression, to the post-1978 revival of a unique feminine literary voice. Li Ziyun begins her analysis with the May Fourth writer Lu Xun, who correctly articulated that women in China first needed economic independence in order to gain any equality with men. She then cites Ding Ling's fiction of the 1920's and 1930's, in which Ding Ling insightfully demonstrates that women's issues are not identical to those of men. In the 1930's, however, due to the Japanese threat to national survival, women's consciousness was stifled by the force of pressing social and political movements—from the 1930's to 1978, female discourse was neglect-

ed in the literary circles of China. Li Ziyun cites only three examples of female voice during this period—Xiao Hong (1930's), Zhang Ailing (1940's) and Zong Pu (1950's)—as examples of talented writers whose voices broke through the repressive political situation in China.

Following the fall of the Gang of Four, the proliferation of women's writing in China became remarkably rich and diverse, as categorized by Li Ziyun's essay. The diversity of women's voices even included contemporary woman writers in mainland China who wished to distance themselves from the women's movement in their desire to compete with male writers on equal terms (these include Zhang Kangkang, Zhang Jie, and Wang Anyi). Zhang Kangkang's *The Right to Love* (*Ai de quanli*) and Zhang Jie's *Love Should Not Be Forgotten* (*Ai shi buneng wangjide*) were especially noteworthy because they attest for the first time that love is a political right of all human beings, challenging the prevailing belief that love is a bourgeois emotion. Zhang Xinxin's fiction also questioned the loss of femininity imposed by political revolution, and the choice women face between career and family. Zhang Jie's writing, with its older heroines, describes social problems faced by women who fight to assert their own value. Also noteworthy are authors Wang Anyi and Tie Ning, whose writing focuses on sexual awakening and sexual experience. Li Ziyun points out that such writing could only have appeared under the present favorable political conditions garnered by the older generation of female writers. A final development discussed by Li Ziyun is in direct correlation with the growing economic boom in China—that is the proliferation of women's fiction related to the social changes instigated by economic development. Li Ziyun points out dialectical trends in this category as well—on the one hand, there are narratives in which women are reduced to commodities in the lives of wealthy men; on the other, women grapple with new turmoil caused by economic independence.

In "*Sex Histories*: Zhang Jingsheng's Sexual Revolution," Peng Hsiao-yen takes an in-depth look at the reception of Zhang Jingsheng's pioneering 1926 work of fiction. The book was so successful

that, according to Peng's account, the publication caused the police to disperse a crowd in Shanghai and instigated a proliferation of sequels published under Zhang Jingsheng's name. One of these false sequels *Sex Histories, Part II*, can be compared to the original to demonstrate the serious sexology of Zhang's original work. Zhang's commentaries are wide-ranging, and the histories further develop Zhang's theory of sexual aesthetics, leading Peng to conclude that the histories are "designed" to fit Zhang's own purposes. In addition, Peng demonstrates the inferior quality of the commentaries in Part II, where the crass, lowbrow narratives resemble traditional pornographic fiction.

Moreover, Peng notes the unusual use of the autobiographical form in Zhang's *Sex Histories*, and indicates that they are meant to be "case histories" in the Freudian sense, but also eclectic and quirky, as if solicited from many anonymous contributors. Zhang uses them as "data" to develop his own sexology. He further discusses the research of sex educator Marie Stopes (*Married Love*, 1918) which commonly appeared in the early twentieth century newspapers of China during that time. However, Peng is quick to point out that although Stopes's research may have instigated Zhang's work, Zhang did not simply copy western theory, but was creative in his own work—for example, he maintained that men have periods of desire as well as women. He reiterates his belief that the contributors' accounts are fabricated by Zhang to suit his theory. Peng concludes by saying that May Fourth intellectuals carefully selected their sources and tailored them to the theories they wished to propagate. Thus, Zhang Jingsheng's *Sex Histories* takes its place in the women's liberation movement in China for its role in opening further discussion of a taboo subject: female sexuality.

The final essay by Margaret Hillenbrand rounds out this volume of feminism studies by examining the concept of marital breakdown exclusively from the male perspective. The theories of Michel Foucault on power and discourse provide Hillenbrand with a methodological framework by which to examine four texts in a selection of representative fiction from mainland China on the topic of marriage and divorce. The first three stories (by Li Rui, Ah Cheng, and Liu

Heng) provide a sampling of expositions in which the husband, entering marriage under a patriarchal aegis, ends up ultimately divorced, abandoned, or henpecked by his wife. Hillenbrand cites the feminist critic Claudia Herrmann in explanation of the paradox of the male patriarchal mindset and the misapprehension of the dichotomy between fraudulent male bravado and true masculine authority. Finally, in an examination of Zhang Xianliang's *Half of Man Is Woman*, a novel most often treated with a politicized interpretation, Hillenbrand reconstructs gender conflict to demonstrate the text as a meditation of the battle of the sexes, and offers further analysis as to why the male protagonist triumphs. Ultimately, Hillenbrand concludes that male disempowerment is frequently more a result of power mismanagement be men than a female usurping of authority. This selection of literature brings Hillenbrand to cite the feminist assessment of marriage as an institution essentially at cross purposes with female empowerment.

The multi-faceted and interdisciplinary approaches to feminism in Chinese literature must already be apparent from the diversity of the essays contained herein. As this collection attests, from their stirrings in the Ming-Qing period as well as in the Chinese literary currents of today, the female voice has had an exciting place in the development of Chinese literature. Although the multiplicity of approaches cannot be categorized, in these essays we hope to shed light on the issues facing the women of China today, as well as the attempts of writers—both male and female—to articulate these dilemmas and struggles.

NOTES

[1] Chang discusses this idea in light of Camille Paglia's argument defining androgyny as an ideal synthesis of the male and female, in Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990) 21-22, but also notes the theory's detractors, such as Kari Weil, in *Androgyny and the Denial of Sexual Difference* (Charlottesville: State UP of Virginia, 1992)

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[2] Hélène Cixous, "From the Scene of the Unconscious to the Scene of History," in Ralph Cohen, ed., *The Future of Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1989). Cixous elaborates on this Freudian concept in the opening pages of her essay (4).