

# **Feminist Theory and Contemporary Chinese Female Literature**

*Wang Ning*

## **ABSTRACT**

Based on a brief critical review of Western feminist theory from the Chinese perspective, the author tries to analyze some phenomena that appeared in current Chinese literature: the awakening of the female sense and the rising of the feminist writing of Chinese characteristics. The present essay is aimed to reinterpret the female writing of some newly rising Chinese female novelists and their texts. To the author, these writings are produced under the influence of Western feminist theory, but on the other hand, they are of more indigenous characteristics, which have a unique, long tradition and which might well carry on theoretical dialogue with Western feminist theory.

## **KEY WORDS**

feminist theory

new realist fiction

avant-garde fiction

self-identity

"immediacy of experience"

"female language"



To discuss the relationship between (Western) feminist theory and contemporary Chinese female literature is no doubt an important function of comparative literature studies, especially Chinese and Western comparative studies of literature and culture. This paper aims not only at interpreting current Chinese literary phenomena with a modified Western critical theory, but also at questioning and even recasting Western theory from a Chinese point of view and in terms of the Chinese writing and reading experience. It is true that feminism has been developing in China in a different way from its evolution in the West. And it has its own long but latent tradition in Chinese culture and literature. So first of all, I think it necessary to offer a bird's-eye view of the origin and development of feminism in the West, based on my own observation and understanding as a Chinese scholar, especially in the English-speaking world where feminist theory is somewhat different from the theoretically oriented French theory.

### **Feminism and Its Recent Orientations Reconsidered**

Obviously, feminism, as a social and cultural trend, has been around time since the 19th century, when came to the fore as a rebel force against the male-centric world its cultural and social values. The staunch revolutionary spirit does find embodiment in the works of some female writers in 19th century English literature, which of course anticipated the modern feminist movement. Upon entering the 20th century, in the domain of literary creation and criticism, feminism has launched two waves, the direct consequence of which is that it has not only heightened women's social status and provided them with vari-

ous rights they deserve to have, but it also paved the way for the pluralistic development of contemporary women's literature and for the new orientation in feminist criticism.

The first wave of feminism, which started in the latter part of the 19th century and lasted till the 1960s, is characterized by a striving for women's social rights and a strong sense of participation in social and political affairs. It advocates social, political and economic reform, and apparently differs from the "new" (from 1960's) feminist movement, characterized by mixing Marxism with poststructuralism and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Earlier in this period, female critics were chiefly concerned about women's own problems, such as those of their existence and social status. They actually did not involve themselves in any theoretical issues as their followers have recently done. Thus their limitations are rather evident. We should say that the "center" of feminism was still in Europe rather than in North America during the period of the first wave of feminism.<sup>1</sup>

The second wave of feminism shifted its focus from Europe to North America. It is characterized by being more and more ideologically and deconstructively oriented, marked by contemporary critical theory and set under the umbrella of contemporary cultural studies, especially in Anglo-American critical circles. Lasting from the 1960s to the latter part of the 1980s, the second wave of feminism started with the publication of Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which emphasizes the further struggle for women's liberation and for a better life. But the debate around this issue has already shifted from focussing on women's various rights to their "experience" and their sexual difference from men and has developed more and more politically and ideologically oriented. As far as the "center" of the feminist movement, the United States, is concerned, the second wave is actually a direct consequence of the mid-1960's women's liberation movement. From the issues that they deal with, feminism then is very much engaged in social affairs rather than just confined to academic studies. There are at least five important topics heatedly debated in the feminists' works, such as the difference in sex, in experience, in discourse, in the unconscious, and in social and economic

conditions. Such important figures as Gayatri C. Spivak and Elaine Showalter, who have made vital contributions to the flourishing of feminism in the contemporary era and whose works have exerted strong influence on current feminist criticism, should be particularly mentioned. The former is famous for her translation and interpretation of Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction and her own construction of the theory of the "other" characterized by postcolonial studies and Third World criticism; and the latter is known for her attempt to construct a new feminist poetic. As a result, the second wave of feminism has paved the way for the formation of the new framework of the three forces dominating North American academic circles at the time, that is the Deconstruction, the New Historicism, and Feminism.

In the latter part of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, along with the pluralistic orientation in the development of contemporary critical theory, feminism itself has been evolving in a really diverse direction: such issues as gynocriticism, gender studies, gays and lesbian studies, Asian women's studies, black women's poetic, and even minority discourse are all observed under the umbrella of post-modern and post-colonial cultural studies.<sup>2</sup> There are at least five fields in which current feminist or women's studies are carried on: (1) sexual politics, which aims at challenging the long-lasting paternal world and reverse the artificial hierarchy between man and woman; (2) Marxist feminism, which is chiefly concerned with the double oppression of the working-class women, the oppression caused by the division of labor due to the differences in sex, causing the discrimination of sexes at home; (3) female writing and female criticism aiming at pursuing a sort of female discourse or writing, which was long challenged by the British novelist Doris Lessing in her *The Golden Notebook* (1963), but which is still advocated by quite a number of feminists; (4) the French academic feminism characterized by Lacanian psychoanalysis, and even Kristevian semiotics, which is obviously theoretically oriented with Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous as its representatives; (5) lesbian studies and the Third World criticism aiming at deconstructing the male-centric hegemony and even the imperialist discourse.<sup>3</sup> So in today's North American cultural

and theoretical circles, the role played by feminism cannot be replaced by any other forces, although now and then male-dominance is still prevalent in certain fields.

It is true that feminism has been introduced into China from the West since the latter part of the 1980s<sup>4</sup> and theoretically discussed in regard to Chinese writers' and critics' critical and creative reception, although Chinese female writing has its own long tradition and line of development. But to my mind, the current prevailing feminist/female writing in Chinese literature is of both its own tradition as well as Western influence. So it is of certain relevance to deal with Chinese avant-garde female writing from a perspective of parallel comparison in the context of international feminism.

### **Seeking Self-identity: Chinese Avant-Garde Female Writings**

Anyone who is familiar with contemporary Chinese literature will no doubt confront the fact that since China's openness to the outside world and economic reform in the latter part of the 1970s, various Western trends of culture and literature and art have flooded into China, exerting a strong influence on present-day Chinese literature.<sup>5</sup> Of all the cultural and literary trends that have affected Chinese literature, feminism is obviously of great relevance. Despite the fact that Western feminist theory has been responded or reacted to by certain Chinese critics and writers, we could still compare it with current Chinese female writing. In this respect, the above description of the origin and development of feminism in the West has undoubtedly offered us a frame of reference through which we can observe and interpret contemporary Chinese female literature.<sup>6</sup> Evidently, due to its long male-centric cultural tradition, few Chinese women have had a strong sense of feminism. So it is not surprising that the belatedness of feminism in China has made the female sense in contemporary Chinese literature rather weak and obscure for a long time.

Since there is striking difference between Chinese culture and Western culture, the "feminist" senses reflected in their literary works

are naturally different:

From the social context and class background in which female literature rises, Western female literature is a product in the development of capitalist production with the middle class women as the main force who are both of certain bourgeois democratic sense and bourgeois ladies' leisure for enjoyments. In contrast, the rise of modern Chinese female literature is closely related to the entire movement of democracy and women's liberation and thus marked with strong social and revolutionary significance.<sup>7</sup>

To some Chinese scholars, this idea is to some extent correct, although we could still find similarities between the two in pointing to the male-centered world: In the West, ideology and language have always been permeated with a sense of "male-centrism" and "male-superiority". Women are nothing but men's accessories or even playthings without independent personality and self-identity. Moreover, in the contemporary era, there are still some theorists who try to legitimize or theorize this problematic world; however in China, due to the influence of the long-lasting traditional cultural value, the so-called "*sangang wuchang*", namely, the "three cardinal guides" (ruler guides subject, father guides son, and husband guides wife) and "five constant virtues" (benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and fidelity), have long permeated women's consciousness and subconsciousness, becoming their guiding principles of thinking and behavior. If they act against this principle, they are bound to be punished by the power and feudal ethic code based on the "male-centric" doctrine. Therefore, many women, deliberately obscuring the differences in sex, think that to be feminist is to identify themselves with men, thus possibly achieving the real equality between men and women. In reality, such examples could be found even in selecting a leading member on various administrative levels at the advice of the upper authority. While in recent literary works, especially in that of the New Period, (1976-1989) and the post-new period (1990-) the success of a woman

cannot but be accompanied by the failure of her love affairs, marriage and family relations. But in any event, there have always been quite a few women writers of strong avant-garde sense who have produced literary works almost as profound in content and as good in literary quality as those male writers, and sometimes, even better in subtle psychological descriptions of female characters. In the latter part of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, such women writers of certain avant-garde or quasi-avant-garde sense such as Ru Zhijuan, Dai Houying and Zhang Jie did produce a number of influential and controversial works that even made some impact on people's mental emancipation after the ten-years' catastrophe. But as compared with criticism of the major male writers, critical works about them are far from enough. In the mid-1980s, Chinese literature saw a kind of innovation and renovation in narrative discourse and writing technique practiced by a group of young writers, most of whom are obviously male writers. So critics including myself have virtually neglected those female writers' literary achievement and factual influence in the literary circles.<sup>8</sup> This phenomenon forms a striking contrast with the flourishing of feminism in the West as well as the numerous publications done by overseas sinologists on Chinese female writings. To my mind, it is naturally the passive effect of long-standing prejudice out of male-centrism against women. Although critics of postmodernism, Lacanian psychoanalysis and postcolonialism have practiced deconstructing the binary opposition between modernity and postmodernity, between men and women and between grand narrative and *les petites histoires*, they still have overlooked the existing influence and social effect of female literature in contemporary China.

Frankly speaking, the rise of female writing in contemporary China has attracted the attention of overseas sinologists as well as comparatists who are interested in Oriental culture and literature, including Chinese culture and literature. This also makes us confront a tempting literary phenomenon: contemporary Chinese avant-garde female writings. In this field of research, I think it should include such schools as the New Tide Fiction (*Xinchao xiaoshuo*) or Avant-garde Fiction (*Xianfeng xiaoshuo*) represented by Liu Suola and Can

Xue with some other male writers: the former is actually the first to touch upon the issues of absurdity and the existentialist postmodernism among contemporary writers, and the latter tries to create a nightmarish and Freudian world where abnormal psychology is analyzed; the New Realist Fiction (*Xin xieshi xiaoshuo*) represented by the two women writers such as Chi Li and Fang Fang who have actually practiced the Hassanian postmodern theme of appealing to the "immediacy of experience", the Fiedlerian postmodern sense of commonality and the Lyotardian postmodern theme of the loss of the grand narrative and the rise of *les petites histoires*; the New State Fiction (*Xin zhuangtai xiaoshuo*) represented by Chen Ran and Lin Bai with some other male writers: the former is known for her unremitting avant-garde experimentation with various techniques and the latter is particularly good at delving into the very depth of women's privacy, sexual life, and love affairs in an attempt to expose it in a faithful way to the reader.

As compared with male writers, the impact of these female avantgardists is far from great, for they have not formed a group like the male avantgardists who rose after 1985, but their avantgardist sense does find embodiment in the following aspects, if we have a carefully study their writings and try to theorize them. Their qualities include:

(1) Continuously pursuing with a unique female dedication to their artistic exploration, never being satisfied with only one style, always transcending their contemporaries as well as themselves. In this aspect, the old poet Zheng Min and young novelist Wang Anyi particularly deserve to be mentioned. Zheng, as one of the very few poets of the older generation who are still interested in new ideas and novel techniques, has always been standing between modernity and postmodernity in the Chinese context: her early poetry is written largely for the sake of art itself, but on the other hand, with her solid foundation in the English language and wide knowledge about Western literature, she has been extremely interested in the Derridean poststructuralist theory and has even practiced it in her recent poems and essays, which are of certain philosophical meditation and decon-



struction of binary opposition. Wang, as the one who rose immediately after the Cultural Revolution and contributed a bit to the recovery of traditional realism, was known in the 1980s for her series on the "three loves" (*san lian*), "Love in the Waste Mountains" (*Huangshan zhi lian*), "Love in a Small Town" (*Xiaocheng zhi lian*) and "Love in the Jinxiu Valley" (*Jinxiugu zhi lian*), which delve deep into the female psychological world and represent the sexual psychology of different female characters. Her stories written in recent years, such as "The Century on the Hill" (*Gangshang de shiji*), "Brothers" (*Dixiong men*), "The Story of the Uncle" (*Shushu de gushi*) and "The Sacrificial Altar" (*Shensheng jitan*) are permeated with a conscious feminist sense associating with a sort of postmodernist sense, which have become rare texts open to feminist analysis in contemporary Chinese literature.

(2) Trying with a strong sense of female avantgardism to create a world of their own, which is not affiliated with any other male-centric world and in which the artificial hierarchy between man and woman is reversed and the male-centric authority is either banished or deconstructed. Such writings are characterized by a striking female sense of gender and sometimes even colored with the so-called female "private novel" (*si xiaoshuo*), with the author's cultural identity and personality highlighted. They are actually very close to the female phase in the development of Western feminism. In this aspect, Tie Ning, Chen Ran, Lin Bai, Hai Nan, Yi Lei, Hong Ying and Jiang Feng are representatives. When Tie Ning published her novel *The Gate of Rose* (*Meigui men*, 1988), the critical circles were shocked at her boldness in unrestricted description and profound exploration of the female psychological world, in which the heroine's conscious sense of the feminist challenge against and deconstruction of the male-centric world still lingers in the reader's mind. Lin Bai's *A Woman's War* (*Yigeren de zhanzheng*, 1994) exposes in a thorough-going way the secrecy and privacy of a woman and her attitude toward the world. The other writers more or less delve into the very depth of women's subtle psychology, thereby breaking through the long established ambivalent psychology of men toward women.

(3) Devoting to the "re-casting" of history with a unique female subtlety and penetrating insight into life and society, aiming at breaking through the "male(hero)-centric" mode in historiography. In this aspect, the recent writings produced by Zhao Mei and Xu Lan are typical examples. Their descriptions of historical characters are not based on the realistic notion of a historian, but rather close to the metahistorical description or historical narrative advocated by the New Historicists in the West. The historical novel *Empress Wu* (*Wu Zetian*, 1994) written by each of them at the advice of the film director Zhang Yimou with the same title is not just aimed to reverse the verdict or re-describe the long-deformed historical fact about China's first and only woman emperor, but to open up a new domain for the writing of the historical novel: deconstructing the "grand narrative" and creating the "*petites histoires*", questioning and even re-casting the so-called "official history" (*zhengshi*) from the unique female perspective and giving the new significance to history as well as to controversial historical figures. Although historians might well question whether their historical narrative is faithful to the historical truth or not, literary critics will certainly welcome their new texts for them to anatomize with the feminist theory or from the new historical perspective.

(4) Describing with a subtle observation the daily trifles of ordinary people, thus highlighting a sense of commonalty rather than the so-called grand narrative. In this aspect, Chi Li, Fang Fang, Fan Xiaoqing and Han Xiaohui have made some contributions: the former three novelists are good at plain description of daily trifles, which has actually reacted to the radical experimentation made by the (male) avant-garde writers in the latter part of the 1980s and anticipates the rise of the New Realist Fiction, another metamorphosed postmodern version in contemporary Chinese literature.<sup>9</sup> This version on the one hand appeals to the "immediacy of experience" of the Hassanian postmodern concept, and on the other hand, is engaged in the deconstruction of the depth structure of the grand narrative, thereby realizing the shift of devotion from the (modern) grand narrative to the (postmodern) *petites histoires*. Han, as an essayist and an editorial

staff in *Guangming Daily* (*Guangming ribao*), has made another contribution to the flourishing of essay writing in the Post-New Period Chinese literary circles, which is particularly characterized by female writers' careful observation and subtle perception and description of people and their daily life.

(5) Delving deep into the characters' abnormal psychological world with unique female sensibility and precise grasp and even professional psychoanalytic terms and giving true representation of the subtle psychological world of female characters, thus creating a world of absurdity and fantasy and pushing contemporary Chinese psychoanalytic fiction writing to a new extreme. In this aspect, Can Xue and Xu Xiaobin manifest themselves as typical representatives. The former constructs a kind of Freudian vision with her vivid description of the abnormal female psychological world in "The Aged Floating Cloud" (*Canglao de fuyun*) and "The Muddy Street" (*Huangni jie*), that is, constructing a nightmarish world in which all people, including women, are more or less neurotic.<sup>10</sup> The latter tries conscientiously to make a careful study of psychology, including Freud's psychoanalysis, before applying it in a creative way to her own writings, which find particular embodiment in her novella *An Investigation into a Neurotic* (*Dui yige jingshenbing huanzhe de diaocha*, 1985). Her attempt has indeed enabled us comparatists engaged in interdisciplinary studies of literature to observe the text from a metamorphosed psychoanalytic perspective and finally re-cast the theory with the Chinese female writing experience.

(6) Dealing with the world and life with female intuition and philosophical meditation and showing their metaphysical concern for the world and human existence by presenting the complicated relationship between men and women, thus producing a version of existentialism in contemporary Chinese literature. In this aspect, the late novelist Dai Houying and Liu Suofa should be mentioned. Dai, in the early 1980s, when Sartrean existentialism came into China in a favorable way, produced her controversial novel *Ah, Men* (*Ren a, ren*, 1980) and *The Death of a Poet* (*Shiren zhi si*, 1982), which explore the complicated relationship between man and society, man and the out-

ward world and men and women and provide the young Chinese generation with a poetic philosophy of life. Liu, on the other hand, as one of the eminent avant-garde writers rising after 1985, constructs in her writings a chaotic world, in the narrative course of which she deconstructs the various binary oppositions by first setting them up. The publication of her story "You Have No Other Choice" (*Ni bie wu xuanze*) has actually paved the way for contemporary Chinese avant-garde literature to move from the phase of modernity to that of post-modernity. Apparently, their metaphysical meditation is by no means less profound than those male writers, but the paradox, irony and tension that frequently appear in their writings are even not matched by their male counterparts.

We should say that with the joint effort made by all these female writers, a sort of quasi-female discourse is emerging in contemporary Chinese literary circles, which deserves our careful observation and theoretical analysis. This phenomenon has also shown that with the flourishing of the international feminist movement and the pluralistic orientations of feminist literature and criticism, the belated Chinese female literature has grown more and more mature, gradually approaching the general trend of international feminist development and world female literature. If we do not confront this fact and merely view it as an isolated phenomenon within the domain of China's mainland, we cannot further our study in a profound manner. With the recent development in Western feminist critical theory as a frame of reference, we could push forward our study of contemporary Chinese female literature and make it meet with the international scholarship.

### **Moving out of the Binary Opposition: Return to the Female Sense**

Over thirty years ago, the publication of Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1963) once shocked the post-war British literary circles for its challenge against the then prevailing feminist idea of the so-called "female language." Obviously, to her as well as to many of her contemporary female writers and critics, there is no such thing

as the so-called "female language," which is indeterminate and even problematic, for language itself has no difference in class or gender. To invent a sort of female language could do nothing but intensify the already existing binary opposition between man and woman and highlight the "female narcissism" haunting quite a number of women writers in their writings. Therefore, the only correct way to solve the problem in the "war between sexes" is to pursue a universally acknowledged humanistic language transcending this artificial binary opposition. Although this idea might well cause controversy and those advocating it could even be regarded as the enemy of the feminist movement, it is to my mind of certain relevance to current Chinese female literary creation and feminist criticism. From its very beginning, the Chinese feminist movement has been closely related to its national revolution although it could not but have been affected by Western feminist thinking. So Chinese female literature is to a large extent such a product out of both the domestic movement as well as Western influence. The contemporary female literary phenomenon present before us is just a mixture of many elements: feminine, feminist and female, and even somewhat anti-feminist or "female-centric," which no doubt has much to do with the unique Chinese conditions in a cultural transitional period. At the moment, due to the UN Fourth World Conference on Women which was held in Beijing in 1995, many Chinese literary magazines have put out special issues on female literature, quite a few publishing houses have tried to seize the time to publish book series on women's studies, and plus the joint effort made by the press and mass media, the already rising "fever" of feminism has been pushed to an inadequate extreme. We might well be worried about whether or not a new kind of hierarchy would appear in place of the traditional male-centric one, or whether or not a new binary opposition would be set up. There is full reason to do so, but we should not neglect the other side of the phenomenon: on the one hand, we have quite a number of intellectual women whose female sense has been awakened; on the other hand, in the countryside and in some cities, a much larger number of country women and load-off female workers are still working in the fields or at home or doing

part-time job simply for their least equal living rights with men. Even in towns and cities, the total equality between men and women is still far from satisfactory: many young girl students who will finish their university schooling would spend much greater effort before they could find a good job, and some talented female scholars or officials are now and then prevented from being promoted simply because they are women. Women should make far greater effort before they could achieve what they deserve to. Of course, there are a few lucky women who could seize every favorable opportunity in contemporary China, but such cases are indeed very rare. So it is too early to talk about "lesbianism" or "women's return home" which is frequently discussed in the Western developed countries.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, we should also keep an eye on the potential emergence of a new kind of "female hegemony" or "female-centrism," which will most probably form a new binary opposition and cause a new war between sexes. In this aspect, female literature should transcend itself and move out of the traditional either/or mode of thinking so as to return to womanhood itself and embrace the entire world with women's "motherhood."

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Raman Selden & Peter Widdowson, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, 3rd edition, University Press of Kentucky, 1993, 206-210.

<sup>2</sup> Linda J. Nicholson ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism*, New York & London: Routledge, 1990, 27-35.

<sup>4</sup> In this aspect, the translated book edited by Zhang Jingyuan *Dangdai nuxingzhuyi wenxuepiping (Contemporary Feminist Criticism)* should be mentioned, although quite a few feminist essays had been translated into Chinese and published in journals previously.

<sup>5</sup> Wang Ning, "Confronting Western Influence: Rethinking Chinese Literature of the New Period," *New Literary History* 24.4 (1993): 905-26.

<sup>6</sup> In the present essay, I have used some terms concerning the topic I address, such as feminism (*nuquan zhuyi* or *nuxing zhuyi* in Chi-

nese), woman (*funu* or *nuren*), female (*nuxing*). In order to make things clear, I here offer some explanations. The first term is translated from English dealing with Western feminist theory and its reception in China; the second and third terms are sometimes used interchangeably but mean different things: women's literature simply refers to those literary works written by women writers, whether they are of feminist sense or not; female literature refers to those literary works chiefly written by women writers in which a sort of female or feminist sense is dominant. For among Chinese women writers, not everyone has a clear female or feminist sense. Many of them are not willing to be called "women writers" or "female writers."

<sup>7</sup> Sheng Ying, ed., *A History of 20th Century Chinese Female Literature* (Tianjin: Tianjin People's Press, 1995) 18.

<sup>8</sup> It is true that not until recently did such avant-garde critics as Zhang Yiwu and Chen Xiaoming begin to make some effort to observe these female writings.

<sup>9</sup> As far as the four different versions of postmodernity in contemporary Chinese literature are concerned, see Wang Ning's "Constructing Postmodernism: The Chinese Case and Its Different Versions," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 20.1-2 (1993): 49-61.

<sup>10</sup> As for a psychoanalytic criticism of Can Xue's writings, Wang Ning, "The Reception of Freudianism in Modern Chinese Literature Part II," *China Information* 6.1 (1991): 46-54.

<sup>11</sup> In the past few years, a nation-wide debate on whether it is necessary for women to "return home" (*funu huijia*) has attracted quite a few male and female scholars and critics in the Chinese intellectual circles. And some essays have appeared in such influential newspapers or journals as *Guangming Daily* (*Guangming ribao*), *China Women* (*Zhongguo funu bao*) and *Life* (*Shenghuo*). Although the debate has come to an end with no result, it is still talked about among quite a number of men and women every now and then.