

# Womanhood, Authorship and Intertextuality in Contemporary Chinese Women's Poetry

*Jeanne H. Zhang*

## ABSTRACT

The issues of womanhood, authorship and intertextuality are closely related in women's writing. Gender awareness permeates the creative writing of contemporary women poets. The loss of the author's authority over the meaning of texts jeopardizes the notion of authorship but generates a complex intertextuality in modern Chinese literature. Chinese woman poets' relationship to their own culture and history means a negotiation of cultural possibilities, a creative reception of or resistance to societal and historical gender expectations, and a poetic re-invention of female identity. For poets like Shu Ting, Yi Lei, Wang Xiaoni, Zhang Zhen and Tang Yaping, writing is meant for self-articulation and self-definition. In order to re-construct a (feminine) poetics in the aftermath of the traditional (male) political domination of Chinese literature, these writers are actively reconsidering the questions of gender, sexuality, and poetic authority in the course of writing. While articulating the gendered self, they are confronted with the dual postmodern anxiety of authorship and influence. In an overpopulated literary environment, these women poets are returning to the Chinese past to open up a new space for their writing while also evoking foreign models in a Chinese context.

## KEY WORDS

womanhood  
subjectivity  
poetic voice  
creativity

gender  
sexuality  
authorship  
intertextuality



## I. Introduction

Women's poetry is an interesting hermeneutic category precisely because it reveals the specificity of female experience and psychology in the course of textual production. This fusing of the issue of "woman" (*nüxing, funü, nüzi*)<sup>1</sup> with that of "literature" calls into focus the double problematic of writing and womanhood. In the People's Republic of China (PRC) women's poetry has been recognized as an important discourse with specific regional features in contemporary literature. This paper will situate Chinese women's writing in a wider, cross-cultural critical and theoretical framework by bringing the concept of intertextuality into a study of the correlation between poetic discourse and gender discourse.

Since Kristeva initiated the term in 1967,<sup>2</sup> intertextuality has come to be labelled as the very trademark of postmodernism in the sense that it is an integral, perhaps a distinguishing component of postmodern literature. The postmodern version of intertextuality springs from the idea that the meaning of a text is provisional and open to modifications and new interpretations. In this paper I will first examine certain gender-specific experiences as expressed in contemporary Chinese women's poetry. Then I will discuss the issue of authorship in relation to womanhood. Finally, I will discuss references to Chinese and foreign literature in the light of an analytical distinction between semantic and structural intertextuality. Due to the interpretive intricacy of this study I have hardly done an exhaustive analysis of the poems selected; rather, the focus is on analyzing how and to what extent a woman author's gender awareness informs her creative writing.

## II. The Poetic Re-invention of Womanhood

After the dominance of socialist realism for more than four decades, in a relatively more tolerant cultural atmosphere Chinese women's poetry has seen "a historical breakthrough during the past twenty years."<sup>3</sup> A constellation of women poets has emerged on the Chinese literary scene: Yi Lei, Shu Ting, Zhai Yongming, Wang Xiaoni, Zhang Zhen, Lu Yimin, Tang Yaping, to name some prominent authors. Women's poetry as a discourse has gradually taken shape after Tang Xiaodu's review article on Zhai Yongming's poem-cycle "Woman" (*Nüren*)—"Women's Poetry: From Darkness into Daylight"—came out in 1987. A common critical paradigm practiced in present critiques is to take the author's gender and subjectivity as the major point of reference. As a result, the absence of a female perspective excludes some women-authored texts from this category, e.g. Zheng Min's work, Shu Ting's "Oh, Motherland, My beloved Motherland" (*Zuguo e, wo qinai de zuguo*), Lu Yimin's "Ink Horse" (*Mo ma*), and Yan Yuejun's "China under the Moon" (*Yue xia de Zhongguo*). Texts of this type are labelled either as "trans-gender poetry" (*chaoxing shige*)<sup>4</sup> or as "gender-neutral poetry" (*zhongxing shi*).<sup>5</sup>

In retrospect, gender consciousness constituted the driving force of women's writing throughout the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> Chinese women poets were mainly concerned with the exploration of the emotional and psychological world of the female self. What they did in the writing process was to construct their subjectivity through their poetic imagination. On the one hand, women poets' self-portrayal could be seen as a transgressive, self-empowering gesture against both ideological shackles and male-dominated discursive power. Writing about the self and for the self was no less than a means to the pursuit of an identity that had not been pre-determined by social, cultural and gender bonds. On the other hand, the private, often confessional mode of women's writing was criticized for its extreme "emotionalism, narcissism, perversion, and morbidity."<sup>7</sup> A much fuller history of contemporary women's poetry needs to be written, particularly one that traces the major trends of the post-Mao era, but what we can do here is to sketch two features

two features of women's poetry—a strong “night consciousness”<sup>8</sup> and preoccupation with the female body—so as to uncover certain telling textual indexes of a discourse that may be named “women's poetry” in the contemporary PRC.

Myriad night-related images set the keynote of women's poetry and presented a unique poetic spectacle throughout the 1980s. Blackness, the primary color of the night, can transform our normal sense of vision and create a sense of “non-differentiation” (*hundun*), which according to Chen Xuguang<sup>9</sup> “coincides with women's psycho-sexual awareness in the sense that women's psychological world is as tolerant and all-inclusive as the boundless night.” In a manifesto-like article called “Night Consciousness” Zhai also claims:

Actually, each woman confronts her own abyss—the private anguish and experience that constantly vanish and are constantly confirmed [. . .]. This initial night, upon its rise, leads us to a unique world belonging only to the female sex, with a brand-new, specially laid-out angle.<sup>10</sup>

Here women are identified with the night. Women's recourse to the night can be viewed both as a means of self-empowerment and as an escape from the day and the reality. Let us have a look at Zhai Yongming's “Longing” (*Chongjing*) and Tang Yaping's “Black Swamp” (*Heise zaoze*):

I have grown used to practicing the way the moon smiles  
Here or there, because I am  
A patch of earth desired by the nightmare<sup>11</sup>

I loosen my long hair, and send flying the desire to conquer  
the night  
My lust is the limitless dark.<sup>12</sup>

Both poets turn the night into a self-sufficient world away from daytime clamor and the peeping eye of the sun, one where they can let go of

their own consciousness. These poems are not a reflection but rather an illusion of reality. In a dream-like state women free themselves, albeit temporarily, from bondage of various kinds: ethical, psychological, and biological. Darkness seems to provide a haven: "To construct a segment of darkness for self-comfort."<sup>13</sup>

The writing of the body is a hallmark of feminist creative practice. In her famous essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous suggests that the female body acts as an essential link between textuality and sexuality: "Write yourself: your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth."<sup>14</sup> Retreating to the body is, on the one hand, a result of women authors' limited access to various institutionalized resources, e.g. traditional Chinese women's confinement to the domestic sphere and the lack of educational and professional opportunities; on the other hand it is an introspective gazing by the writing subject into her inner being. Presumably, women's sex-specific experiences (pregnancy, childbirth, menstruation, abortion, and the female experience of intercourse) entail the possibility of a different perception and understanding, different ways of relating to self and other. In creative practice the insistence on the body often marks a subversive stance towards the dominant tradition and culture in the Chinese context:

My sexual desire is rising  
 The thin wall is receding inch by inch  
 My long hair is falling down like an exquisite curtain over  
 my breasts  
 Your mouth is like the swaying breeze<sup>15</sup>

In the conjectured relationship  
 of mother and son  
 myself and you  
 I have already sharpened the knife  
 And blood has sprayed bright patterns on the ceiling  
 A pair of tiny feet is being hoisted down<sup>16</sup>

Both poems and their explicit titles touch the forbidden area of private life in the Chinese tradition: eroticism in the former and abortion in the latter. The poets deal with unconventional subject matter and resort to startling imagery and bold versification. This reflects the more open phraseology of contemporary women poets who are fed up with roundabout language about womanhood and sexuality. On a fuller reading of the poems, the manner of disclosing the female body suggests an ambivalent attitude toward female physicality and sexuality. In Yi Lei's poem nakedness does not bring the female subject closer to the self, or to heterosexual understanding. Rather, nakedness is another barrier between man and woman, as also between the self and the world. With its focus on individual psychology, motherhood, and the opposition of life and death, Zhang Zhen's poem draws our attention to the ambiguity and multiplicity of the self.<sup>17</sup> The poem "Abortion" breaks with an established Chinese ethics that highlights the genteel image of a selfless mother.

From the perspective of Chinese literary history, the celebration of the female body and the exploration of female sexuality are a disruptive challenge to the long-standing feminine (*wanyue*) tradition which emphasizes a woman's softness, weakness, need for support and willingness to give of herself, as in Shu Ting's "Farewell in the Rain" [*Yubie*]:

I really want to take your hand  
And run away to the freshly cleared sky and open fields  
Without shrinking or looking back<sup>18</sup>

In comparison with later poets labelled as "Post-Obscure" (*hou menglong*) or "Newborn Generation" (*xin shengdai*) poets,<sup>19</sup> Shu Ting, one of the most distinguished Obscure (*menglong*) poets, treats her subjects in rather conventional ways. For instance, love, friendship and social obligations are presented from the perspective of a naive girl. Even when she does speak of such bodily things as "blood, victim, wound,"<sup>20</sup> her expression is restrained, veiled, and markedly sentimental. By contrast, Post-Obscure women poets such as Yi Lei, Zhai

Yongming, Tang Yaping and Zhang Zhen, question the traditional conception of the woman as chaste, self-sacrificing and virtuous, and do so in a highly individualistic manner. Sometimes they speak in a powerful, unrestrained and provocative voice; at other times their voices are painful, helpless, desperate. But central to their concern is the need to recover a gender awareness that has sunk into oblivion during the time of totalitarian repression.

### III. The Author and Authorship

In "The Death of the Author"<sup>21</sup> Roland Barthes suggests that the author has lost what was thought to be a "natural authority" over his/her work. The author gives way to writing, to a theory and practice of textuality which, Barthes argued, substitutes language itself for the person who has hitherto been supposed to be its owner. From his point of view, the author in the traditional sense has vanished. However, Barthes does not go into the gender position of this "author" who is now doomed to oblivion. I believe this ambiguity raises a variety of questions in regard to creative writing: Does there exist an Author in the abstract without identity marks? In other words, can the act of writing transcend the author's sexual identity? To what extent is it possible to locate the question of female authorship within the post-structuralist framework? Does it make sense to talk about the "death of the female author" if she is still struggling to be born?

The feminist assertion of gender differentiation disrupts the post-structuralist idea that writing and reading are the products of writing and textuality themselves.<sup>22</sup> Their dissatisfaction with the anonymity or "death" of the author causes feminist critics to contend that writing and reading are experienced and produced by the gendered subject who writes and reads.<sup>23</sup> While the male author may be overburdened with the (his) "self," the woman author is still seeking to discover or to define a selfhood that has not been imposed on her, constructed by others. In her book *Subject to Change* Nancy K. Miller argues:

The postmodernist decision that the Author is Dead and the subject along with him does not, I will argue, does not necessarily hold for women, and prematurely foreclosed the question of agency for them. Because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production that men have had, they have not, I think, (collectively) felt burdened by *too much* Self, Ego, Cogito, etc. Because the female subject has juridically been excluded from the polis, hence decentered, "disoriginated," deinstitutionalized, etc., her relation to integrity and textuality, desire and authority, displays structurally important differences from the universal position.<sup>24</sup>

Miller's argument points to a fundamental difference between male and female authorship on account of their relation to discourse, authority and meaning. It seems to me that the study of women's literature makes it possible to reconsider the problems of writing, authorship, subjectivity and sexual identity in very specific ways. Let me then return to the Chinese texts themselves and have a look at Wang Xiaoni's "I Should be a Craftswoman" (*Yinggai zuo yige zhizuo zhe*) and Zhai Yongming's "Night Scene" (*Yejing*), to see how these women poets construct their relations with language, writing and the self:

Only when I write about the world  
 Will the world appear with its head lowered.  
 Only when I write about you  
 Will you take off your spectacles to look at me.  
 When I write about myself  
 I see my hair grow gloomy, and should have it cut.  
 Whoever is able to produce a pair of scissors  
 Is really somebody.

Please squint your eyes  
 And go far away without looking back.  
 I am about to write poetry



I am  
 A stubborn craftswoman  
 In my own room.<sup>25</sup>

The legend continues to write—Now  
 She is standing in the mirror, astounded  
 Seeing herself, and the opened book on the balcony  
 The wind has been strong throughout the evening  
 One chinaberry sends out warning to the other  
 She walks upstairs carrying her skirt, and lifts the book  
 Without beginning, without end  
 But she feels all is very familiar, like reading herself<sup>26</sup>

Alluding to Virginia Woolf's canonical text *A Room of One's Own*, Wang Xiaoni's poem indicates a symbolic space in which women may retain their individuality and autonomy. The poem suggests that the major activity within the private sphere is writing *per se*. The insistence on creative writing transgresses the popular Chinese saying that women's virtue matters more than their talent (*Nüzi wucui bian shi de*). "Haircut" and "scissors-making" are reminiscent of some traditional Chinese boudoir activities, such as knitting, needlework, quilting, embroidery, and above all painstakingly giving someone or getting a new hairdo. But the lyrical speaker is more enchanted with "making scissors" than with "using scissors." A similar creative pleasure forges the metaphorical link between "making scissors" and "making texts." In this way the poet transfigures the alienated girl in a boudoir or the lady-in-waiting in a traditional Chinese study into the writing subject who enjoys the pleasure of writing in a room of her own. Female creativity is depicted as a calling, a philosophy: "I write, therefore I exist." To turn the act of writing into craftsmanship echoes the conventional conception—encountered in various cultural traditions—of the poet as a crafts(wo)man and of poetry as a craft. In this poem language and writing not only structure a perception of self and other but also have become an integral part of a way of being.

In contrast, Zhai Yongming's "Night Scene" approaches the

questions of language, creativity and authorship from a different vantage point. The narrator speaks behind the scenes with the voice of the “she” protagonist who first experiences the metamorphosis into a mirror image, and then feels like she is a book without beginning or end. Considering that the mirror image is not the perceiver *per se*, we discern the viewer’s desperate attempt to know herself in and the mirror’s manipulative power over her, despite the fact that she is actually dissolved into the mirror. This sense of dissolution marks the fear of loss of self-identity. What is left of a book without beginning and end is only the middle, but the middle alone cannot constitute a complete narrative. Let us take one step further by questioning the book’s signature: Is its author male or female? In all probability, the anonymous author is female since the she-protagonist identifies with this incomplete narrative, revealing the same deprivation as the mirror image. Meanwhile, the equation of the female body with an incomplete narrative implies that there is, within the writing subject, as much fragmentation as there is a possibility of rewriting and re-interpreting. The poem thus expresses a dual anxiety, of authorship and of identity: Woman is both inside and outside the narrative; the quest for self-identity conjoins with the act of reading in appearance and of writing in essence. In her pursuit of a new subjectivity and an authorial control over the text, the poet is confronted with her inability to either configure the narrative or safeguard its meanings.

#### IV. Intertextual Relations in Women’s Poetry

The notion of intertextuality is initially a French poststructuralist invention. Kristeva first coined the term intertextuality in her essay on Bakhtin’s theory of literature and language—“Word, Dialogue and Novel” (1966). According to Kristeva, “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.”<sup>27</sup> Here, textual production is compared to the Byzantine art of making a mosaic by piecing together bits of colored glass and stones. Artistic originality lies not in the materials used but in the way raw materials are put together and in the final result. Intertextuality is per-

haps also common sense: originality in the abstract does not exist; a work of literature is always related to other texts, literary or non-literary. The notion of intertextuality thus turns our attention to the question of how texts are constituted and constructed in a generally overpopulated literary environment. It has played an active role in moving literary criticism away from the traditional assumption of the author's authority over the meaning of a text to the poststructuralist proclamation (Barthes again) of "the death of the author." Authorship is no longer the source and guarantee of the meaning of a literary text; the author does not create completely original texts but reassembles and recycles materials from earlier texts.<sup>28</sup> This postmodernist interpretation of intertextuality leads to a conception of literature as "production, not representation,"<sup>29</sup> a production or being-produced necessarily situated within a huge web composed of numerous intertexts. Whereas above it was suggested that woman authors are not necessarily ready yet to "abandon their authorial egos" since (unlike men) they may be still forming them, once we move into the intertextual domain we may need to qualify this statement.

Now I would like to identify, within the framework of contemporary Chinese women's poetry, certain intertextual links between past and present and between different cultural-linguistic traditions. To that end, two large categories of reference—to Chinese and foreign texts—will be discussed on the basis of an analytical distinction between semantic and structural intertextuality.<sup>30</sup> The semantic concern is with images and themes; the structural concern is with poetic forms and text syntax. My objective here is to reduce arbitrariness in textual analysis.

Poets, after all, are first and foremost readers of literary texts. Their reading experience leaves indelible marks on their writing. Among contemporary Chinese women poets Shu Ting is the one most obviously attached to an indigenous poetic tradition while nonetheless demonstrating an affinity with Western literature. Much of her favorite vocabulary, such as "morning and evening" (*zhaozhao xixi*), "the far ends of the world" (*tianya haijiao*), "rain and wind" (*fengfeng yuyu*), and "chilly air in early spring" (*chunhan liaoqiao*), is characteristic of

Chinese lyric verse (*ci*) from the Song dynasty (A.D. 960–1279). The dream-narrative of the poem entitled “Oh, Mother” (*E, muqin*) can be seen as the rewriting of the “Grievance in Spring” (*Chunyuan*) by the Tang dynasty poet Jin Changxu.<sup>31</sup> In addition, some of her poetry claims kinship with the early work of He Qifang (1912–1977). The poem “Sculpture Cluster” (*Qundiao*) bears explicit intertextual linkage with He’s famous poem “Prophecy” (*Yuyan*)—“Are you the young goddess in prophecy?”<sup>32</sup>

This crowd of soldiers  
 Proper are  
 Young gods in prophecy<sup>33</sup>

Shu Ting adapts He’s love-narrative into a passionate ode to revolutionary soldiers and changes the she-addressee in He’s poem to the (male) soldiers. The English translation has to distinguish between god and goddess since He’s poem is evidently addressed to a young girl whose song is like the “silver bell” and the “dream.” The Chinese term *shen* can of course refer to both god and goddess; thus the identification of the god’s gender is dependent on the context. In this instance, Shu Ting’s line is indeed a quotation from He’s poem.

The point of departure of an intertextual study is to move from the traditional identification of influence (or reception) to a devaluation of the homogeneity and closure of a literary text. Literary texts exist in an intertextual network subsuming numerous (con)textual interrelations on various levels. Let’s take Tang Yaping and Zhai Yongming as examples to show how contemporary poets are related to each other in terms of shared experience, subject matter, poetic technique and language. Tang Yaping’s “Black Desert” (*Heise shamo*) is a poem-cycle consisting of twelve independent poems: “Black Night—Preface” (*Heiye—Xushi*), “Black Swamp” (*Heise zaoze*), “Black Tears” (*Heise yanlei*), “Black Hesitation” (*Heise youyu*), “Black Gold” (*Heise jinzi*), “Black Cave” (*Heise dongxue*), “Black Nightgown” (*Heise shuiqun*), “Black Midnight” (*Heise ziye*), “Black Stones” (*Heise shitou*), “Black Frost and Snow” (*Heise shuangxue*), “Black Turtle” (*Heise wugui*),

and “Black night—Post-script” (*Heiye—Bashi*), all centering on the theme of “black.” Structurally, the preface and postscript (bearing the same title) form a coherent, self-enclosed black world.

Both on the structural and the semantic level, Tang’s poems (originally 1985) establish an explicit intertextual relationship with Zhai Yongming’s poem-cycle “Woman” (originally 1984) and her manifesto-like article “Night Consciousness.” The poem-cycle “Woman” consists of four sections, each of which is composed of four or five separate, indeed autonomous poems, but displays clear thematic and stylistic consistency. “Woman” was originally a 20-poem cycle. The poem “Longing” (*Chongjing*) was taken out of the 1994 collection called *Zhai Yongming’s Poetry* (*Zhai Yongming shiji*), but added to *Call It Everything* (*Cheng zhi wei yiqie*, 1997). This long poem-cycle exhibits a coherent structure, advancing from “Presentiment” (*Yugan*) all the way through to “End” (*Jieshu*). An overview of “Woman” gives the impression that the poem-cycle portrays women’s innermost, “darkest” consciousness by means of dense black imagery, carefully contrived metaphors, and structural coherence.

The night is the central image in the two poem-cycles, around which a chain of images fan out, i.e. black whirlpools, abysses, caves, bats, stars, the moon, and night crows. Interestingly, the poem “Black Swamp” alone contains a few direct references to the poem-cycle “Woman”:

Even prior to my birth I made my mother’s *presentiment*  
*convulse*

The *nightmare* will penetrate the thin ice tonight

Making memories subside and overwhelmed

What I want to overwhelm has been overwhelmed

Leaving one age-old gleam of sunlight unconquered

My *silence* blocks the night’s *throat*<sup>34</sup>

Tang Yaping takes out three titles from Zhai’s “Woman” poem-cycle—“Presentiment” (*Yugan*), “Nightmare” (*Emeng*) and “Silence” (*Chenmo*)—and re-arranges these textual scraps for her own purpose.

In addition, the imagery of “convulsion” (*jingluan*) and “the night’s throat” (*ye de houlong*) also bears kinship with Zhai’s poem “Presentiment”:

Fresh mosses kept in the mouth, the significance they demand  
 Smiles knowingly folded in the bosom  
 Night faintly *convulses*, like a cough  
 Stuck in the *throat*, I have left this dead hole.<sup>35</sup>

In both poems the world is perceived from a female angle or perspective, since imagery of this kind is clearly associated with the biological condition of womanhood as well as with the aforesaid undifferentiated female consciousness. But the two female images constructed here are radically different. The first is that of an ambitious woman who attempts to conquer the world with her erotic power; the second is that of a prophet who is searching for “significance.” More broadly viewed, the narrative voice in “Black Desert” has become in one instance uncontrolled, powerful, subversive, and in another cynical, playful, satirical. Yet both tones differ from the prophetic, probing, meditative tone of the “I” narrator in “Woman.”

During my talks with Beijing-based poetry critics (Tang Xiaodu, Cui Weiping, and Zhou Zan), Tang Yaping was referred to as an inferior imitator of Zhai Yongming.<sup>36</sup> It is well-known that the two poets have maintained a friendship for quite some time and often exchange works. However, it is improper to reduce Tang to a mere apprentice of Zhai and “Black Desert” to a mere sequel to “Woman”; the two poets wrote in a similar fashion for a period of time, after all, and dealt with similar subject matter. I intend to do (poetic) justice to Tang Yaping by arguing that her vision might be derivative, but her poetic voice is markedly different from that of Zhai.

On different occasions, both Zhai and Tang have acknowledged writing under the influence of the American poet Sylvia Plath, as did some other Chinese women poets. However, Plath’s impact goes far beyond the sphere of women’s poetry. Her work “had a sweeping im-

pact on Chinese poets who were still struggling with ideological shackles. The mode of writing pointing to personal life and experience rocked the entire unofficial poetry circles.”<sup>37</sup> I would now like to compare Wang Xiaoni’s poem “Staring at the Cut Growing Bigger” (*Zhushi shangkou dao jida*) with Plath’s “Cut” in order to examine the Chinese poet’s innovative use of Plath’s theme and imagery:

[. . .]

The wound walks in this morning  
The red wings flap the wall.  
The wound brightens  
An arch appears before my eyes.

[. . .]

The blood vessel secluded for you  
Suddenly elated  
Like opening a black sound box.

Use my eyes to converse with the cut  
The flower blooms wider and wider  
Let me tell you  
I will carry the growing cut  
To the street in an elegant manner

Brightly crossing the red light  
The red does not fear the red  
From start to end  
I see the completeness, no less than a thrill.

[. . .]

Without cut, they feel bored  
Look look look, constantly directing their longing outward.<sup>38</sup>

What a thrill—  
My thumb instead of an onion.

The top quite gone  
 Except for a sort of a hinge

Of skin,  
 A flap like a hat,  
 Dead white.  
 Then that red plush.  
 [. . .]  
 A celebration. this is.  
 Out of a gap  
 A million soldiers run,  
 Recoats, every one.  
 [. . .]  
 How you jump—  
 Trepanned veteran,  
 Dirty girl,  
 Thumb stump.<sup>39</sup>

A Chinese translation of Plath's poem "Cut" is included in *Selected Poetry of the American Confessional School (Meiguo zibai pai shixuan)* published in 1987, one year before the writing of "Staring at the Cut Growing Bigger." On the basis of textual comparison, I believe that Wang Xiaoni must have been exposed to Plath's poem and been excited by the American woman's poetic exploration of both her domestic experience (peeling onions) and (in a rather shocking, violent way) her own body. In fact the image of a "wound" is a very serious and innately feminine one, suggesting the gap, the "hole" in a woman's body as well as the sexual "wounding" women suffer at the hands of men—being made love to and impregnated, giving birth in a painful expulsion of baby, placenta, blood. The speaker in Adrienne Rich's "Peeling Onions" (1963), a poem that clearly refers back to Plath's, sees her own crying eyes as "wounds":

Only to have a grief  
 equal to all these tears! [. . .].



Crying was labor, once  
 when I'd good cause.  
 Walking, I felt my eyes like wounds  
 raw in my head [. . .].  
 These old tears in the chopping-bowl. (Kennedy 473)

And yet in Wang's and Plath's poems a trivial kitchen wound (knife-cut)—which might still, in its gruesomeness, be considered by men *not* a subject for a woman's poem—is described very matter-of-factly and even given a comic effect, as if it were a festive event to be celebrated. Perhaps in one sense what men take as something serious is being feminized; with regard to the enduring of physical suffering women are actually stronger than men. In these two poems, then, the ordinary domestic wound that subtly suggests deeper things is personified and dramatized in a way that deflates its intrinsic horror: it can walk and bloom like a flower in Wang's poem; it gives rise to still wilder (and more obviously violent) fantasies in Plath's work: "little pilgrim," "carpet rolls," "a million running soldiers," "Ku Klux Klan," and "veteran" (cf. the full poem included in *Ariel*).

In both poems the sudden redness of the cut is a thrilling physical sensation for the speaker, but with varied degrees of intensity. In the case of Plath's "Cut," the physical sensation becomes more and more powerful as the poem proceeds: we start out with an ironic tone—"My thumb instead of an onion," move forward through a chain of shocking images and end with a sharp note of self-mockery—"Dirty Girl, / Thumb stump." But while Plath's style is closer to the American imagist tradition with its fragmented images abruptly juxtaposed, creating a greater sense of abstraction and discontinuity, "Staring at the Cut Growing Bigger" is a more sustained, coherent narrative. It also has a lighter touch in diction, movement and imagery; for instance, the colloquial term *de* is repeated four times at the end ("all right," "let it be," "look," and "enough"). The poem starts with a sensational response to the cut but gradually diminishes in emotional intensity as the "scene" is increasingly associated with the boredom of day-to-day life; its tone is matter-of-fact and low-key, typical of poetry concerned with

the everyday life of ordinary people.<sup>40</sup>

Plath is often invoked by Chinese women poets as an empowering precursor, but she is only one of many foreign models for imitation and emulation. After China once more opened its door to the outside world in 1978, official and unofficial poetry journals were instrumental in introducing to Chinese readers foreign poetry from different schools, including that of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rilke, T. S. Eliot, Stevens, Elytes, Ginsberg, Lowell, Plath and Rich. Translated foreign literature made up for the inadequacy of politicized Chinese literature during the Maoist regime, adding new forms, rhymes, imagery, and subject matter to modern Chinese poetry. It also provided new perspectives on the creation of a Chinese poetics, perspectives different from that of orthodox (patriarchal) tradition. Chinese works based on these models, it must again be stressed, should not be considered mere borrowing and copying; they express the individual poets' voices as well as the particularities of Chinese culture.

The imitation and emulation of certain role models by Chinese women poets may be seen then as leading to an intertextual network of preferred topics and forms, where source and influence cannot always be disentangled. The linkages within this network do not follow a one-to-one pattern as in traditional influence criticism, but rather follow one-to-many, many-to-one, or many-to-many patterns. Such multi-dimensional links illustrate the "multi-dialogical" nature of literary production.

## V. Conclusion

I am maintaining then that the three issues of womanhood, authorship and intertextuality are closely interrelated in women's writing. Chinese woman poets' dynamic relation to their own culture and history inevitably means a negotiation of cultural possibilities, a creative reception of or resistance to societal and historical gender expectations, and a poetic revision of female identity. For these women poets writing is meant as articulation and self-definition. To reconstruct a poetics in the aftermath of the long-standing (patriarchal) poli-

tical domination of "literary culture" throughout Chinese history, these writers have had to (and still must) reconsider the questions of gender, sexuality and poetic authority or voice. While articulating a gendered-self they are confronted with a dilemma, a double anxiety: the anxiety of subjectivity and the anxiety of influence.<sup>41</sup> For their subjectivity tends to be fluid rather than fixed, their poetic voice ambiguous and even self-contradictory. Their authorial intention is often in conflict with the postmodern (poststructuralist, post-Barthian) problematic of the "death of the author." At a time of literary exhaustion<sup>42</sup> these women poets are not only returning to the Chinese past to open up a new space for writing, they are also taking foreign (especially female) authors as role models for their own poetic production by "recreating" them in the Chinese cultural and linguistic context.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Women's literature" was first recognized as a gendered aesthetic category in the 1910s and the 1920s during the New Cultural Movement (*xin wenhua xundong*). However, gender was considered incompatible first with the criterion of "proletarian literature" in the 1930s and then with that of socialist realism during the Maoist regime. In response to the emergence of a constellation of women authors (writers and poets alike), scholars of modern Chinese fiction took the lead in taking new directions in scholarship beyond the fact-finding state and into a wider critical and theoretical context. See, for instance, *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*, ed. Tani E. Barlow (Durham: Duke UP, 1993). Also see Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua, *Fuchu lishi dibiao* [Emerging from the Horizon of History]. (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin wenxue chuban she, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Since Julia Kristeva first coined the term in the 1960s by combining Saussurean and Bakhtinian theories of language and literature, intertextuality has been a dominant idea within literary and cultural studies, taken up by practically every subsequent literary movement. The concept was later foregrounded in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia UP, 1986) 37.

<sup>3</sup> See Xie Mian and Li Qinxue, eds. *Zhongguo nüxing shige wenku* [A Treasury of Chinese Women's Poetry] (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 1997) 3.

<sup>4</sup> See Lü Jin, "Nüxing shige de sanzong wenben" [Three Different Textual Types of Women's Poetry] *Shi tansuo* 4 (1994): 145.

<sup>5</sup> The term "middle-sex poetry" was used by the poetry critic Wu Sijing during a personal interview in January 2001. The interview was part of my pilot study supported by the Research School of Amerindian, African and Asian Studies of Leiden University.

<sup>6</sup> See Zang Di, "Zibai de wuqu" [The Dilemma of Confession] *Shi tansuo* 2 (1995): 48.

<sup>7</sup> See Chen Xuguang, *Shixue: Lilun yu piping* [Poetics: Theory and Practice] (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 1996) 134–35.

<sup>8</sup> The article first appeared in the pages of *Shige bao* [Poetry News]. See Zhai Yongming, "Heiye de yishi" [Night Consciousness], reprinted in *Cichang yu mofang: Xin shichao lunjuan* [Magnetic Field and Magic Square: New Poetry Tide Criticism], ed. Wu Sijing (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 1993) 140–43.

<sup>9</sup> See Chen Xuguang, *Shixue: Lilun yu piping* 128.

<sup>10</sup> The translation is mine.

<sup>11</sup> See Zhai Yongming, "Chongjing" [Longing], in Tang Xiaodu (ed.), *Cheng zhi wei yiqie* [Call It Everything], in *Zhongguo nüxing shige wenku*, ed. Xie Mian and Li Qinxue. (Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 1997) 14. I am responsible for the English translation of the selected Chinese poems.

<sup>12</sup> See Tang Yaping, "Heise zaoze" [Black Swamp], in *Hei se shamo* [Black Desert], eds. Xie Mian and Li Qinxue (Beijing: *Zhongguo nüxing shige wenku*, 1997) 80.

<sup>13</sup> See Zhai Yongming, "Zhengming" [Testament], in *Cheng zhi wei yiqie* (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 1997) 18.

<sup>14</sup> The remark is taken from Helene Cixous's essay "The Laugh of the Medusa." See Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* 245–64. For reference to the Chinese text, see Zhang Jingyuan, *Dangdai nüxing zhuyi wenxue piping* [Contemporary Feminist Literary Criticism] 188–211.

<sup>15</sup> See Yi Lei, "Luoti" [The Naked Body], in *Nüxing nianling* [The Age of Womanhood] (Beijing: Renming wenzue chubanshe, 1990) 127.

<sup>16</sup> See Zhang Zhen, "Liuchan" [Abortion], in Shen Ri (ed.), *Meng zhong louge* [Attic in the Dream], in Xie Mian and Li Qinxue (eds.), *Zhongguo nüxing shige wenku* 152.

<sup>17</sup> See Tao Naikan, "Going Beyond: The Post-Menglong Poets, Zhai Yongming and Zhang Zhen," *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia* 27–28 (1995–96): 162–63.

<sup>18</sup> See Shu Ting, "Yubie" [Farewell in the Rain], in *Shu Ting de shi* [Shu Ting's Poetry] (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1994) 114.

<sup>19</sup> Contemporary Chinese poetry is roughly delineated into two phases: Obscure Poetry and Post-Obscure Poetry/Newborn Generation Poetry. See Michelle Yeh, "Light a Lamp in a Rock: Experimental Poetry in Contemporary China," *Modern China* 4 (1992): 379–409. Also see Hong Zicheng and Liu Denghan, *Zhongguo dangdai xinshi shi* [History of Contemporary New Chinese Poetry] (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1993) 401–17. Contemporary Chinese Experimental poetry began with underground poetry in the early 1970's as a quest for creative and individual freedom from the political establishment. The *Jintian* poets—the best-known Experimental group—were later acclaimed as the backbone of the Obscure poetry group, i.e. Bei Dao, Shu Ting, Gu Cheng, Jiang He, and Yang Lian. Only after the mid-1980s did various poetic experiments with form and content bloom on the Chinese literary landscape, thus constituting the Post-Obscure poetic tide.

<sup>20</sup> See Wolfgang Kubin, "Writing with Your Body: Literature as a Wound—Remarks on the Poetry of Shu Ting," *Modern Chinese Literature* 4 (1988): 150.

<sup>21</sup> See Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Text-Music*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977) 142.

<sup>22</sup> See Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2000) 156.

<sup>23</sup> Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* 156–57.

<sup>24</sup> See Nancy K. Miller, *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988) 106.

<sup>25</sup> See Wang Xiaoni, "Yinggai zuo yige zhizuo zhe" [I Should Be a Craftswoman], in Xu Jingya, ed. *Wo de zhili bao zhe huo* [My Paper Wraps Up Fire], ed. Xie Mian and Li Qinxue (Beijing: *Zhongguo nüxing shige wenku*, 1997) 107.

<sup>26</sup> See Zhai Yongming, "Yeijing" [Night Scene], in *Cheng zhi wei yiqie* (Shenyang: Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe, 1997) 13.

<sup>27</sup> See Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* 37.

<sup>28</sup> See Ulrich Broich, "Intertextuality," in *International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice*, eds. Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1997) 251.

<sup>29</sup> See Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* 86.

<sup>30</sup> Based on Morris' threefold semiotic perspective on intertextual relationships—syntactic, pragmatic, and semantic—Plett identifies three different kinds of intertextualities: material intertextuality, structural intertextuality, and material-structural intertextuality. Material intertextuality refers to the repetition of signs in a semantic and thematic sense, and structural intertextuality to the repetition of syntactic and structural rules. In Plett's terms, material-structural intertextuality combines the repetition of signs and rules in two or more texts. I think that the distinction between semantic and structural performances is essential to the analysis of individual texts. See Heinrich H. Plett, "Intertextualities," in *Intertextuality*, ed. H. Plett (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991) 7.

<sup>31</sup> See Sun Shaozhen, "Hui fu xinshi genben de yishu chuantong—Shu Ting de chuanguo gei women de qishi" [Restore the Essential Artistic Tradition of New Poetry—Enlightenment from the Creative Writing of Shu Ting], in *Menglong shi lunzheng ji*, ed. Yao Jiahua (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 1989) 19.

<sup>32</sup> He's poem is taken from Liu Fuchun and Li Baoyan, *Zhongguo xiandai jingdian shiku* [A Treasury of Masterpieces of Modern Chinese Poetry] (Taiyuan: Beiyue wenyi chubanshe, 1994) 4:1.

<sup>33</sup> See Shu Ting, "Qundiao" [Sculpture Cluster], in *Shu Ting de*

shi 29.

<sup>34</sup> See Tang Yaping, "Heise zaoze" [Black Swamp], in *Heise shamo* 81. My italics, highlighting intertextuality.

<sup>35</sup> See Zhai Yongming, "Yugan" [Presentiment], in *Cheng zhi wei yiqie* 4.

<sup>36</sup> In February 2001 I interviewed four influential Beijing-based poetry critics: Cui Weiping, Tang Xiaodu, Zhou Zan, and Wu Sijing. Prof. Wu Sijing was the only one who did not see Tang Yaping as an imitator of Zhai Yongming.

<sup>37</sup> Here I quote Cui Weiping's remarks made during the aforesaid interview. The translation is mine.

<sup>38</sup> See Wang Xiaoni, "Zhushi shangkou dao jida" [Staring at the Cut Growing Bigger] 130–31.

<sup>39</sup> See Sylvia Plath, "Cut," in *Ariel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965) 23–24.

<sup>40</sup> See Michelle Yeh, "Light a Lamp in a Rock," in *Modern China* 4 (1992) 396.

<sup>41</sup> The combination of rhetorical and psychological approaches to intertextuality is Bloom's particular contribution to contemporary literary theory's moving beyond the self-enclosed study of literary texts. See Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973).

<sup>42</sup> Here I revise John Barth's phrase "literature of exhaustion," as quoted in Broich's article on intertextuality, in *International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1997) 252.

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