

The Paradox of “Women’s Poetry” and Literary Feminism

by

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Abstract

This thesis argues that the concept of “women’s poetry” in contemporary China emerged not as a feminist critical approach or a methodology for women poets to question gender values of the patriarchy, but as a new analytical method for the critic and a poetic strategy for the poet to refute the binary of form and content, which simultaneously reaffirmed the binary mode of the patriarchy.

My analysis rests on how the critic Tang Xiaodu and the poet Zhai Yongming appropriated the idea of “women’s poetry” in markedly different ways and how in doing so both of them carried out the mission of what I call “formal experimentation.” I use the term to refer to the situation in which the critic and the poet transformed the text into a discursive space. In this space, Tang promoted critical innovation that not only valued poetic form but also poetic function from a social perspective, and Zhai pursued poetic experimentation that harmonized what to write with how to write it.

My reading of Tang’s articles on Zhai’s poems and his theory of poetry alongside Zhai’s essays on poetics suggests that nesting in their prose is an implicit patriarchal stance: Building a sociocultural criticism on the idea of “women’s poetry” and working it into the traditional formalist criticism, Tang essentializes the biological male-female divide and hints at the lower poetic value of gender-marked imagery; while registering female consciousness as both poetic subject and form, Zhai repudiates feminism and feminist approaches to women’s poetry in her essays on the idea of “women’s poetry.” However, my understanding of her poems indicates that feminist concerns are the chosen subject matter Zhai speaks on in varied formal structures. Tang’s reading of Zhai Yongming’s poems and his idea of “women’s poetry” end up replicating

and consolidating the patriarchal male-female binary, which undermines his efforts to advance the notion that poetic form and content are equal. In an attempt to disassociate herself with feminism, Zhai renders her statement of the unity of form and content controversial. Zhai holds the view that when we talk about whether a poem is feminist or non-feminist, we are referring to the subject of the poem rather than the form. In addition, the subject is not as significant as the form, as formal elements define the literariness of a poem and thus its significance. In addition, in order to propound the idea of “women’s poetry” as a poetic strategy for women poets to prove the aesthetic value of their works, Zhai ends up perpetuating an aesthetic value system which has long subordinated women’s writing to male supremacy.

My hope is that this study will, on the one hand, act as a corrective to reveal the limitations of the concept of “women’s poetry,” and, on the other hand, invite more scholarly reflections on the larger implications of feminist poetics in the Chinese context through the “limitations” of Zhai’s prose and extensiveness of her poetry.

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Introduction

“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,” Nancy Miller contends, the author of the book *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing*.¹ Miller’s argument expresses her dissatisfaction with the post-structuralist idea of the metaphorical death of the author that overlooks women authors’ lack of subjectivity in the tradition of writing. My primary concern is not that Miller’s study makes visible the patriarchal underpinning of the research on the relationship between writing and reading. Rather, Miller’s concerns with writing and the “self” motivated me to ask alternative questions about contemporary Chinese poetry. I ask whether male poets in the mid-1980s China were overburdened with the “self,” what drives the heated debate over the subjectivity of poetry—a poetic ideal that dissociates poetry from the political ideology of the establishment—among poets (female and male) and critics, and what the contexts and meditations enabling the discussion of an idea of “women’s poetry” 女性诗歌 are that might or might not ally with literary feminism. Seeking answers to these questions has afforded me the chance to reflect upon the danger of non-historicized applications of feminist ideas in the study of women’s poetry since the late 1970s.

The concept of “women’s poetry” emerged and has evolved within the broader framework of Chinese experimental poetry.² As has been defined by Michelle Yeh and Maghiel

¹ Nancy Miller, *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 106.

² Jeanne Hong Zhang, *The Invention of a Discourse: Women’s Poetry from Contemporary China* (Leiden: CNWS Publications, 2004), 19.

van Crevel, experimental poetry has been characterized by its quest for poetic subjectivity—creative freedom from the political ideology of the establishment.³ In the words of Jin Siyan,

In twentieth century Chinese literature, we find writers expressing several forms of subjectivity characterized as “*ziwo*” (*I*), “*xiaowo*” (small *I*), “*dawo*” (capital *I*), “*wangwo*” (*I* to be forgotten), as well as “*wuwo*” (no *I*). The “capital *I*” and the “*I* to be forgotten” are characteristic of the “art for life” school of authors, which had its zenith in the 1950s and 1960s. The “*ziwo*” and “*xiaowo*” are both expressions of the “art for art’s sake” and the “*ziwo de zhutixing*” (the subjectivity of the *I*) movements of the late 1970s.⁴

Jin’s summary of the literary trend of “art for art’s sake” since the late 1970s comports with critics’ observations of the so-called Third Generation⁵ poetic scene.

³ For more on Chinese experimental poetry, see Michelle Yeh, “Light a Lamp in a Rock: Experimental Poetry in Contemporary China,” *Modern China*, vol. 18, no. 4 (1992): 379-409; and Maghiel van Crevel, *Language Shattered: Contemporary Chinese Poetry and Duoduo* (Leiden, The Netherlands: CNWS, 1996), 69-70.

⁴ Jin Siyan, “Subjective writing in contemporary Chinese Literature: the ‘I’ has taken over from the ‘we’ omnipresent until the late 1970s,” trans. Peter Brown, *China Perspectives*, no. 54 (July – August 2004): 54.

⁵ The “First Generation” poets refer to those established poets before the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, such as He Jingzhi 贺敬之, Xu Chi 徐迟, Lü Jian 吕剑, Wen Jie 闻捷, Li Ji 李季, Li Ying 李瑛, Gong Liu 公刘, Wei Yang 未央, Bai Hua 白桦, Shao Yanxiang 邵燕祥, Yan Zhen 严阵, and Liu Shahe 流沙河. The “Second Generation” poets refer to the so-called Menglong shiren 朦胧诗人 (also known as Misty poets or Obscure poets), most of whom were born after the founding of the People’s Republic. The “Third Generation” poets are those who have established their positions since the heyday of Menglongshi 朦胧诗 (also known as Misty poetry or Obscure poetry) by embodying a departure from the artistic features of the Misty poetry. The Second Generation poetry and the Third Generation poetry have been identified by Michelle Yeh and Maghiel van Crevel as the experimental poetry in the history of Chinese poetry. Yeh and van Crevel share the conclusion that the similarities between the Misty and the Third Generation poetry outweigh the differences, although what brought them to the conclusion differs. Yeh examines the shared aesthetic dimensions between the two (1992: 401), whereas van Crevel supports the conclusion with the distinction that if the two are not viewed as artistic expression deviating from the political sphere but as literary works, their differences outweigh their similarities (1996: 78). In other words, as is observed by van Crevel, the Third Generation poetry as a whole shares with its immediate predecessor—the Misty poetry—the role, which is a real departure from a language of political rhetoric. By contrast, although Yeh agrees that the artistic innovation of the experimental poetry encompasses the desertion of the political cause of the state, she proposes that literary scholars should be cautious of reductive interpretations of politics in trying to deny the relevance or centrality of political overtones in a poem (1999: 206). Chapter Three of this thesis builds on Yeh’s observation and attempts to prove that the poetry of Zhai Yongming paradoxically engages with politics by her claimed distance from the political project of feminism.

Since 1984, Chinese poetry, known alternatively as Post-Misty poetry (or Post-Obscure poetry), poetry of the Third Generation, or poetry of the Newborn Generation, has embraced divergent aesthetic ideals. To analyze the many distinct styles in this poetic scene, critics from Yin Angui,⁶ Yu Cijiang,⁷ and Xie Mian⁸ onward have grappled with how to categorize this so-called Third Generation poetry into two or three trends. Michelle Yeh observes that the two-trend categorization and the three-trend taxonomy are consistent with each another. This thesis will follow the tripartite division which refers to the “roots-searching school” 寻根派, the “stream of life” 生活流, and the “stream of consciousness” 意识流.⁹ Despite significant differences in poetic views among the three trends, it has been generally acknowledged that Chinese poetry of the so-called Third Generation enacted a departure from the political ideology. Members of this generation either renounced the use of language as political rhetoric and focused on articulating private experience or embraced an aesthetic ideal and concentrated on exploring the literary potential within language. Zhai Yongming 翟永明, a prominent female poet and a chief figure of the stream-of-consciousness poets, according to Yeh, “focuses on the emotional and psychological world of the individual”¹⁰ in a quest for a poetic subjectivity from the political-literary orthodoxy. Zhai understands feminism as a political project and considers it inferior to the poetic ideal that transcends realistic experiences. She writes,

⁶ Yin Angui 尹安贵, “Shenghuo liu, yishi liu, liu xiang he fang?” 生活流, 意识流, 流向何方? [Stream of life, stream of consciousness, where are they flowing to?], *Shikan* 诗刊 8 (1987): 59-61.

⁷ Yu Cijiang 于慈江, “Menglongshi yu disandaishi: tuibianqi de shenke lüdong” 朦胧诗与第三代诗: 蜕变期的深刻律动 [Menglongshi and third-generation poetry: profound rhythms of transformation], *Wenxue pinglun* 文学评论 3 (1988): 94-102.

⁸ Xie Mian 谢冕, “Meili de dunyi: lun zhongguo hou xinshichao” 美丽的遁逸—论中国后新思潮 [Beautiful evasion: on the Chinese post-new wave], *Wenxue pinglun* 文学评论 6 (1988): 28-43.

⁹ See Yeh, 1992, 393; van Crevel, 81.

¹⁰ See Yeh, 1992, 394.

I am not a feminist, and so I am speaking about the possibility of “women’s” writing. Yet the embarrassing situation of women’s writing arises from the fact that there exists a hierarchical concept of distinction according to gender. Criticism of “women’s poetry” does not go beyond the same distinction in the political sense of the term. Judging from my own experiences, as an American woman writer used to say, “Only books dealing clearly with the problems of the female sex have been analyzed.”¹¹

我不是女权主义者，因此才谈到一种可能的“女性”的文学。然而女性文学的尴尬地位在于事实上存在着性别区分的等级观点。“女性诗歌”的批评仍然难逃政治意义上的同一指认。就我本人的经验而言，与美国女作家欧茨所感到的一样：“唯一受到分析的只是那些明确讨论女性问题的作品。”

In an essay entitled “Night Consciousness” 黑夜的意识 prefacing the poem cycle “Woman” 女人, Zhai distinguishes three possible forms of “women’s literature”—“feminine, lyrical sentimentality” 女子气的抒情感伤, “unconcealed feminism” 不加掩饰的女权主义, and “women’s literature” “女性”的文学, the last of which is based on a female consciousness to express female subjectivity.¹² Ironically, with the publication of the poem cycle “Woman,” accompanied by the essay “Night Consciousness” in 1986, Zhai’s intervention served as the catalyst for the scholarly debate on the concept of “women’s poetry” and its relation to a political

¹¹ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, “Zai tan ‘heiye yishi’ yu ‘nüxing shige’” 再谈“黑夜意识”与“女性诗歌” [More on the Subject of ‘Night Consciousness’ and ‘Women’s Poetry’], *Shi tansuo* 诗探索 1 (1995): 129. English translation by Philip Liddell from Jin Siyan and Philip Linddell, “Women’s Writing in Present-Day China,” *China Perspectives*, no. 45 (January – February 2003), 42.

¹² Zhai Yongming 翟永明, *Wancheng zhihou you zenyang* 完成之后又怎样 [What will it be like after all is done] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2014), 4. For more details on the definition of “female consciousness,” see Chapter One and Chapter Three.

criticism of feminism. This thesis begins with the exploration of the relationship between the idea of “women’s poetry” and literary feminism.

The idea of “women’s poetry” emerged in China in the mid-1980s. It is regarded as a feminist critical approach to women poets’ expression of gender consciousness and female subjectivity as a counter-discourse against the male-dominated establishment.¹³ Zhai’s poem cycle “Woman” and the essay “Night Consciousness” immediately drew the attention of Tang Xiaodu, a leading male poetry critic since the 1980s. In 1987, Tang published an article in the national journal *Shikan* 诗刊 [Poetry] entitled “Women’s Poetry: from Night to Day—On Zhai Yongming’s Poem Cycle ‘Woman’.”¹⁴ Since it came into print, this article has been considered to be the first work of scholarship on “women’s poetry” and of canonizing the concept of “women’s poetry” as a feminist paradigm for the study of contemporary Chinese women’s poetry since the mid-1980s.

This thesis, however, argues that the concept of “women’s poetry” emerged not as a feminist critical approach or a methodology for women poets to question gender values of the patriarchy, but as a new analytical method for the critic and a poetic strategy for the poet to dissolve the binary of form and content, which simultaneously reaffirmed the binary mode of the patriarchy. My analysis centers upon how the critic Tang Xiaodu and the poet Zhai Yongming appropriated the idea of “women’s poetry” in markedly different ways and how in doing so both of them carried out the mission of what I call “formal experimentation.” I use the term to refer to the situation in which the critic and the poet transformed the text into a space. In this space, Tang

¹³ Chen Xuguang 陈旭光, “Ningwang shiji zhijiao de qianye—Dangdai nüxing shige: taishi yu zhanwang yantaohui shuyao” 凝望世纪之交的前夜——“当代女性诗歌：态势与展望”研讨会述要 [Visions for the Future at the Turn of the Century: A Conference on Contemporary Women’s Poetry], *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣 5 (1995): 49-52.

¹⁴ Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, “Nüxing shige: cong heiye dao baizhou—du Zhai Yongming zhushi ‘Nüren’” 女性诗歌：从黑夜到白昼—读翟永明组诗《女人》 [Women’s Poetry: from night to day—On Zhai Yongming’s poem cycle “Woman”], *Shikan* 诗刊 3 (1987): 58-9 and 50.

promoted critical innovation that not only valued poetic form but also poetic function from a social perspective, and Zhai pursued poetic experimentation that accommodated poetic subject with poetic form. My reading of Tang's articles on Zhai's poems and his theory of poetry alongside Zhai's essays on poetics suggests that nesting in their prose is an implicit patriarchal stance: Building a sociocultural criticism on the idea of "women's poetry" and molding it into traditional formalist criticism, Tang essentializes the biological male-female divide and hints at the lower poetic value of gender-marked imagery; while registering female consciousness as both poetic subject and form, Zhai repudiates feminism and the feminist approach to women's poetry in her essays on the idea of "women's poetry."¹⁵ However, my reading of her poems indicates that feminist concerns are the chosen subject matter Zhai speaks on in varied formal structures. The contradictions manifested by the appropriation of the term "women's poetry" as revealed in my reading denote the contradictions employed by the critic and the poet to challenge the line between poetic form and poetic content.

Tang attempts to link feminist criticism to artistic formalism which actually arose from and has evolved in the patriarchal discursive establishment. This attempt belies the central feminist claim that women are historically and systematically oppressed and the oppression has been codified in literary texts and discourses. Tang's reading of Zhai Yongming's poems and his idea of "women's poetry" end up consolidating the patriarchal male-female binary, which undermines his efforts to advance the equal poetic importance of form and content. Zhai explicitly articulates that the idea of "women's poetry" is a poetic strategy that she proposed for cleansing herself of the former poetic subject and form.¹⁶ Zhai holds the view that when we talk

¹⁵ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, "Nüxing shige' yu shige zhong de nüxing yishi" "女性诗歌"与诗歌中的女性意识 ["Women's poetry" and female consciousness in poetry], *Shikan* 诗刊 6 (1989): 10-11.

¹⁶ Jeanne Hong Zhang, *The Invention of a Discourse: Women's Poetry from Contemporary China*, 67.

about whether a poem is feminist or non-feminist, we are referring to the subject of the poem rather than the form.¹⁷ In addition, the subject is not as significant as the form, as formal elements define the literariness of a poem and thus its significance.¹⁸ Zhai contradicts herself when she insists on the discrepancy between form and content even though she proposed previously that form and content are united under a mode of writing which is female-conscious. In an attempt to disassociate herself with feminism, Zhai renders her statement of the unity of form and content controversial. In addition, in order to propose her idea of “women’s poetry” as a poetic strategy for women poets to prove the aesthetic value of their works, Zhai perpetuates an aesthetic value system which has long subordinated women’s writing to male supremacy.

My analysis is focused on the initiators of the term “women’s poetry,” but it brings to light the possibilities to revisit contemporary women poets and their poetry for any blindness to or misreading of the texts and contexts. My elucidation of the paradox sheds light on the uncritical deployment of Western feminist criticism for the analysis of contemporary Chinese women’s poetry. But, most importantly, I intend to demonstrate that the unfortunate reinforcement of the patriarchal ideology during the construction of “women’s poetry” as an anti-patriarchal critical approach and the inconsistency of Zhai’s prose and poetry register the relentless imposition of the patriarchy.

Chapter One “Women’s Poetry and Its Historical Context” attempts to articulate the inherent hierarchy of critical forms and the paradox of the allegedly anti-patriarchal stance of the concept of “women’s poetry.” I examine how poetry critics used the terms such as “female consciousness,” “female subjectivity,” and “femininity” to identify a “new” tradition of women’s poetry that proclaims the oppression of women and how such an effort contradicts the notion of

¹⁷ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, “Zai tan ‘heiye yishi’ yu ‘nüxing shige,’” 129.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

patriarchy as a historical presence. Critics, poets, and editors strive in a collective manner to project onto Zhai Yongming the image of a feminist and to bring about a new tradition of women's poetry. Such a combined effort to separate women's poetry from Zhai onward from its precedents can only sidestep the problems persisting in the critical tradition that valorize differences and prioritize one over the other. Tang Xiaodu's articles on the work of Shu Ting 舒婷 and Ma Lihua 马丽华 are read to reveal that Tang, the initiator of the concept of "women's poetry," treats the poetry of the two female poets differently from that of Zhai Yongming. The idea of "difference" is implemented to conceptualize a "female consciousness" distinct from male perception in Tang's interpretation of "Woman." Unfortunately, this approach emphasizing "difference" essentializes the biological male-female divide and hints at the lower poetic value of gender-marked imagery. Lastly, Zhai Yongming's essay "Night Consciousness" is examined to demonstrate critics' narrow view of her inconsistent attitude towards "femininity," which encourages me to reflect on the larger implications of the limitations of the poet.

Chapter Two, "'Women's Poetry' as a Critical Strategy," argues that Tang's making of a formal language to articulate women's poetry leads to the growth of a feminist poetic critical practice in which he himself does not in fact engage. His endeavor to demonstrate the consistency of arguments in his two articles betrays the fact that he adopts the concept of "women's poetry" to change a contemporary critical culture that was unable to conjure new approaches. My examination shows that Tang intends to mold the critical approach of "women's poetry" into the traditional formalist criticism as a way to refute the binary of form and content, but this new method of reading poetry only results in reinforcing the binary mode of the patriarchy. I examine his articles "Women's Poetry: from Night to Day—On Zhai Yongming's

Poem Cycle ‘Woman’”¹⁹ and “Who Is Zhai Yongming”²⁰ alongside Zhai’s poem cycle “Woman.” His first article on Zhai’s poem cycle “Woman” demonstrates his effort to build a sociocultural criticism on the idea of “women’s poetry” and mold it into traditional formalist criticism. This article is hailed for having advanced a feminist paradigm for the study of Chinese women’s poetry. Rather ironically, Tang acknowledged, ten years later, in his second critical article on Zhai’s poetry, that he should be faulted for the binary model on which he based his idea of a critical approach of “women’s poetry” in his previous essay. More ironically, the second article does not focus on re-examining the anti-patriarchal implications of the poem from a real anti-patriarchal stance, but it elaborates at length on how it echoes the critical approach adopted in the former article. In the second article, Tang places considerable emphasis on the text and assigns a low status to the critical lens of “women’s poetry.” This approach presupposes formal criticism as the principal interpretive method to guarantee the supremacy of the text and remains firmly planted on the ground of patriarchal suppression upon women and their works. Moreover, Zhai’s poem cycle “Woman” does not address itself to the critique of male dominance as claimed by Tang, but, coincidentally, maps a territory for exhibiting how poetry as an art of metaphysics overshadows the success of patriarchal oppression. In an attempt to address the paradox about the concept of “women’s poetry,” this chapter arrives at the conclusion that Tang’s reading of Zhai Yongming’s poems and his idea of “women’s poetry” reinforce the patriarchal male-female binary. Tang’s methodology has been uncritically endorsed by some of his peers as well as younger generation critics to analyze contemporary Chinese women’s poetry. This chapter strives to initiate a conversation with future scholarship about revisiting

¹⁹ Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, “Nüxing shige: cong heiye dao baizhou,” 58-9 and 50.

²⁰ Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, “Shui shi Zhai Yongming” 谁是翟永明? [Who Is Zhai Yongming], *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论 5 (2005): 25-26.

contemporary Chinese women poets and their poetry for any blindness to or misreading of the texts and contexts.

Chapter Three “‘Women’s Poetry’ as a Poetic Strategy” examines how Zhai appropriates the idea of “women’s poetry” to pursue a poetic ideal that fosters a sense of what to write and how to write it. It goes on to contemplate how, in her two additional essays on the concept of “women’s poetry,” Zhai marks a boundary between her poetry and feminism. Zhai understands literary feminism as a “political” criticism that neglects the aesthetic value of the text itself. However, elevating the value system of aesthetic criticism to the status of a divine absolute, Zhai unfortunately promotes the status quo where the operation of literature has long been studied within the male value system under the ideological umbrella of aesthetic analysis. I also work to decode two of Zhai’s poems²¹ which have not heretofore been interpreted from a feminist perspective, and share a thematic concern about technology and civilization. The purpose is to present the notion that Zhai’s poetry may not set out to prove the validity of feminism but maps a territory for deconstructing the patriarchal imposition on the inferiority of femininity. I aim to understand the ways in which Zhai’s paradoxical intervention speaks not of her rejection of the so-called feminine tradition but her resistance to oppression. In this sense, Zhai engages with the political project of literary feminism through her asserted distance from it. This chapter comes to the conclusion that the inconsistency in Zhai’s prose and poetry speaks to the challenges the poet confronts from the patriarchal thinking about literature and gender and the vicious circle that guards the stability of a patriarchy-imprinted poetic tradition, which goes beyond what Lydia H.

²¹ “Lightly Injured People, Gravely Wounded City” 轻伤的人，重伤的城市；“Envisioning the Future” 想未来

Liu has observed: “a work of fiction always speaks for itself and what it says does not necessarily coincide with the author’s private opinion.”²²

This thesis is intended to delineate the paradoxes surrounding the idea of “women’s poetry” and note its limitations. Its aim is to argue for a stronger sense of women’s poetry that attempts to break free of the binary confines of gender and gendering.

²² Lydia H. Liu, “The Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature: Negotiating Feminisms across East/West Boundaries,” *Genders*, no. 12, (Winter 1991): 41.

Chapter One “Women’s Poetry” and Its Historical Context

Chinese politics has historically attached importance to Chinese literature. Literary writing was the major tested skill in Chinese Imperial examinations which were a civil service examination system in Imperial China for selecting state officials and ensuring a common knowledge of the classics and literary style among them. The politicization of Chinese literature became the dominant mode of literary expression in modern China and literature became the means to a political end. In 1938, the Chinese Communist Party established the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Arts in Yan’an to educate people in literature, fine arts, music, and drama. In 1942, the Communist Party initiated the Yan’an Rectification Movement, the first ideological mass movement to coerce the other leaders of the Chinese Communist Party to support Mao Zedong and consolidate Mao’s leadership within the Party. The Forum on Literature and Art, part of the large-scale Rectification Movement, was organized in May 1942. Mao Zedong hosted three meetings of the Forum. After the Forum, Mao’s speeches were edited and published as *Talks at the Yan’an Forum on Literature and Art*.²³ These talks disciplined literature and art and indoctrinated writers into a set of political beliefs to serve the revolutionary cause as effectively as possible. Starting from the 1942 Yan’an Forum, there was endless imposition of the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party on literary writing.²⁴ The reform of literature and art to promote

²³ For a thorough study of the Talks and their significance as a literary standard for 35 years, see Bonnie S. McDougall, *Mao Zedong’s “Talks at the Yan’an Conference in Literature and Art”: A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary*, Michigan Papers in Chinese Studies, vol. 39 (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies; University of Michigan, 1980).

²⁴ van Crevel provides an outline of the political events which demanded writers to create literature and art to serve the revolutionary cause. See van Crevel, 11.

political ideology culminated during the period of the so-called Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution 无产阶级文化大革命 (1966-1976).²⁵ Regarding literary and art criticism across these periods, “political criteria must overrule artistic ones.”²⁶ However, the political thaw of 1978 after the rise of Deng Xiaoping radically changed the climate of Chinese literature. Between early 1985 and the crackdown on the student movement in Tiananmen Square in 1989, there was a continual sequence of intense intellectual debates in the realm of cultural production, which is commonly referred to as “High Cultural Fever.”²⁷ The intellectual “freedom” and “creativity” was the major topic of the discussions.²⁸ Writers were seeking new forms of expressing literature’s departure from official Communist ideology. Literary critics tried to construct new concepts to understand such autonomy and subjectivity of the work of art. Li Tuo’s idea of “pure literature” was one of the monumental critical concepts in the period, which embodied the desire for individualism and self-expression in literary writing.²⁹ In the meantime, large-scale translation and the introduction of Western works provided the Chinese intellectual market with modes of artistic experiment.³⁰

What happens when literary feminism interacts with contemporary Chinese poetry, or rather, what happens to Chinese poetry and poetics when they confront feminist criticism,

²⁵ It was a movement launched in 1966 by Chairman Mao Zedong and terminated by the death of Mao in September 1976 and the downfall of the “Gang of Four” shortly thereafter. For a detailed scholarly treatment of the Cultural Revolution, see Roderick MacFarquhar and Michael Schoenhals, *Mao’s Last Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

²⁶ van Crevel, *Language Shattered*, 7.

²⁷ For elaborated analysis of the cultural discussion in the mid-1980s, see Wang Jing, *High Culture Fever: Politics, Aesthetics, and Ideology in Deng’s China* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1996). As Wang Jing points out, among the heated cultural debates is the fever for new methodologies in 1985 (38). The discussion of a reform of literary criticism which is analyzed in Chapter Two of this thesis was part of the large-scale cultural discussion in mid-1980s.

²⁸ Zhang Xudong, *Chinese Modernism in the Era of Reforms: Cultural Fever, Avant-Garde Fiction, and the New Chinese Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 36.

²⁹ Li Tuo 李陀 and Ling Jing 李静, “Manshuo ‘chun wenxue—Li Tuo fangtan lu” 漫说“纯文学”—李陀访谈录 [On “pure literature”—An interview with Li Tuo], *Shanghai wenxue* 上海文学 3 (2001): 4-15.

³⁰ Zhang Xudong, 35. For a history of the poetic climate since the 1950s and the emergence of Misty and post-Misty poetry or what Michel Yeh calls “experimental poetry”, see van Crevel, *Language Shattered*.

especially in the context of the mid-1980s' valorization of depoliticization? If we can agree that the concept of "women's poetry" has evolved since the mid-1980s when literary feminism was introduced into Chinese literary cycles, what are the controversies over the equivalence of "women's poetry" and feminist poetics? If tradition is constructed as patriarchal, is the discourse on "women's poetry" a critique of that tradition or is it constructed tacitly as endorsing binary categories of aesthetics / politics and the feminist / the feminine? This chapter ventures to answer these questions. I draw on He Guimei's sketch of the introduction of literary feminism into Chinese critical cycles since the mid-1980s.³¹ By demonstrating how critics differentiate the "non-political" feminisms from the "political" ones and favor the former over the latter, I attempt to articulate the inherent hierarchy of critical forms and the paradox of the purported anti-patriarchal stance of the concept of "women's poetry." I analyze how the translation of the work of feminism effects a reconfiguration of the normative state discourse of gender equality—an official construct of equality at the expense of sexual differentiation, and how, ironically, concerns of difference cause the conceptualization of "women's poetry" to fall victim to its own good intentions. I examine how poetry critics use terms such as "female consciousness," "female subjectivity," and "femininity" to identify a "new" tradition of women's poetry that claims that women are oppressed and how such an effort contradicts the notion of patriarchy as a historical presence. Tang Xiaodu's articles on the verse of Shu Ting 舒婷 and Ma Lihua 马丽华 are read to reveal that Tang, the initiator of the concept of "women's poetry," treats the poetry of the two female poets differently from that of Zhai Yongming 翟永明. Tang does not approach the work of Shu Ting and Ma Lihua from an anti-patriarchal perspective. However, Zhai's poem cycle

³¹ He Guimei 贺桂梅, "Dangdai nüxing wenxue piping de yige lishi lunkuo" 当代女性文学批评的历史轮廓 [The History of Literary Criticism of Contemporary Women's Literature], *Jiefangjun yishuxueyuan xuebao* 解放军艺术学院学报 2 (2009): 17-28.

“Woman” is read as the breeding ground of the concept of “women’s poetry” which, as Tang asserts, is a feminist poetics.³² The idea of “difference” is appropriated to conceptualize a “female consciousness” distinct from male perception in Tang’s interpretation of “Woman.” Unfortunately, this appropriation of the notion of “difference” inadvertently essentializes the biological male-female divide and implies that gender-marked imagery is of lower poetic value.³³ Tang fails to flesh out a compelling notion of “women’s poetry” as anti-patriarchal due to this inadequate conceptualization of gender difference.³⁴ Such failure appears to be more rightly expected when his emphasis on “difference” in the approach to the work of female poets preceding Zhai’s is considered. I aim to argue that the effort to separate women’s poetry from Zhai onward from its predecessors can only sidestep the problems persisting in the critical tradition that valorize differences and privilege one over the other. Poetry critics are concerned with feminist poetics, but they call into question the “new” women’s poetic tradition, which is established by breaking with the tradition, negatively marked as feminine or political. Lastly, Zhai Yongming’s essay “Night Consciousness” is examined to demonstrate how critics have narrowly understood Zhai’s inconsistent attitude towards “femininity,” which encourages me to reflect on the larger implications of the limitations of this poet. I attempt to demonstrate that these limitations register the traces of patriarchal constraint upon women poets in general.

³² Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, “Nüxing shige: cong heiye dao baizhou,” 58-9 and 50.

³³ Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993) has suggested that the easy identification of women with biology is problematic.

³⁴ See Chapter Two of this thesis for a discussion of how Tang fails to justify the concept of “women’s poetry” due to his ill-conceived definitions of “female consciousness” and “female subjectivity.”

1.1 Politics and Literary Feminism

The translation of feminist works began in 1983.³⁵ Feminist literary criticism in the Chinese context emerged with the translation of English language scholarship of feminist theory.³⁶ Influential translations included Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1986, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1988, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Mary Eagleton's *Feminist Literary Theory*, and Toril Moi's *Sexual / Textual Politics* in 1989, and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* in 1999.³⁷ As is observed by He Guimei, among these six major works of feminism, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* is most relevant to literature and literary criticism, but it was the last to be translated.³⁸ The reason for the late introduction of Millett's work probably stems from the fact that Millett's criticism places gender issues in literary texts into politics 把男/女两性的关系纳入‘政治’范畴, which was perceived as being too aggressive and was unacceptable to the critical establishment at the time 这对于以‘两性和谐’为理想的中国批评界, 显得过于激进.³⁹ He also claims that from the translator's introductory remarks on the book, it is also reasonable to assume that *Sexual Politics* was translated to show that it is of lower critical value in the Chinese context.⁴⁰

Interestingly, Chinese academia divides feminism into feminist politics and non-political feminist theory and privileges the latter over the former. As He explains, whether or not a feminist work is received in the Chinese context depends on whether it falls into the category of

³⁵ Chen Houcheng 陈厚诚 and Wang Ning 王宁, *Xifang dangdai wenxue piping zai Zhongguo* 西方当代文学批评在中国 [Contemporary Western Literary Criticism in the Chinese Context] (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 2000), 423.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 424.

³⁷ Chen Houcheng and Wang Ning, 427-8; He Guimei, 22.

³⁸ He Guimei, 22. My point here is not to prove or disprove He's judgment on the relevance of feminist works to literature or literary criticism. Rather, He's observation and summary of the introduction of feminist literary theory help explain the bias that creeps into the practice of feminist criticism in the Chinese context.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

non-political theory or not. Critics in the Chinese context strive to split feminism into feminist politics and feminist literary theory, which inadvertently justifies the hierarchy of the non-political over the political. The consequence of this defense of non-political aesthetic criticism is that the critical modes and concepts cultivated in the patriarchal culture will be firmly in control of literary studies. The anti-patriarchal stance of literary feminism in the Chinese context is thus softened.

Rather ironically, literary feminism in the West has been deemed “merely academic” and, thus, politically marginal.⁴¹ Feminist critics reflect how ardent the suspicions are that literary feminism could be political and justify its status within the domain of political action itself. Feminist works which are judged to be political and thereby unfit to serve as a critical reservoir to be drawn upon by critics in the Chinese context are not actually viewed in the same way in the West. Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, which is discarded as unsuitable to the Chinese context, has been cited by Western critics as a revolutionary example of feminist criticism that proves itself in a political action.⁴² In other words, literary feminism sets out to prove that there is an unacknowledged politics at work in the effort to reconsider the content of the literary canon, to question the aesthetic criteria of literature, and to unveil the bias of sexism across literary texts by men and by women. Literary feminism shed its subaltern status by showing that the academy is a site of political activity where feminism interrogates and alters the institutional power structure. Being political is a central part of feminism’s literary strategy. Diana Fuss avers that “it is difficult to imagine a *non-political* feminism, politics emerges as feminism’s essence.”⁴³

⁴¹ Ellen Rooney, “The Literary Politics of Feminist Theory,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. Ellen Rooney (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 73-95.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 76-77; He, 22.

⁴³ Diana Fuss, “Reading Like a Feminist,” in *The Essential Difference*, eds. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 112.

Having said that, while they have a different attitude toward the politics of feminist literary theory, literary critics in the Chinese context and feminist critics in the West share the concern that political interpretations of stereotypical sexual roles in literary texts have not been acknowledged as legitimate criticism by the canonical literary paradigm. In the introduction to *Sexual Politics*, Millett gives voice to this concern:

It has been my conviction that the adventure of literary criticism is not restricted to a dutiful round of adulation, but is capable of seizing upon the larger insights which literature affords into the life it describes, or interprets, or even distorts. This essay, composed of equal parts literary and cultural criticism, is something of an anomaly, a hybrid, possibly a new mutation altogether. I have operated on the premise that there is room for a criticism which takes into account the larger cultural context in which literature is conceived and produced. Criticism which originates from literary history is too limited in scope to do this; criticism which originates in aesthetic consideration, “New Criticism,” never wished to do so.⁴⁴

Ellen Rooney comments that “Millett’s introduction seems less concerned that her book’s literary analyses may not be considered sufficiently political than that her political interpretations be acknowledged as criticism by an academy still wedded to the New Criticism and effusive, celebratory prose.”⁴⁵ Literary feminism sets out to prove that it is literarily and politically valuable in a way that supersedes the authority of the New Criticism as an aesthetic criterion of literary text and the stereotyped structure of women’s roles in society which become systematized in literary texts.

⁴⁴ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), xii.

⁴⁵ Ellen Rooney, “The Literary Politics of Feminist Theory,” 77.

Nevertheless, the lack of enthusiasm for political aspects of feminism and the willingness to abide by the critical paradigm as it evolved in the patriarchal culture among literary critics in the Chinese context confirm, in Rey Chow's words, "the complete efficacy of patriarchal ideology."⁴⁶ Literary criticism in the Chinese context was intended to correct the stereotypical sexual bias in literature by means of adopting literary feminist theory from the West. However, in an attempt to disassociate itself from politics, literary feminism in the Chinese context runs the risk of reinforcing the binary mode of patriarchal thought. On the one hand, it hazards a degree of acquiescence to the hierarchy of the traditional formalist appreciation of literature over political interpretations. On the other hand, primarily targeting at the state discourse of gender equality, literary feminism in the Chinese context could at best, as argued by previous scholarship, expose limitations of feminist literary theory by revealing its failure to accommodate a variation that "not only attests to heightened awareness of women as a collective force of resistance but to a significant breakaway from the totalizing discourse of official feminism."⁴⁷ What I am trying to say is this: Instead of adopting this critical language of "difference" and "diversity" as an unproblematic guideline in our judgment of Chinese literature, shouldn't we perhaps be wary of quelling challenges to the authority of this approach? What is implied in this type of critical argument is the view that "socialism and patriarchy exist in stable harmony in the People's Republic in the 1980s."⁴⁸ Analyzing how Chinese women writers initiate a departure from a "political" feminism that "posits the equality between men and women

⁴⁶ Rey Chow, "Virtuous Transactions: A Reading of Three Stories by Ling Shuhua," *Modern Chinese Literature* 4: 1 and 2 (Spring and Fall 1988): 79.

⁴⁷ Lydia H. Liu, "The Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature: Negotiating Feminisms across East/West Boundaries," 26.

⁴⁸ Michael S. Duke, *Modern Chinese Women Writers: Critical Appraisals*, ed., Michael S. Duke (M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1989), vii.

by depriving the latter of *their* difference”⁴⁹ could enable contemporary critics to jump to the conclusion that literary feminism in the West overlooks the complexity of gender oppression within Post-Mao patriarchal society. However, patriarchy does not only refer to the state ideology of gender. This focus on one slice of the patriarchal construction in the Chinese context could have been unconsciously reinforcing the efficacy of patriarchal ideology.

Assertion of difference can lead to preferential acceptance of the so-called second-wave feminist theory which focuses on female experience and female uniqueness, presenting them as empowering. As He Guimei observes, although post-structuralist feminist works were translated and included in *Contemporary Feminist Criticism*, an anthology edited by Zhang Jingyuan 张京媛 in 1992, what has influenced the practice of Chinese feminist criticism are the translations that focus on the expression of female experience and the essence of a female identity.⁵⁰ I am not arguing that we should privilege the insights of post-structuralist feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, which treat “woman” as a discursive category. Rather, my concern is that feminist criticism in the Chinese context may not well serve the purpose of exposing the sham of patriarchal structure if only theories which meet some predetermined condition, in this case, non-political, are borrowed and applied. In order to highlight the difference between men and women, contemporary Chinese critics subject the work of women writers to close stylistic analysis and look for recurring traits. While agreeing that this approach

⁴⁹ Lydia H. Liu, “Invention and Intervention: The Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature,” in *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*, ed., Tani E. Barlow (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 35.

⁵⁰ He, “Dangdai nüxing wenxue piping de yige lishi lunkuo,” 22. Zhang Jingyuan 张京媛, *Dangdai nüxing zhuyi wenxue piping* 当代女性主义文学批评 [Contemporary Feminist Criticisms] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1992). Western feminist works selected in Zhang’s anthology are “A Criticism of Our Own: Autonomy and Assimilation in Afro-American and Feminist Literary Theory” by Elaine Showalter, “The Mirror and the Vamp: Reflections of Feminist Criticism” by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “Feminism and Critical Theory” by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Feminism and Deconstruction” by Mary Poovey, “Women’s Time” by Julia Kristeva, “Sexual Difference” by Luce Irigaray, “Feminism and the Psychic” by Jacqueline Rose, “Inquiry into Femininity” by Michele Montrelay, and “Patriarchy, Kinship, and Women as Exchange Objects” by Juliet Mitchell.

is worth exploration, I am partial to the view that it is not possible to say whether these recurring traits should be ascribed to a truly feminist undertaking against the patriarchal oppression in the literary history of women's writing. The emphasis on a unique and independent female voice could have been masking the fact that the female gender has long been exploited on the grounds of its difference from the male. Denial of difference can in some circumstances undermine the foundation sexual difference provides for unfolding the historical nurturing of what it is to be a woman. However, preoccupation with the "difference" reading of women's writings could risk cementing the authority of this approach and ensuring that its conformity to patriarchal customs goes unexamined. This seems especially to be the case in terms of the controversies over the equivalence of the concept of "women's poetry" and feminist poetics.

1.2 The Concept of "Women's Poetry" and Literary Feminism

The editorial department of the journal *Shi Tansuo* 诗探索 summoned some of the most celebrated poets and prominent critics who were in Beijing to a conference on the concept of "women's poetry" in 1995.⁵¹ A controversy arose over the scope of the term "women's poetry,"

⁵¹ Chen Xuguang 陈旭光, "Ningwang shiji zhijiao de qianye—Dangdai nüxing shige: taishi yu zhanwang yantaohui shuyao" 凝望世纪之交的前夜——“当代女性诗歌：态势与展望”研讨会述要 [Visions for the Future at the Turn of the Century: A Conference on Contemporary Women's Poetry]. *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣 5 (1995): 49-52. Most previous scholarship on women's poetry begins with uncritical restatements of the critic Tang Xiaodu's 唐晓渡 explanation of the term, cites Lü Jin's 吕进 categorization of three different kinds of women's poetry, and concludes with a consensus that "women's poetry" is applied to the poetry which is written by female poets and which evinces a strong sense of "female consciousness" that casts doubt on the patriarchal perceptions of female images. This chapter, however, starts with a rereading of the controversy on the concept of "women's poetry" which arose among critics and poets during a panel discussion on the topic. The justification for this is that the opinions critics and poets expressed about the concept of "women's poetry" in the conference are shared among critical articles published before and after the conference was held. See also Lü Jin 吕进, "Nüxing shige de sanzong wenben" 女性诗歌的三种文本 [Three categories of women's poetry], *Shi tansuo* 诗探索 4 (1999): 139-47; Liu Lingyan 刘玲燕, "Zhongguo dangdai nüxing shige yantaohui huiyi zongshu" "中国当代女性诗歌"研讨会会议综述 [A Seminar on Contemporary Chinese Poetry], *Journal of Hainan Normal University (Social Science)* 海南师范大学学报 (社会科学版) 3 (2011): 112.

which divided the participants into two groups. One group represented by critics Liu Fuchun 刘福春, Wang Jianzhao 汪剑钊, and Chen Xuguang 陈旭光 asserted that the term “women’s poetry” 女性诗歌 is an abbreviation for feminist poetry 女性主义诗歌, which is applied only to the poetry of feminist poets such as Zhai Yongming 翟永明, Yi Lei 伊蕾, and Tang Yaping 唐亚平.⁵² The other group, including the poet Li Xiaoyu 李小雨 and critics Wu Sijing 吴思敬, Cui Weiping 崔卫平, and Michel Hockx 贺麦晓 claims that the term “women’s poetry” should not exclude the work of female poets as celebrated yet not acclaimed for their feminist tendencies.⁵³ In reading these seemingly opposed views on the scope of “women’s poetry,” it is easy to hypothesize that in both of these analyses of the relationship between women and poetry, women are proclaimed to be innately literary, although some are innately literary feminists. It turns out that the disagreement revolves not around identifying a type of “female poetry” that is prominently based on the so-called literary criteria, but centers on differentiating between “feminist” and “non-feminist” female poets. Rather ironically, “women’s poetry” has been formulated as a critical concept, but when reflecting on any exacting definition of the term, poetry critics have raised troubling questions about the relationship between the gender of the poet and the subject of the poetry, rather than about the critical attitudes toward female subjects in a variety of authors. This helps to explain the ways in which the concept of “women’s poetry” remains fundamentally under the influence of patriarchal ideology.

When speculating about defining a “feminist literary criticism,” Annette Kolodny asks whether it means “(1) any criticism written by a woman, no matter what the subject; (2) any criticism written by a woman about a man’s book which treats that book from a ‘political’ or

⁵² Ibid., 49.

⁵³ Ibid., 50.

‘feminist’ perspective; and (3) any criticism written by a woman about a woman’s book or about female authors in general.”⁵⁴ Kolodny’s foremost objective is to make sure that feminist criticism itself should be gender-marked. In other words, feminist criticism assumes that there is something unique about women’s writing and puts its approach to that writing under examination. However, poetry critics in the Chinese context take a different tack. When applied to the study of poetry, the concept of “women’s poetry” is used in the contexts where only the work of women poets is analyzed. Poetry critics assume the liability of the concept of “women’s poetry” in exposing the ways in which female experience is expressed in poetry and call women’s writing into question.⁵⁵ The paradox is that the concept of “women’s poetry” is not considered as something in development and open to question. Consequently, in an attempt to have the concept of “women’s poetry” adequately defined, terms such as “female uniqueness,” “female consciousness,” “female subjectivity,” and “feminine poetry” are invoked by critics. However, these terms are either vaguely hinted at or inadequately explained. In spite of the attempt to expose the sexist bias in the state ideology of gender equality, the invention of “women’s poetry” leaves one with the uncomfortable sense that the underlying premise of this critical approach is biological determinism. In addition, in order to justify itself, the concept of “women’s poetry” assumes that there is such a thing as female consciousness and that women

⁵⁴ Annette Kolodny, “Some Notes on Defining a ‘Feminist Literary Criticism,’” in *Feminist Criticism: Essays on Theory, Poetry and Prose*, eds., Cheryl L. Brown and Karen Olson (Metuchen, N.J. and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1978), 37.

⁵⁵ See Jeanne Hong Zhang, *The Invention of a Discourse: Women’s poetry from Contemporary China*, 9. As Zhang summarizes, “There is no consensus on the definition of women’s poetry. Roughly speaking, there are two different definitions. The broader one, as Lü Jin suggests, amalgamates different authors crossing generations, geographies, and writing styles, on the basis of their gender. The narrower one implied by poetry-critics like Tang Xiaodu, Chen Xuguang and Li Zhen pinpoints a body of ‘confessional’ texts by women poets, which have an overtly feminist slant. According to the latter categorization, if a woman poet writes in a more conventional fashion or from a gender-neutral standpoint, she is not a ‘woman poet,’ and her poetry is not ‘women’s poetry.’”

writers must evolve a style appropriate to that consciousness.⁵⁶ In this sense, the concept of “women’s poetry” is aimed at the work of several women poets since the mid-1980s which is claimed to embody such a female consciousness.⁵⁷ Poetry written by preceding women poets and the work by male poets coming before and after the invention of this concept are excluded from analysis. In this attempt to draw lines among women poets and between women poets and male poets, “women’s poetry” as a critical approach fails to unmask the subordination of women in society which is codified in literary texts by men and women and throughout history. Another ramification is that critical efforts are devoted to attaching negative labels to the work of women poets who came before the emergence of the concept of “women’s poetry.”

Women’s poetry since the mid-1980s has been frequently highlighted as an achievement of women’s literary independence from the male-dominated history of writing. The assumption on which this critical approach to “women’s poetry” is predicated is that women poets since then have cleansed their work of “feminine” traits that are evident in all previous women’s poetry.⁵⁸ This assumption ironically intimates that feminine poetry affirms women’s subordination and thus endorses the patriarchal ideas codified in the Chinese poetic tradition. In contrast, poetry

⁵⁶ In her influential article on feminist criticism, Josephine Donovan builds her argument by demonstrating the questionable assumption Virginia Woolf makes in *A Room of One’s Own*: “The fundamental assumption Woolf is making in this analysis is two-fold: one, that there is a female ‘mind,’ and, two, that there is or ought to be a feminine style tradition appropriate to that ‘mind.’” See Josephine Donovan, “Feminist Style Criticism,” in *Images of Women in Fiction Feminist Perspective*, ed., Susan Koppelman Cornillon (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972), 341.

⁵⁷ Some critics and poets hold the view that “women’s poetry” refers to poetry written by all “prominent” women poets, while the category of “feminist poetry” 女性主义诗歌 should be created to address the poetry written by Zhai Yongming and some of her peers which is claimed to be feminism-slanted (see Chen Xuguang 陈旭光, “Ningwang shiji zhijiao de qianye—Dangdai nüxing shige: taishi yu zhanwang yantaohui shuyao,” 50). This seemingly revisionist redefinition is in reality more problematic than helpful. Firstly, the underlying premise remains the differentiation between works by women poets. Secondly, there is a hierarchy of prominent and less prominent women poets based on some other ill-defined criteria. Lastly, the proposal for a category of “feminist poetry” assumes equally falsely that works of those so-called “feminist poets” as a group and individually have been thus directed and thematized, and that other general women’s poetry remains uninfluenced by the patriarchal culture.

⁵⁸ Lisa Lai-Ming Wong, “Liberation of Femininity? Women’s Poetry in Post-Mao China,” in *Gender, Discourse and the Self in Literature: Issues in Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong*, eds., Kwok-Kan Tam and Terry Siu-han Yip (The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2010), 92.

that fits in the category of “women’s poetry” is highly commended for displaying a strong sense of female subjectivity. This sense of subjectivity is what distinguishes feminine poetry and “women’s poetry” and also what contributes to the notion of “women’s poetry” as an anti-patriarchal approach to women’s poetry since the mid-1980s. My point, then, is that we must not merely qualify this assumption about the uniqueness of women’s poetry since the mid-1980s. Instead, I propose that we revisit scholarship on the “femininity” of Chinese women’s literature and begin not with assumptions but by asking questions about the relationship between femininity and patriarchy.

Femininity is easily and negatively associated by contemporary Chinese poetry critics with a mode of expression which is sentimental and emotional.⁵⁹ The goals are to single out these feminine characteristics for attack and contrast them with a “female consciousness” which is “calmly and firmly asserting her individuality with a sense of self-awareness and self-worth [that is] unique in the history of Chinese poetry.”⁶⁰ In Jeanne Hong Zhang’s monograph *The Invention of a Discourse: Women’s Poetry from Contemporary China*, only two pre-modern Chinese women poets—Cai Yan 蔡琰 and Li Qingzhao 李清照—are included for analysis. The book concludes that the poetics of these two poets fits well with the feminine tradition.⁶¹ This conclusion is reached by generally outlining these two poets’ biographical information and

⁵⁹ As Julia C. Lin and Nicholas Kaldis observe, “what has been associated with or defined as a ‘feminine’ quality or tradition in Chinese poetry has arisen out of a social and literary discourse thoroughly dominated by patriarchal values,” and what is referred to as “the ‘traditional feminine mode’ in Chinese poetry is largely a male construction.” See Julia C. Lin and Nicholas Kaldis, “Introduction,” in *Twentieth-Century Chinese Women’s Poetry: An Anthology*, edited and translated by Julia C. Lin (London: Routledge, 2015), xviii. However, in Wolfgang Kubin’s analysis of Shu Ting’s poetry, the use of the words “feminine” and “femininity” corresponds more closely to what has been referred to as “feminist” than to the “feminine tradition” in Chinese poetry. See Wolfgang Kubin, “Writing with Your Body: Literature as a Wound—Remarks on the Poetry of Shu Ting,” in *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*, edited by Tani E. Barlow, 137-50. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993.

⁶⁰ Julia Lin, “Women’s Voice in Modern China,” in *Woman and Literature in China*, eds., Anne Gerstlacher et al. (Bochum: Brockmeyer, 1985), 452.

⁶¹ Jeanne Hong Zhang, *The Invention of a Discourse: Women’s Poetry from Contemporary China*, 29.

superficially commenting on a tiny number of poems. Building on this assessment of Cai Yan and Li Qingzhao, Zhang further connects the work of the two pre-modern poets with that of three modern women poets. In her evaluation of Bin Xin 冰心, Zhang unreflectively reprises Julia Lin's comment that "the accent of Bing's verse is thoroughly feminine, not only in subject matter but also in technique."⁶² Zhang's assessment of Shu Ting 舒婷 is that "Shu's tone is akin to a feminine mode of self-expression in the same vein as Li Qingzhao and Bing Xin."⁶³ Zhang's treatment of Qiu Jin 秋瑾 is ambivalent but intriguing in a way that supports my proposition that the feminine is understood as negative and the exact opposite of the feminist. Zhang's ambivalence deserves a full quotation and careful examination:

Qiu Jin was the first influential feminist whose feminist ideas compelled her to write against the restraints of a feminine role. The above quoted song⁶⁴ may sound didactic, naïve, and excessively emotional to today's readers. However, according to Yan Chunde, Qiu Jin's works paved the way for the emergence of the "first-generation" women authors during the May Fourth Movement.⁶⁵

What is interesting in Zhang's conclusion with respect to Qiu Jin is that it seems Qiu does not accommodate the demands of an exclusively feminine reading. What I find helpful from Zhang's reading is not whether Qiu is feminist or not, but that Qiu's feminist ideas are interpreted as the source of artistic inspiration "against the restraints of a feminine mode." In this reading, femininity is something to be curbed and the feminist is a new poetics that breaks away from that

⁶² Ibid., 31.

⁶³ Ibid., 33.

⁶⁴ The song refers to Qiu Jin's poem "Mian nüquan ge" 勉女权歌 [A Song to Encourage the Pursuit of Women's Rights]

⁶⁵ Jeanne Hong Zhang, *The Invention of a Discourse: Women's Poetry from Contemporary China*, 31.

so-called feminine tradition. This interpretation draws a boundary between the feminine tradition and a “new” feminist tradition coined as a tradition of “women’s poetry.” Chinese women’s poetry is thus divided into two traditions, one before the invention of the concept of “women’s poetry,” and the other after. This division supports my hypothesis that the “difference” reading of two traditions of women’s poetry contradicts the understanding that “woman” is a historically created category. The causes of the contradiction are that women poets are thought to have a free choice over what they write, and their writing is considered to be immune to the authority of patriarchal ideology. Women poets are blamed for the feminine characteristics in their work, while the patriarchal system remains unscathed. Such contradictions exemplify the disagreement between the critical approach of “women’s poetry” and feminist methodology. Literary feminism traces how patriarchy rationalizes the difference of women from men in literary texts and how the mode of feminine expression might signify what is upheld by the patriarchal society.

I am not arguing that the concept of “women’s poetry” is invented to endorse patriarchal principles. What I am attempting to articulate is that in constructing the concept as an anti-patriarchal approach to Chinese women’s poetry, poetry critics inadvertently champion the cause of the patriarchy. They do this by pitting “feminine” against “feminism.” The last two sentences of Zhang’s comment on Qiu Jin appear to confirm my hypothesis. Zhang restates another critic’s assertion about the connection between Qiu Jin and women writers during the May Fourth Movement. Disapproving of the poems of Qiu as “didactic,” “naïve,” and “excessively emotional,” Zhang hastily relegates all women writers of the May Fourth period to the so-called feminine tradition. Zhang’s reading epitomizes the effort contemporary poetry critics devote to building a “feminist” poetics against a feminine tradition.

Zhang's interpretation echoes previous scholarship on the concept of "women's poetry." In his influential essay on the categorization of "women's poetry," Lü Jin 吕进 submits that Cai Yan, Xue Tao, Zhu Shuzhen, and Qiu Jin are all subservient to the male-centered poetry tradition 蔡琰、薛涛、朱淑真、秋瑾这些晶莹的名字似乎只是中国这个古老诗国的一种点缀，甚至是男性话语中心的古代诗歌的一种附庸。⁶⁶ Luo Zhenya 罗振亚, a leading critic on modern Chinese poetry, classifies Chinese women poets preceding Zhai Yongming as non-feminist poets due to an absence of female consciousness in their work.⁶⁷ Luo further claims that the publication of Zhai's poem cycle "Woman" prefaced by the essay "Night Consciousness" marks the beginning of feminist poetics in China 标志着具有鲜明的性别主体性的女性主义诗歌在中国正式诞生。⁶⁸ Zhang Qinghua 张清华, an influential scholar on contemporary Chinese literature, reiterates this criticism with particular respect to the Menglong poet Shu Ting: "poems of Shu Ting and others are fundamentally thematized around human destiny, rather than a complete and female independence and subjectivity" 在舒婷等人的诗中，表现最多和最根本的仍是对人对共同命运与权力的思考，而不是一种完整独立的女性立场。⁶⁹ Cui Weiping 崔卫平, one of the very few female poetry critics active during the period when the concept of "women's poetry" was heatedly discussed, compares Shu Ting to the "comrade" of men and labels her as sentimental, while acknowledging Zhai Yongming as a "mature woman."⁷⁰ The

⁶⁶ Lü Jin 吕进, "Nüxing shige de sanzong wenben," 139.

⁶⁷ Luo Zhenya 罗振亚, "Dangdai nüxingzhuyi shige lun" 当代女性主义诗歌论 [On contemporary feminist poetry], *Wenxue yu wenhua* 文学与文化 3 (2010): 124.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁶⁹ Zhang Qinghua 张清华, "Fuhuo de nüwa changgedangku—dangdai Zhongguo nüxingzhuyi de dansheng yu nüxingzhuyi shige" 复活的女娲长歌当哭—当代中国女性主义的诞生与女性主义诗歌 [Resurrected goddess Nü Wa venting anger by writing poetry: The emergence of Chinese feminism and feminist poetry], *Zhonghua nüzi xueyuan Shandong fenyuan xuebao* 中华女子学院山东分院学报 2 (1999): 43.

⁷⁰ Cui Weiping 崔卫平, "Dangdai nüxingzhuyi shige" 当代女性主义诗歌 [Contemporary feminist poetry], *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣 5 (1993): 45.

poetry of Zhai Yongming, Tang Yaping 唐亚平, Yi Lei 伊蕾 and others emerging since the mid-1980s is what germinated the concept of “women’s poetry” in China. This concept has evolved into a critical approach that situates these women poets in a feminist position in poetry writing. They are considered as different from earlier “feminine” poets for their conscious exploration of female subjectivity.

Constructing the characteristics of the feminine poetry as negative and conservative in its anti-patriarchal stance, critics attempt to identify qualities of female consciousness that are indicative of the anti-patriarchal poetics. Furthermore, these qualities of female consciousness are highlighted as the recurring traits of the work of those women poets who are associated with the concept of “women’s poetry.” In this way, the concept of “women’s poetry” is constructed as a normative anti-patriarchal poetics. However, poetry critics working on this critical approach of “women’s poetry” are not alert enough to their potential bias, which causes them to base the concept of “women’s poetry” on patriarchal grounds. Specifically, defining femininity as sentimental and emotional, which are normally deemed as resulting from feeling rather than reason, these critics ironically endorse the patriarchal hierarchy of reason over emotion.⁷¹ In addition, an insufficient review of the literature of “femininity” in Chinese fiction and the English language literature renders unacknowledged the assumption of femininity on which the concept of “women’s poetry” is founded.

In a discussion of the topic of *funü*, Wendy Larson surveys Chinese critical articles about women and literature from 1925 to 1935, the height of the Republican Era.⁷² Larson concludes

⁷¹ The patriarchy historically associates the emotional with the feminine and the rational with the masculine and prioritizes the latter. See Megan Boler, “Feminist Politics of Emotions and Critical Digital Pedagogies: A Call to Action,” *PMLA*, 2015 Oct., 130 (5): 1489-1496.

⁷² Wendy Larson, “The End of ‘*Funü Wenxue*’: Women’s Literature from 1925 to 1935,” in *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*, ed., Tani E. Barlow (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 58-73.

that women critics during that period formulate literature as essentially feminine and challenge the ideology that “good literature” should be theoretically established to devalue the lyrical and emotive.⁷³ In her reading of Ling Shuhua 凌叔华 and “a feminine style” [guixiupai] 闺秀派⁷⁴ literature, Rey Chow elaborates on how the patriarchal organization of society confines women to domesticity, how women writers attempt artistic representation of such consignment, how subjectivism, domesticity, triviality, and sentimentalism are disparaged as characteristics of a feminine mode of writing, and how this mode of writing fails to match the requirements of “great” literature.⁷⁵ Chow argues that the feminine mode of writing bears historical traces of women’s oppression and the critical tradition that naturalizes the inferiority of the feminine.⁷⁶

In her book *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women’s Poetry in America*, Alicia Suskin Ostriker asserts that literary criticism has long devalued women poets’ articulation of gendered experience and that expression of feminine confinement and constraint should be read as resistance to the authority of the tradition of masculine poetry disguised as “American poetry.”⁷⁷ Ostriker underscores the notion that femininity is a shared trait in the history of women’s poetry, which indicates that the dominant criticism relentlessly disparages women poets.

⁷³ Ibid., 59-63. “In reading essays which establish Chinese literature as feminine, it is easy to hypothesize that should ‘good literature’ be theoretically reconstructed to devalue the lyrical and emotive and then value social knowledge and engagement, the affinity of women with literature would disappear, and along with it this constructed ‘women’s literature’ would become a victim of this redefinition” (63).

⁷⁴ As a compliment, the term “guixiu” refers to a woman from a family of high social position and excellently educated. It later became the terminology of literary criticism to describe the characteristic of domestic femininity of the work of women writers.

⁷⁵ Rey Chow, “Virtuous Transactions: A Reading of Three Stories by Ling Shuhua,” in *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*, ed., Tani E. Barlow (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 90-105.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 92-93.

⁷⁷ Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women’s Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).

With the advent of modernism, some women began writing more openly of sexual passion, some became leading inventors of avant-garde form, some became social critics, and the general quality of women's poetry rose precipitously. Yet almost all this work continued to register the traces of feminine confinement and constraint; and, not coincidentally, the dominant criticism continued to disparage, neglect, and misread the woman poet.⁷⁸

The above-mentioned critics try to make clear how women writers chronicle a history of women's oppression in a feminine mode of writing. However, contemporary poetry critics divide women poets into feminine and feminist, and conveniently construct a critical concept of "women's poetry" that attributes the failure of most women poets to the limitations of femininity. This critical approach of "women's poetry" helps to reinforce the negative qualities of femininity which are historically determined by the patriarchal literary tradition. In this sense, the concept of "women's poetry" bolsters the stability of the patriarchal bias. To a certain extent, the concept of "women's poetry" rests on the idea of "difference." However, such a paradox of this "difference" reading of women poets shakes the very foundation of the critical approach of "women's poetry."

1.3 Tang Xiaodu and "Women's Poetry"

Tang Xiaodu, born in 1954 in Jiangsu, China, is a poetry critic and poet. He graduated from Nanjing University in 1981, and in the following year began to work as an editor at *Shikan* 诗刊, the most influential official journal of poetry and poetics in China. Tang had much contact with

⁷⁸ Ibid., 10.

most of China's prominent poets over the years in the post at *Shikan*. He helped to promote the work of poets in official circles through his critical essays published in official journals.

Acclaimed as one of the leading poetry critics in China since the 1980s, Tang has been a frequent guest at poetry conferences in the West since the 1990s.

The critic Tang Xiaodu's influential article "Women's Poetry: from Night to Day—On Zhai Yongming's Poem Cycle 'Woman'"⁷⁹ is touted as the first work of scholarship on the concept of "women's poetry" 以评论翟永明的组诗《女人》为契机，唐晓渡最早提出了当代诗学中的“女性诗歌”命题，⁸⁰ advancing a feminist paradigm for the study of Chinese women's poetry. However, Tang treats the poetry of Shu Ting 舒婷 and Ma Lihua 马丽华 differently from that of Zhai Yongming 翟永明. Shu Ting and Ma Lihua are two women poets who established their reputations as influential contemporary poets before Zhai was hailed as the first feminist poet. The "difference" approach to the work of women poets is adopted by Tang. Although the poetry of Shu and Ma is not disparaged as feminine, Tang does not view the poetry of Shu Ting and Ma Lihua as work that interrogates the patriarchal order.

Tang's article "The Lyrical in Shu Ting's Poems"⁸¹ was published before his influential article on the concept of "women's poetry." Tang's essay on Ma Lihua's poetry entitled "Inflorescence under the Sun"⁸² came out after his article on Zhai Yongming's "Woman."

⁷⁹ Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, "Nüxing shige: cong heiyeye dao baizhou," 58-9 and 50.

⁸⁰ Chen Zhongyi 陈仲义, "Ge'an chouyang: dangdai shixue qianyan de zuantan—jian yu lujin xiansheng shangque" 个案抽样：当代诗学前沿的钻探—兼与吕进先生商榷 [Critic Representatives: Investigations of Contemporary Poetics and Concurrent Discussion with Lǚ Jīn], *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论 2 (2006): 115.

See also Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, "Shui shi Zhai Yongming," 25-26. In this article, Tang states that his essay on Zhai Yongming's "Woman" initiates the concept of "women's poetry."

⁸¹ Wang Guangming 王光明 and Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, "Shu Ting shi de shuqing yishu" 舒婷诗的抒情艺术 [The lyrical in Shu Ting's poems], *Shi tansuo* 诗探索 1 (1984): 157-63.

⁸² Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, "Taiyang xia de huaxu" 太阳下的花序 [Inflorescence under the sun], *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论 6 (1987): 123-27.

Assuming that Tang was not exposed to feminist critical theory when he read Shu Ting's poetry,⁸³ why didn't Tang approach Ma's poetry from a feminist perspective? I am not proposing that women's poetry excludes analytical perspectives other than feminist criticism. However, if the concept of "women's poetry" is constructed as an anti-patriarchal critical approach, such an approach needs to make clear that what women have so far expressed in poetry is in one way or another patriarchal imposition. What they have been able to express is the result of the ongoing negotiation with the patriarchal literary criteria. Nevertheless, critics such as Tang analyze the work of women poets whom they find lacking in conscious exploration of female subjectivity according to predetermined "objective" standards of what counts as "true" and "great" poetry. This belief that true poetry is genderless and literary criteria are bias-free means that Tang's methodology for treating women poets differently does not recognize a tradition in which women poets belong. Therefore, the critical concept of "women's poetry" initiated by Tang fails to discuss the limitations and the strengths of a tradition of women's poetry which is marginalized by the tradition of so-called true poetry, a disguised form of masculine literary tradition. More on the paradox of "women's poetry" and Tang Xiaodu's reading of Zhai Yongming's poetry is to be discussed in detail in Chapter Two.

1.4 Zhai Yongming and "Women's Poetry"

Zhai Yongming is considered one of the most prominent female poets of Twentieth century China. She started writing poetry in 1980 and began to publish in 1982 with such famous poets as Bai Hua 柏桦, Huang Xiang 黄翔, Ouyang Jianghe 欧阳江河, and Zhong Ming 钟鸣 in the

⁸³ Wolfgang Kubin provides a perceptive reading of the poetry of Shu Ting from a feminist perspective. See Wolfgang Kubin, "Writing with Your Body: Literature as a Wound—Remarks on the Poetry of Shu Ting," in *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*, ed., Tani E. Barlow (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 137-50.

“underground” or “unofficial” poetry publications.⁸⁴ In 1986, Zhai published the poem cycle “Woman” prefaced by an essay entitled “Night Consciousness.” These writings kindled the debate on “women’s poetry” among poetry critics. Upon their publication, the poem cycle and the essay immediately captured the critical attention of Tang Xiaodu, who canonized the concept of “women’s poetry” as put forward by Zhai’s intervention and “Woman” as a feminist manifesto.

In the essay “Night Consciousness,” Zhai proposes a triadic mode of female-authored literature: “feminine, lyrical sentimentality” 女子气文学; “unconcealed feminism” 不加掩饰的女权主义; and “women’s literature” 女性的文学, the last of which is based on a woman’s consciousness to express female subjectivity.⁸⁵ Zhai categorizes women’s writing according to an order of poetic value. In Zhai’s view, true literature manages to convey a universal vision of human life. In Zhai’s categorization, feminine literature and feminist literature do not share a spiritual affinity for human destiny with true literature, and only women’s literature has the literary value to become true literature 在女子气—女权—女性这样三个高低不同的层次中, 真正具有文学价值的是后者.⁸⁶ In other words, Zhai’s idea of “women’s literature” is predicated on an assumption that true literature is the artistic representation of a universal experience. Zhai ranks the three modes in ascending order according to their distance from this criterion of true literature. As Zhai asserts, feminine literature is the lowest in the order, and “women’s literature” is at the top of the hierarchy. Zhai appears, as suggested earlier, to adopt a

⁸⁴ Maghiel van Crevel, “Zhai Yongming,” in *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Women: The Twentieth Century 1912-2000*, ed., Lily Xiao Hong Lee and A. D. Stefanowska (M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 2003), 672-78. The journals where Zhai Yongming published her poems are *Jintian* 今天 and *Cishenglin* 次生林.

⁸⁵ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, “Heiye de yishi” 黑夜的意识 [Night consciousness], in *Wancheng zhihou you zenyang* 完成之后又怎样 [What will it be like after all is done] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2014), 4.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

patriarchal mode on women's literature. Assuming a predetermined gender-neutral literary criterion of literature, Zhai predicates her definition of "women's literature" on a patriarchal foundation where true literature is believed to be genderless. Prioritizing what she calls "women's literature" and disparaging the so-called feminine and feminist literature, Zhai embraces an aesthetic ideal of "universality." This constructed "universality" of "women's literature" trivializes the gender bias of literary history. To borrow Shu-mei Shih's words, literature was imagined as "a pristine arena where utopian, aesthetic ideals could be realized and relations of power neutralized."⁸⁷ Zhai's understanding of the feminine, the feminist, and true literature in her essay "Night Consciousness" is marked with the patriarchal bias of aesthetics. I do not argue, as some critics did, that "a work of fiction always speaks for itself and what it says does not necessarily coincide with the author's private opinion."⁸⁸ Rather, this inconsistency between Zhai's prose and poetry, which is to be addressed in Chapter Three, compels me to reflect on the larger implications of feminist poetics in the Chinese context through the "limitations" of Zhai's prose.

Zhai's rejection of feminism has been interpreted as her rejection of the political ideology of literature.⁸⁹ In conceptualizing a critical approach of "women's poetry" which, as suggested earlier, is non-political, contemporary poetry critics conveniently present Zhai as the spokesperson of the critical idea. They view her as the leader of the movement and advocate for "women's

⁸⁷ Shu-mei Shih, *The Lure of the Modern: Writing Modernism in Semicolonial China, 1917-1937* (University of California Press, 2001), 15.

⁸⁸ Lydia H. Liu, "The Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature: Negotiating Feminisms across East/West Boundaries," 41.

⁸⁹ See Jeanne Hong Zhang, *The Invention of a Discourse: Women's Poetry from Contemporary China*, 15: "The words *feminist* and *feminism* arouse negative feelings in the contemporary Chinese literary context because of their political connotations." For more on literary critics' understanding of women writers' reluctance to be associated with the label of feminism, see Tani E. Barlow, "Theorizing Woman: *Funü, guojia, jiating*," *Genders* 10 (1991): 132-60; Lydia Liu, "The Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature: Negotiating Feminisms across East/West Boundaries," 22-44.

poetry.” Zhai’s attitude towards femininity in this essay has not been studied by critics. Rather, as has been analyzed previously, contemporary poetry critics hastily accept the negative judgment of the feminine and predicate their construction of a discourse of “women’s poetry” on the prioritization of the feminist over the feminine. By contrast, in an interview with Jeanne Hong Zhang in 2002, Zhai reflects: “When I think about my earlier works from a critical distance, I find some of them unconstrained, emotionally saturated, especially the poem series ‘Woman,’ though it was lavishly praised.”⁹⁰ Zhai’s reflection appears to be an acknowledgement of the inconsistency in what she aims at in the essay and what she actually accomplishes in the poem cycle “Woman.” Zhai attempts to steer clear of the sentimental elements of femininity in her poetic practice, but she ends up perpetuating this trait in her poems. To a certain extent, Zhai’s paradox registers the traces of patriarchal restraints on contemporary Chinese women poets. Zhai’s perception of the so-called feminine literature is marked with a history of dominant criticism which misreads and devalues women’s literature in the past.⁹¹ Zhai’s efforts to renounce the feminine constraint reveal her attempt to overcome the confinement she identifies with earlier women writers. Such constraint on women poets has been observed by Alicia Suskin Ostriker on her interpretation of contemporary American women’s poetry.

Like every literary movement, contemporary women’s poetry in part perpetuates and in part denounces and renounces its past. Women writing today tend to continue what Louise Bogan identified as the key contribution of their grandmother to the life of American poetry: “the line of feeling.” At the same time, much of their vitality derives

⁹⁰ Jeanne Hong Zhang, *The Invention of a Discourse: Women’s Poetry from Contemporary China*, 67.

⁹¹ For a detailed portrait of the gendered conventions of femininity in traditional Chinese poetry, see Maija Bell Samei, *Gendered Persona and Poetic Voice: The Abandoned Woman in Early Chinese Song Lyric*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004, 26.

from an explosive attempt to overcome the mental and moral confinement they identify with these grandmothers, and this effort has both thematic and formal consequences.⁹²

Thematically, the central motif of Zhai's poem cycle "Woman" is a quest for self-definition and independence. Throughout the essay, Zhai implies that "women's literature" is a composition by a female consciousness⁹³ which is innate to all women. The term seems not to have been explicitly articulated in the essay. Nevertheless, in an interview with Jeanne Hong Zhang, Zhai explained what she meant by "women's literature."

In my view, [women's literature] is a mode of independent writing, which may or may not be related to the female gender. I don't think it is necessary to be gender neutral. In fact, gender-neutral positioning in the abstract doesn't exist. The so-called gender-neutral position is mostly a disguised male position.⁹⁴

The definition of "women's literature" Zhai proposes is a mode of independent writing. Such a quest for female identity registers women poets' condition of marginality. Zhai's unconscious endorsement of the patriarchal structure of women's literature and her struggle against the

⁹² Alicia Suskin Ostriker, 10.

⁹³ In an interview with Zang Di 臧棣, Zhai Yongming reaffirms that "female consciousness" is inherent in all the works of women writers. See Zhai Yongming, "Wancheng zhihou you zenyang" 完成之后又怎样 [What will it be like after all is done], in *Zhishang jianzhu* 纸上建筑 [Buildings on paper], (Shanghai: Dongfang chubanshe, 1997), 240. Originally in Chinese, 我认为女诗人的作品中的"女性意识"是与生俱来的, 是从我们体内引入我们的诗句中, 无论这声音是温柔的, 或是尖厉的, 是沉重的, 或是疯狂的, 它都出自女性之喉, 我们站在女性的角度感受世间的种种事物, 并藉词语表达出来, 这就是我们作品中的女性意识 ["Women's consciousness" is born, pouring out of our bodies into our verse. The poetic voice comes out of women's throats, be it gentle or sharp, heavy or hysterical. From a female perspective, we experience all sorts of things in the world, and then express them by means of words. This is women's consciousness in our works] (translation by Jeanne Hong Zhang).

⁹⁴ Jeanne Hong Zhang, *The Invention of a Discourse: Women's Poetry from Contemporary China*, 15.

feminine confinement expose the cruelties of the history of dominant criticism. I will elaborate more on the limitations of Zhai's prose and her poetic interventions in Chapter Three.

In conclusion, this chapter has sought to articulate that in constructing the concept of "women's literature" as an anti-patriarchal approach to Chinese women's poetry, poetry critics unconsciously champion the cause of the patriarchy. Tang Xiaodu, the initiator of the concept of "women's poetry," fails to justify the concept of "women's poetry" as anti-patriarchal due to his "difference" approach to the work of female poets preceding Zhai's. Tang's approach separates the women's poetry of Zhai and subsequent women poets from that of her antecedents. In so doing, he sidesteps the problems persisting in the critical tradition that valorize differences and privilege one over the other. Tang attempts to construct the concept of "women's poetry" as a "new" critical approach to women's poetry. Ironically, this construction overlooks the unexamined past of patriarchal imposition on women poets coming before Zhai Yongming. Zhai Yongming, whose poem cycle "Woman" and essay "Night Consciousness" incite the debates on "women's poetry," unconsciously endorses the patriarchal bias of women's literature in her prose. Her struggle against the feminine confinement registers the historical traces of patriarchal criticism.

Chapter Two “Women’s Poetry” as a Critical Strategy

As this point in the thesis, it should be clear to the reader that the idea of “women’s poetry” emerged in China in the mid-1980s. It is regarded as a feminist critical approach to women poets’ expression of gender consciousness and female subjectivity as a counter-discourse against the male-dominated political and discursive establishment. The critic Tang Xiaodu’s landmark critical article “Women’s Poetry: from Night to Day—On Zhai Yongming’s Poem Cycle ‘Woman’”⁹⁵ is considered to be the first work of scholarship on “women’s poetry,”⁹⁶ advancing a feminist paradigm for the study of Chinese women’s poetry. The poet Zhai Yongming served as the impetus for the scholarly debate on the concept of “women’s poetry” and feminist poetics with the publication of a poem cycle entitled “Woman” 女人.⁹⁷

This chapter argues, however, that the concept of “women’s poetry” emerged not as a feminist critical approach to question gender values of the patriarchy, but as a new analytical method for the critic to refute the binary of form and content, which simultaneously reaffirmed the binary mode of the patriarchy. My analysis centers on how the critic Tang Xiaodu promotes critical innovation that not only values poetic form but also poetic function from a social perspective. My reading of Tang’s articles on Zhai’s poems and his theory of poetry alongside Zhai’s poem cycle “Woman” suggests that inherent in his prose is an implicit patriarchal stance.

⁹⁵ Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, “Nüxing shige: cong heiyeye dao baizhou,” 58-9 and 50.

⁹⁶ Chen Zhongyi 陈仲义, “Gean chouyang: dangdai shixue qianyan de zhuantan—jian yu lüjin xiansheng shangque,” 115.

Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, “Shui shi Zhai Yongming,” 25-26.

⁹⁷ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, *Nüren* 女人 [Woman] (Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 2008), 17.

Building a sociocultural criticism on the idea of “women’s poetry” and working it into traditional formalist criticism, Tang essentializes the biological male-female divide and hints at the lower poetic value of gender-marked imagery. The contradictions manifested by the appropriation of the term “women’s poetry” as revealed in my reading denote the contradictions employed by the critic to challenge the line between poetic form and poetic content. Couched in his criticism is the assumption that formal reading of the aesthetic value of poetry which has evolved in the patriarchal culture subsumes and transcends the feminist criticism. Such a hierarchical approach undermines his efforts to negotiate equal poetic importance of form and content.

In *The Invention of a Discourse: Women’s Poetry from Contemporary China*, Jeanne Hong Zhang argues that Tang Xiaodu sets the parameters of feminist criticism when it comes to women’s poetry.⁹⁸ In a conference on contemporary Chinese women’s poetry held in 2010, Tang Xiaodu reaffirmed that the idea of “women’s poetry” lays the foundations for a critical practice against the male-centered culture.⁹⁹ Tang’s methodology has been uncritically endorsed by some of Tang’s peers as well as younger generation critics in their subsequent analysis of contemporary Chinese women’s poetry.¹⁰⁰ While there is no consensus on the definition of

⁹⁸ Jeanne Hong Zhang, *The Invention of a Discourse: Women’s poetry from Contemporary China*, 15.

⁹⁹ See Liu Lingyan 刘玲燕, “Zhongguo dangdai nüxing shige yantaohui huiyi zongshu,” 112. In his article “Pure Poetry: Between Illusion and Reality,” Tang Xiaodu reveals that what the poet Gong Liu 公刘 practices in poetry is in direct contradiction to what he claims in prose. Tang praises the critical perception as evinced in Gong’s poetry but disapproves of the statement in the latter’s article that pure poetry, in an effort to detach itself from politics, paradoxically recognizes the authority of politics. Agreeing with Gong on seeing politics in a broad sense, Tang holds that there is a politics implicit in the painstaking exploration of the poetic subjectivity. While criticizing Gong’s general observation of pure poetry, Tang sees Gong’s contradiction as something positive in a way that demonstrates poetry’s transcendence of prose. Citing Tang’s position on the idea of “women’s poetry” as a critical approach to the patriarchal system, I am trying to reveal how he also contradicts himself when he insists that he investigates Zhai Yongming’s poem “Woman” from an anti-patriarchal perspective even though he essentializes the biological male-female divide and hints at the lower poetic value of gender-marked imagery. I also consider Tang’s contradiction constructive as it sheds light on the uncritical deployment of western feminist criticism for the analysis of contemporary Chinese women’s poetry. See Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, “Chunshi: xuwang yu zhenshi zhijian—yu gongliu xiansheng shangque jianlun dangdai shige de jiazhi” 纯诗：虚妄与真实之间—与公刘先生商榷兼论当代诗歌的价值 [Pure Poetry: Between Illusion and Reality], *Wenxue pinglun* 文学评论 2 (1989): 81-85.

¹⁰⁰ For example, Chen Chao 陈超, “Zhai Yongming lun” 翟永明论 [On Zhai Yongming], *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣 6 (2008): 134-46.

“women’s poetry,” there is no denying that such a feminist critical framework is the basis for the naming debates.¹⁰¹ As has been summarized by Chen Xuguang,¹⁰² “women’s poetry,” in a narrower sense, drives at a body of poems written by women poets with an obvious feminist slant, which marks out women poets’ “revision of patriarchal historiography.”¹⁰³ By grouping Tang Xiaodu and Chen Xuguang together as critics with a shared definition of “women’s poetry,” Jeanne Zhang confirms that Tang’s article introduces a feminist paradigm into the studies of Chinese women’s poetry. Although she hails Tang as the initiator of the concept of “women’s poetry,” Zhang does not examine Tang’s article in detail. While her reading of Tang rightly emphasizes the significant role Tang’s explanation of “women’s poetry” played in the development of feminist poetics in subsequent decades, Zhang fails to notice the patriarchal underpinnings to Tang’s logic in the article. Although his article provides a structure through which to critique the patriarchy, Tang essentializes gender difference and bases the differentiation on the biological male-female divide. Rather ironically, the foundation Tang lays for the anti-patriarchal practice of poetic criticism is clearly patriarchy-based. In fact, Tang acknowledged, ten years later in his second critical article on Zhai Yongming—“Who Is Zhai Yongming,”¹⁰⁴ that he should be faulted for the binary model on which he based his idea of a

¹⁰¹ For details of the different definitions of “women’s poetry,” see Jeanne Hong Zhang, Introduction and chapter 1. Lü Jin 吕进, “Nüxing shige de sanzong wenben,” 139-47. Zhang provides us with a succinct overview of the naming debates. “There is no consensus on the definition of women’s poetry. Roughly speaking, there are two different definitions. The broader one, as Lü Jin suggests, lumps together different authors crossing generations, geographies, and writing styles, on the basis of their gender. The narrow one implied by poetry-critics like Tang Xiaodu, Chen Xuguang and Li Zhen pinpoints a body of ‘confessional’ texts by women poets, which have an overt feminist slant. According to the latter categorization, if a woman poet writes in a more conventional fashion or from a gender-neutral standpoint, she is not a ‘woman poet,’ and her poetry not ‘women’s poetry’” (2004a: 9).

¹⁰² Chen Xuguang 陈旭光, *Shixue: Lilun yu piping* 诗学：理论与批评 [Poetics: Theory and Criticism] (Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 1996), 120.

¹⁰³ Michelle Yeh’s words. See Michelle Yeh, “The Feminist Poetic of Xia Yu,” *Modern Chinese Literature*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 45.

¹⁰⁴ Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, “Shui shi Zhai Yongming,” 25-34.

potential paradigm of “women’s poetry.” Zhang cites both articles by Tang in her book, but she does not read them side by side in detail.

What Zhang misses has been attempted by Deng Wenhua in his article “On Gender Awareness in Zhai Yongming’s Poems—A Revision of Tang Xiaodu’s Interpretation.”¹⁰⁵ Deng presents his argument against Tang’s anti-patriarchal approach to female consciousness as revealed in Tang’s article published in 1987. However, there is no mention of Tang’s second article on Zhai Yongming’s poetry—“Who Is Zhai Yongming?”—in Deng’s article. In the second article, finished in 1996 and included in his book *Tang Xiaodu: On Poets and Poetry*, which was published in 2001,¹⁰⁶ and later republished by the academic journal *Shi Xuankan* 诗选刊 in January 2005, Tang declared his bias and previous misreading of Zhai’s work. Deng’s article, published in December 2005, amounts to a reiteration of Tang’s own concessions. From Zhang’s brief reading of and Deng’s general observation of Tang’s scholarship on Zhai Yongming, we can see that Tang’s first analysis of the concept of “women’s poetry” has either been taken by later scholarship as a given of his anti-patriarchal stance or as taking the lead to advocate a feminist reading of women’s poetry. Some commentaries may not, like Deng’s, set up their argument in opposition to Tang’s in his first article. However, while they, like Deng, demonstrate that Zhai’s poems do not claim credit for dismantling the patriarchal system,¹⁰⁷ they do not discredit Tang’s critical attempt to approach women’s poetry from an anti-patriarchal perspective. Although Tang’s articles play an important role in the development of feminist

¹⁰⁵ Deng Wenhua 邓文华, “Lun Zhai Yongming shige de xingbie yishi: Cong Tang Xiaodu de wudu tanqi” 论翟永明诗歌的性别意识—从唐晓渡的误读谈起 [On gender consciousness of Zhai Yongming’s poetry: starting from the misreading of Tang Xiaodu], *Journal of Chuxiong Normal University* 楚雄师范学院学报 6 (2005): 43-47.

¹⁰⁶ Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, *Tang Xiaodu shixue lunji* 唐晓渡诗学论集 [Tang Xiaodu: On poets and poetry] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2001), 215-34.

¹⁰⁷ In contrast to Deng’s treatment, my later analysis, however, will show that Zhai’s poem cycle “Woman,” although it does not fully distance itself from the desire to dismantle patriarchal society, evinces a searching critique of sexual inequality.

criticism of contemporary Chinese women's poetry, no discernible scholarship has been conducted that reads Tang's two articles side by side and alongside Zhai's poems. No related question has been asked as to whether Tang's initiation of the concept of "women's poetry" is carried out in the service of feminist criticism even after he confesses in the second article the presumption of a genetic gender difference lying underneath the first one. While he fails to demonstrate creativity in arguing against Tang's patriarchal take, critic Deng Wenhua deserves plaudits for the attempt at reinterpretation. But this important work remains unfinished.

In what follows, I argue that Tang's making of a formal language to articulate women's poetry leads to the growth of a feminist poetic criticism which he himself does not in fact attempt, and his effort in demonstrating the consistency of arguments in the two articles betrays his adoption of the concept of "women's poetry" to change a contemporary critical culture that was unable to conjure new approaches. My examination will show that Tang intends to mold the discourse of "women's poetry" into the traditional formalist criticism to disclaim the binary of form and content, but this new method of reading poetry merely culminates in the incorporation of the binary mode of the patriarchy.

2.1 "Women's Poetry" as an Analytical Method to Invalidate the Binary of Form and Content

Tang's influential article on "women's poetry" was written in 1986 and published in 1987 in *Shikan*, "the most important official poetry magazine in the PRC."¹⁰⁸ It appeared at a time when there was a surge of research into the methodology of literary criticism. In the mid-1980s, the thought liberation movement enabled literary critics to explore the possibilities of approaching literature from different angles other than those sanctioned under strict Communist rule. The year

¹⁰⁸ Maghiel van Crevel, *Language Shattered: Contemporary Chinese Poetry and Duoduo*, 68.

1985 witnessed the free exchange of critical thought in literature and was generally acknowledged to be the “Year of Methodology” in literary criticism.¹⁰⁹ Two pivotal conferences on the methodology of literary criticism were held consecutively in 1985. The first one was organized mainly by editorial departments of influential literary journals such as *Shanghai wenxue* 上海文学 [*Shanghai Literature*], *Wenxue pinglun* 文学评论 [*Literary Review*], and *Dangdai wenyi tansuo* 当代文艺探索 [*Contemporary Literature and Art*]. It was held in March in Xiamen City and was a seven-day roundtable session on questions as to why it was significant to develop new methods for the study of literary texts, how they could be worked out, if it would be possible to introduce research principles of natural science into the analysis of literature, how to evaluate the traditional formulas, and how new approaches could differ from the traditional ones.¹¹⁰ One month later, a conference on literary theory and methodology closely associated with the academy was held in Yangzhou.¹¹¹ The discussion at this conference revolved around such topics as the suitability of introducing systems theory, cybernetics, and information theory into literary studies, the relation between new methods and traditional methods as well as Marxist philosophy, and how new methods could better serve the explanation of literary patterns. Although the former conference featured defining acceptable new methods and the latter focused more on the connection between traditional and new formulas, both recognized the necessity of enriching the paradigm of literary criticism. In terms of poetry, a conference entitled “Exploring

¹⁰⁹ See Qian Jing 钱竞, “Yuqiong qianlimu, gengshang yicenglou—ji Yangzhou wenyixue yu fangfalun wenti xueshu taolunhui” 欲穷千里目, 更上一层楼—记扬州文艺学与方法论问题学术讨论会 [You Can Enjoy a Grander Sight, by Climbing to a Greater Height: the Yangzhou academic symposium on problems of literary study and methodology theory], *Wenxue pinglun* 文学评论 4 (1985): 55; Yan Dichang 严迪昌, “Shige yanjiu fangfa sanlun” 诗歌研究方法散论 [On the Methodology of Poetic Analysis], *Shikan* 诗刊 11 (1985), 11.

¹¹⁰ For details, see Xiao Dan 晓丹 and Zhao Zhong 赵仲, “Wenxue piping: Zai xinde tiaozhan mianqian—ji Xiamen quanguo wenxue pinglun fangfa taolunhui” 文学批评: 在新的挑战面前—记厦门全国文学评论方法论讨论会 [Literary Criticism: In the Face of New Challenges], *Wenxue pinglun* 文学评论 4 (1985): 46-51.

¹¹¹ See Qian Jing 钱竞, “Yuqiong qianlimu, gengshang yicenglou—ji Yangzhou wenyixue yu fangfalun wenti xueshu taolunhui,” 50.

New Approaches to the Criticism of New Poetry” was hosted by the journal *Shikan* in the same year and brought together most of the leading critics of poetry.¹¹² The conference addressed the limitations of existing methods of poetic criticism and was devoted to proposing new strategies to the study of New Poetry.¹¹³ In the eleventh issue of *Shikan* in 1985, four articles on critical methods of poetic analysis were published.¹¹⁴ While the primary foci of these articles vary, the objective of all of them was to incorporate new approaches into the formalist analysis of poetry.

Tang Xiaodu’s article “Women’s Poetry: from Night to Day—On Zhai Yongming’s Poem Cycle ‘Woman’” was published right after the intense discussions about incorporating methods of social science and natural science and literary paradigms from abroad into the formalist interpretation of poetry, and Tang, as an editor of *Shikan* at that time, was likely to be at the forefront of accepting new approaches. These pieces of evidence support my speculation that Tang invented the concept of “women’s poetry” to incorporate sociopolitical criticism into traditional formalist criticism. Furthermore, Tang’s argument in a critical article against Gong Liu’s assertion on the relationship between poetry and politics in an interview helps substantiate this conjecture.¹¹⁵

¹¹² The conference took place in July 1985. Conference speeches were recorded and written out in a paper by Xiaodu 晓渡. It is probable that Xiaodu 晓渡 is Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, as Xiao 晓 is not a normal last name in Chinese and Tang Xiaodu was working as an editor for *Shikan* in 1985. (A news report by the official newspaper *Guangming Daily* 光明日报 mentioned that Tang Xiaodu was an editor of *Shikan* in 1985. See http://www.xinhuanet.com/book/2019-06/10/c_1210154464.htm)

¹¹³ See Xiaodu 晓渡, “Kaituo xinshi piping he yanjiu de xin jumian—Bufen zai jing shige pinglunjia, lilunjia zuotan jiyao” 开拓新诗批评和研究的新局面—部分在京诗歌评论家、理论家座谈纪要 [Exploring New Approaches to the Criticism of New Poetry], *Shikan* 诗刊 9 (1985): 44-45.

¹¹⁴ Yan Dichang 严迪昌, “Shige yanjiu fangfa sanlun.” Yang Kuanghan 杨匡汉, “Piping zhuti de kaifang yishi” 批评主体的开放意识 [Critics’ Interdisciplinary Awareness], *Shikan* 诗刊 11 (1985): 6-8. Cheng Daixi 程代熙, “Yiyuan hua yu duoyuan hua” 一元化和多样化 [Unification and diversification], *Shikan* 诗刊 11 (1985): 8-11. Wu Sijing 吴思敬, “Yong xinlixue de fangfa zhuzong shi de jingling” 用心理学的方法追踪诗的精灵 [The Psychological Approach to the Spirit of Poetry], *Shikan* 诗刊 11 (1985): 14-16.

¹¹⁵ Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, “Chunshi: xuwang yu zhenshi zhijian—yu Gong Liu xiansheng shangque qianlun dangdai shige de jiazhi quxiang,” 81-85. Gong Liu 公刘 (1927-2003) is a prominent “first generation” poet. The “first generation” poets refer to those established poets before the Cultural Revolution. Gong earned his reputation for his series of poems on the subject of a frontier soldier’s life in the 1950s. He is considered to have provoked the national

Gong published the script of the interview in 1988 with the title “On Four Aspects of Poetry and Poets.”¹¹⁶ The relationship between poetry and politics was the second of the four aspects Gong addressed in the interview. Redefining the term “politics” as an expression of social reality in the new historical moment, rather than a label with the negative connotation of the Mao regime, Gong asserts that as long as poets voice concerns about life, there is no poetry that is not political. Therefore, Gong criticizes the trend in the mid-1980s towards a poetic ideal that dissociates poetry from politics. In 1989, one year after Gong’s publication of the interview transcript, Tang published an article entitled “Pure Poetry: Between Illusion and Reality” as a critique of Gong’s observation on the trend toward de-politicization in the experimental poetry.¹¹⁷ Tang points out that Gong assumes that politics is the poetic ideal of poetry and Tang questions this assumption by asserting that “pure poetry” is the ideal of poetry. Tang agrees with Gong on seeing politics in a broad sense. Unlike Gong, though, Tang does not see poetry and politics as two opposed entities. He asserts that pure poetry other than politics is the poetic ideal of poetry, and that politics, as a general term of social reality, is the unprocessed grain of poetry. Tang holds that there is always a politics implicit in the painstaking pursuit of the poetic ideal. This ideal is what Tang understands as “pure poetry.” To define “pure poetry,” Tang invokes Paul Valéry.

debate in the early 1980s on the evaluation of poetry written by the “second generation” or Misty poets (Menglong shiren) with his article “A New Task—On Gu Cheng’s Poems” published in 1979 in the journal *Xingxing*. (Gong Liu 公刘, “Xin de keti—Cong Gu Cheng tongzhi de jishoushi tanqi” 新的课题—从顾城同志的几首诗谈起 [A new talk—On Gu Cheng’s poems], *Xingxing* 星星 1 (Oct. 1979): 89) According to Gong, the “new task” is that “Poets of the older generation must try as hard as possible to understand the new generation” [see Henry Yuhuai He, *Dictionary of the Political Thought of People’s Republic of China* (London: Routledge, 2016), 239].

¹¹⁶ Gong Liu 公刘, “Cong sigе jiaodu tan shi yu shiren—da zhongyang guangbo dianshi daxue zhongwenxi wen” 从四个角度谈诗与诗人—答中央广播电视大学中文系问 [On Four Aspects of Poetry and Poets], *Wenxue pinglun* 文学评论 4 (1988): 4-13.

¹¹⁷ For more on Chinese Misty and post-Misty poetry or experimental poetry, see Michelle Yeh, “Light a Lamp in a Rock: Experimental Poetry in Contemporary China,” 379-409.

Pure poetry, is in fact, a fiction deduced from observation, which should help us to clarify our ideas about poems in general, and should guide us in the difficult and important study of the varied and multiform relations between language and the effects it produces on men. Instead of *pure poetry* it would perhaps be better to say *absolute poetry*, and it should then be understood in the sense of a search for the effects resulting from the relations between words, or rather the relations of the overtones of words among themselves, which suggests, in short, *an exploration of that whole domain of sensibility which is governed by language.*¹¹⁸

Valéry's conclusion that "The conception of pure poetry is that of an inaccessible type, an ideal boundary of the poet's desires, efforts, and powers" is read as the truth of poetry by Tang.¹¹⁹ With these quotations, it is reasonable to claim that, according to Tang, pure poetry is not poetry which dissociates itself from politics, but an inaccessible ideal state of all poetry that aims to transcend circumstances that are imaginarily conceived and artificially produced. In this sense, poetic analysis is, in practice, the appreciation of the observable events subsumed in the domain of perception governed by language. In other words, to understand or interpret poetry is to explore what aspects of realistic experiences or politics in a broad sense are processed by language and how the poet's visions of the world are generated in the process. What concerns Tang as a critic is how literary criticism can give equal consideration to how the poet transfers experiences in the practical world into poetic language and how a poem, the product of the transference, provokes what it means to transcend. In his words, "Theory of pure poetry as

¹¹⁸ The quotation is in Chinese in the article. This English version is from Paul Valéry, *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Denise Follot (Princeton University Press, 1985), 185.

¹¹⁹ Paul Valéry, *The Art of Poetry*, 192.

expatiated by Valéry is universal. The difficulty lies in how it can be applied by the poet to produce the art of poetry and by the critic as the criteria of appreciation” 这类纯诗理论作为诗歌真理大都普遍适用。困难的是如何在创作中领悟、坚持这一美学原则和在批评中具体、灵活地运用这一价值尺度。¹²⁰ As revealed in his words, Tang strives after an ideal state of criticism that involves comprehending what is said in terms of how it is said. Specifically, Tang’s ideal of criticism is a critical mode that aims to grasp the politics or social context from which the art of poetry is conceived and produced and to understand how the art of poetics such as sound, rhythm, structure, irony, metaphor or ambiguity overcomes the restraints of that context. In this sense, Tang’s analysis of Zhai Yongming’s poem cycle “Woman” from an anti-patriarchal perspective in 1987 can be read as an effort to practice his critical ideal that strives to dispel the binary opposition between formalist criticism and sociopolitical criticism.

2.2 Tang’s Idea of “Women’s Poetry” and Its Patriarchal Overtones

Tang devotes his article (1987) on Zhai to a discussion of “women’s poetry.” The title of Tang’s article “Women’s Poetry: from Night to Day—On Zhai Yongming’s Poem Cycle ‘Woman’” is indicative of his treatment of Zhai’s twenty poems as the breeding site of the concept of “women’s poetry.” He sets out to prove that for Zhai the concept of “women’s poetry,” which he defines as a poetic practice that “maps out a world which has been historically dominated by male-oriented bias and that opens up an avenue for reshaping such a world” 真正的‘女性诗歌’不仅意味着对被男性成见所长期遮蔽的别一世界的揭示，而且意味着已成的世界秩序被重

¹²⁰ Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, “Chunshi: xuwang yu zhenshi zhijian—yu Gong Liu xiansheng shangque qianlun dangdai shige de jiazhi quxiang,” 84.

新阐释和重新创造的可能,¹²¹ is formed out of the desire to “breach the traditional ethical guideline on women’s behavior and pursue individual emancipation on the one hand, and achieve complete independence and self-consciousness with the exploration of life experience from a female perspective on the other hand” 追求个性解放以打破传统的女性道德规范, 摒弃社会所长期分派的某种既定角色, 只是其初步的意识形态; 回到和深入女性自身, 基于独特的生命体验所获具的人性深度而建立起全面的自主自立意识, 才是其充分的实现。¹²²

For Tang, the idea of “women’s poetry” as anti-patriarchy contributes to the explication as to how Zhai expresses her feminist conflict against the tradition of feminine-style poetry. In opening his discussion of the elements of female consciousness in Zhai’s twenty poems in the cycle, Tang claims that new images of women in those poems at once oppose the traditionally stereotypical projections of women and confront the prejudice about women’s talent for mimicking famous male poets.¹²³ Given this view of the new images of women, it follows that for Tang, the “Woman” does not fall into the category of feminine females who are tender, sensitive, and emotional. Instead, the woman is spiritually independent and persistently resists the status of inferiority and obedience in the male-dominated society. To thematize this conflict between the patriarchal ethics and the defense of individual independence, Tang interprets imagery from the beginning lines of the first poem “Premonition” and then three lines of the second section of the third poem “An Instant” in the cycle.

穿黑裙的女人夤夜而来

¹²¹ Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, “Nüxing shige: cong heiyè dào bǎizhōu,” 58.

¹²² Ibid., 58.

¹²³ Ibid., 58.

她秘密的一瞥使我精疲力竭¹²⁴

A woman dressed in black arrives in the dead of night

Just one secretive glance leaves me spent¹²⁵

默默冷笑，承受鞭打似地

承受这片天空，比肉体更光滑

比金属更冰冷¹²⁶

smiles cold in silence, accept this heaven

as if enduring a flogging, smoother than flesh,

colder than metal¹²⁷

He concludes that the images of women in both poems represent courageous acts against predetermined roles by the male-centered culture. He also acknowledges the ideology of independence as a woman to be an effective means that subverts the male power over the female 以柔克刚.¹²⁸ He further upholds this self-conscious independence is a sense of subjectivity which is emblematic of “women’s poetry.”

Tang’s illustration gives the impression that Zhai’s reliance on the repetitive images of rebellious women contributes to a strenuous defense of female subjectivity and hence the

¹²⁴ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, “Yugan” 预感 [Premonition], in *Nüren* 女人 [Woman] (Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 2008), 1.

¹²⁵ Zhai, Yongming 翟永明, “Premonition,” in *The Changing Room: Selected Poetry of Zhai Yongming*, translated by Andrea Lingenfelter, 2.

¹²⁶ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, “Shunjian” 瞬间 [An instant], in *Nüren* 女人 [Woman] (Beijing: Zuoja chubanshe, 2008), 4.

¹²⁷ Julia C. Lin, *Twenty-Century Chinese Women’s Poetry: An Anthology*, edited and translated by Julia C. Lin (London: Routledge, 2015), 72.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

subjectivity of “women’s poetry” as a new poetic form. My own view is that it is possible to distinguish various recurrent thematic images in the woman poet’s writing, but it is not possible to say whether these images should be ascribed to a truly feminist undertaking against the patriarchal oppression in the literary history of women’s poetry. In order to argue this point more thoroughly, it is necessary, first of all, to take a closer look at Tang’s assumptions regarding the relationship between the sense of “self” and a form of female poetics against the ideology of male domination, and, subsequently re-read Zhai’s poem cycle “Woman.” Tang’s understanding of the subjectivity of women’s poetry is never made explicit in the article. From what we can read in the article, it would be reasonable to assume that Tang believes that the free voice of women’s awareness of and resistance against the oppression by, what he calls, “fate” 命运 is the evidence of the subjectivity of women’s poetry. Tang’s article fails to prove that the sense of “self” as revealed in the woman poet’s poems is indeed the poetic construction of a feminist subject. It could be equally reasonable that the effort the woman poet Zhai Yongming invests into the pursuit of free poetic expression speaks of the declaration of poetic independence from the political control of the Mao and post-Mao regimes. This declaration of poetic independence from the political control of Mao / post-Mao regimes can be gender-neutral. Such a conjecture recalls the heated debate over the subjectivity of poetry and the discussion of a poetic ideal that dissociates poetry from politics in the mid-1980s in which Tang and Gong, as I previously analyzed, were active participants. The gender-neutral reading of Zhai’s work is reinforced by Zhai’s statement that “I am first and foremost a poet, and in the second place, I am a woman poet.”¹²⁹ This becomes even more evident in Tang’s clarification in the article that “women’s

¹²⁹ For Zhai’s prioritization of the aesthetic value of poetry over the political implication, see her three seminar articles on women’s poetry, respectively: Zhai Yongming 翟永明, “Heiye de yishi,” 3-6; Zhai Yongming 翟永明, “‘Nüxing shige’ yu shige zhong de nüxing yishi,” 10-11; Zhai Yongming 翟永明, “Zai tan ‘heiye yishi’ yu ‘nüxing shige,’” 128-29.

poetry” is predicated on the spiritual independence as represented in the poems and that it is the result of the “openness” of the state ideology between the year 1984 and 1985 “女性诗歌”的形成不是一两个人可以孤立创造的文化奇迹，而是一种历史现象。翟永明的这个组诗出现与‘文革’后又经历动荡而终于稳步走向开放的 1984~1985 年间，正透露出某种深远的消息。¹³⁰ Tang’s association of female consciousness in the art of poetry with the lenient political ideology undermines the validity of his idea of “women’s poetry” as a critical approach against the patriarchy in literary practice.

Tang claims that the meaning of the term “women’s poetry” is not determined by the biologically implicated possessive determiner “women.” In other words, for Tang, “women’s poetry” is not a term defined by the gender of the author. However, Tang contradicts himself by highlighting the fact that the female consciousness embedded in women’s poetry is a biological given for women. Tang seems to embrace the essentialist’s celebration of gender difference. However, Tang’s interpretation of the biological difference between the male and female sexes and the distinct features of female perception do not comport with the assertions of the essentialist feminism and even implicitly prioritizes the masculine. The essentialist feminism propounded by Mary Daly accepts the Cartesian divide between a superior rational mind and an inferior instinct body, but it sets out to invert the hierarchy and prioritize the female instinct.¹³¹

In his interpretation of the beginning two lines of the first poem “Premonition,” Tang deems that women’s premonition of fatal oppression and their determined opposition reflect a “sick mind specific to all women” 女性特有的变态心理。¹³² Though Tang is hazy about the

¹³⁰ Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, “Nüxing shige: cong heiyeye dao baizhou—lun Zhai Yongming zushi nüren,” 58.

¹³¹ Fiona Tolan, *Margaret Atwood: Feminism and Fiction*, (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), 19.

¹³² See Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, “Nüxing shige: cong heiyeye dao baizhou—lun Zhai Yongming zushi nüren,” 58.

definition of a “sick mind” in the statement, it is clear that this peculiar female characterization, in Tang’s argument, marks out the distinctive focus of women’s poetry. In a sense, “women’s poetry” stands out as an exhibition of the female instinct which is defined as a “sick mind.” Although he implicitly associates the “sick mind” with the positive quality of self-determination, Tang’s solution is far from prioritizing the female quality or challenging the patriarchal hierarchy. I submit that it is precisely through the linkage of the quality which has been historically assigned to masculine rationalism with the “sick mind specific to all women” that Tang seeks to stay consistent in his argument that in the fierce resistance against the male-centered culture, women do not “chase the masculinity that does not fit in their own nature” 在一种激烈的自我反抗中，追逐某种与自己的本质并不契合的男性气质。¹³³ The linkage demonstrates Tang’s persistence in drawing the line between femininity and masculinity. Unfortunately, such an effort betrays the contradiction between his belief in gender difference and his evasiveness about femininity and masculinity. With this random linkage and the lack of a definition of a “sick mind,” Tang risks privileging the importance of the masculine quality in recognizing the female nature and hence becoming a solid defender of the priority of the masculine.

Tang does not labor to remove the ambiguities in his treatment of femininity and masculinity, perhaps because he believes that the incorporation of the dualist differentiation into what he calls the “eastern dialectics—firmness within gentleness” “以柔克刚”的东方辩证法¹³⁴ can spare him the trouble. The meaning of the dialectics is that nothing is as strong as gentleness and nothing is as gentle as real strength. Assigning an instinctual gentleness which

¹³³ See *Ibid.*, 58.

¹³⁴ See Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, “Nüxing shige: cong heiyue dao baizhou—lun Zhai Yongming zushi nüren,” 59.

subsumes the masculine strength to women, Tang seems to have shed the trouble of either promoting women to masculine rationalism or prioritizing anti-rationalism. But the strategic evasiveness ends up complicating his claimed anti-patriarchal reading of the poems. This would be a good time to recall that Tang limits the idea of “women’s poetry” to an approach to the spiritual independence of women in poetry. In his reading, the female subject confronts the oppression aggressively in the psychological world while at the same time tolerating 承受 and laughing away 默默冷笑 her subordination. He propounds that tolerance is the only choice women can make “承受” 似乎成了唯一可能的选择，而 “默默冷笑”成了唯一可能的表达。¹³⁵ He also posits that the will to tolerate and the ability to internalize the tolerance turn out to invert the hierarchy of the oppressor and the oppressed and shape the subjectivity of the female 但是，这一笑却赋予了双方的位置以某种微妙的相对性。倾斜的命运天平由于这致命的机枢触动而趋于某种平衡。¹³⁶ There is a tension within Tang’s interpretation that complicates his project of claiming women’s subjectivity or selfhood. He sublimates women’s endurance into a “soft” force of nature that can overcome male power. Tang may risk perpetuating the masculine view of selfhood, one result of which is that women are consigned to selflessness. To follow this line of reasoning, it is only through renouncing their sense of self that women reclaim their agency. Addressing this paradox requires careful reading of his proposed significant attribute of “women’s poetry.” “As a fighting site against the external reality, it [‘Woman’/poetry] must be an illusion (anyway, material repression cannot be overturned without resorting to material means). However, in a spiritual world brimming with conflicts, it achieves full subjectivity on its own” 如果说作为与外部的现实命运抗衡的支点，它不可能不是虚幻的话（说到底，物质

¹³⁵ Ibid., 59.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 59.

的力量只能通过物质来摧毁)，那么，在一个远为深邃复杂的内部精神现实中，它却依靠自身建立起了真正的主体性。¹³⁷ Tang's definition of the attribute of "women's poetry" is predicated on his ideal of poetry that has no gender. As has been analyzed previously, Tang maintains that poetry is an art that transcends politics and all physical reality. Tang defends the genre of "women's poetry" in literature as a transcendent agent over patriarchal politics. What Tang fails to grasp is that the poetic ideal that arises in the hierarchical structure on the relationship between the spiritual and the physical is in effect part of the patriarchal ideology that prioritizes mind over body. Tang's attempts to link feminist criticism to the aesthetic analysis of the poems belie the central feminist claim that women are historically and systematically oppressed and the oppression has been codified in literary texts and discourses.

In his second article on Zhai Yongming and her poems entitled "Who Is Zhai Yongming," Tang mainly reiterates the same theme. Tang sets out to bring political¹³⁸ criticism into appreciative reading of aesthetic values but ends up laboring under the patriarchal hierarchy that prioritizes the aesthetic values of formalist criticism.¹³⁹ As noted earlier, Tang acknowledged, ten years later in this second critical article, that he should be faulted for the binary model on which he based his anti-patriarchal idea of "women's poetry" in the previous article he wrote. But more ironically, this second article does not focus on re-examining the anti-patriarchal implications of the poem from a genuinely anti-patriarchal stance; it elaborates instead on how it echoes the critical approach adopted in the former article. As examined

¹³⁷ Ibid., 59.

¹³⁸ As I have demonstrated in the comparative study of Tang's and Gong's understandings of the term "politics," Tang defines politics in a broad sense that include all practical experiences. Thus, unless particularly demarcated, by political reading I mean sociopolitical criticism.

¹³⁹ The formalist criticism, according to Toril Moi, seems to be identifiable as the American New Criticism which, with the emphasis on "the formal aspects of the literary work at the expense of historical and sociological factors," fails to serve in excavating the historically constructed patriarchal bias against women and their works. See Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (Routledge, 2002), 45-46.

previously, Tang's critical analysis in the first article hinges on the incorporation of feminist criticism into formalist criticism. His interpretation, which adheres to his belief that poetry is an art that subsumes and transcends practical reality, betrays his prioritization of formalist criticism. His second article reinforces the priority of the text and the appreciative reading of the textual structure. Tang avoids inconsistency in his arguments by maintaining his claims that focusing on the "subjectivity of the text does not mean to restrict the text's communication with the extra-text world" and that "The subjectivity allows for the inclusiveness of the textual structure" 关注…作品的内在性，却无意据此画地为牢。这种内在性与其自身无限敞开的外在性是一致的。¹⁴⁰ The focus of Tang's argument is not on how textual analysis evinces feminist overtones in Zhai's poems. What Tang argues in this second article is that poetic criticism is text-centered. He also confesses that he was concept-centered in the former article which led to an exclusive feminist reading in that first article of the poem cycle that failed to acknowledge the critical significance of formal analysis. He further points out that although the concept of "women's poetry" as a critical approach connotes a feminist undertaking, there actually is no genuine feminist criticism of contemporary poetry 不存在什么像模像样的女性主义批评。¹⁴¹ This, according to Tang, is good for the development of the idea of "women's poetry" 这种批评的涣散对 "女性诗歌" 的发展未必不是一件好事。¹⁴² In a sense, Tang is consistent in his argument in both articles that appreciative reading of the aesthetic values subsumes and transcends political criticism. But his paradoxical treatment of the concept of "women's poetry" contributes to the thrust of his argument that the concept of "women's poetry" does not clearly emerge as a feminist critical approach.

¹⁴⁰ Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡, "Shui shi Zhai Yongming," 32.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 27.

¹⁴² Ibid., 27.

In addition, in his re-reading of “Woman,” Tang does not reflect upon the connection between the poetic structure and the feminist overtones, but critiques feminist criticism’s insidious threat to perceive the true meaning of the text.¹⁴³ In his analysis of poetic imagery, images of women are absent. At the end of the article, Tang declares that he excludes the four thematically-female poems in his analysis.¹⁴⁴ He refers to the intertextual relationship between “Woman” and these four poems, but this intertextual connection is worded ambiguously. Even though we assume that he implies a feminist association, Tang’s objective is to demonstrate how the thematic unity of the texts justifies the consistency of the author and how such uniformity disproves Michel Foucault’s argument about the disappearance of the author.¹⁴⁵ In other words, Tang believes that there is an author hovering around the poetic structure but hints at the idea that the gender of the author should not divert the critical focus toward critiquing the ideology of gender inequality which undermines the poetic value of the poems. This is a reprise of the game that formalist criticism of the poetic structure outweighs the political denotation of gender inequality as represented in literary texts. In his eagerness to reject any idea of “women’s poetry” that would be inherently feminist or female, Tang is playing directly into the patriarchal ideology that he was thought to denounce with the notion of “women’s poetry.”

Tang labors to incorporate a feminist reading into the formalist criticism by introducing the idea of “women’s poetry.” Although his effort has been undermined by his paradoxical stance on the patriarchal ideology, Tang’s arguments in both articles rely heavily on the assumption that feminist reading and formalist criticism of Zhai’s poem cycle are both effective

¹⁴³ Ibid., 29.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 34.

¹⁴⁵ In thinking about the relationship between author and writing, Tang believes that for Foucault writing points to the disappearance of the authorship. I don’t think Tang fully understands Foucault’s argument, the emphasis of which is that the text, as the result of writing, is a site where the disappearance of the author can be traced. But this is not the focus of this thesis.

in appreciating its poetic value, and the concept of “women’s poetry” as a critical approach accommodates both perspectives. As this thesis has sought to prove, such an assumption about the idea of “women’s poetry” is disputed for the underlying contradictions accompanying the building of the idea. The ineffectiveness of Tang’s view on this point may be linked to the assertion he made about his theory of “pure poetry,” which, as a poetic theory and a critical principle, is an unattainable ideal state. If we agree with Tang that Zhai’s poem cycle “Woman” is the germinal site of the critical concept of “women’s poetry,” such a concept as a critical approach may probably be an unattainable paradigm. In this sense, Tang’s paradox regarding his effective reading of Zhai’s poems opens up an opportunity to revisit Zhai’s “Woman.” Tang is hailed for having set up the conception of “women’s poetry” to excavate the poet’s expression of gender consciousness as a counter-discourse against the male-dominated discursive establishment. In the first article, Tang introduces feminist criticism into his critical practice that strives to dissolve the binary of formal analysis and sociopolitical interpretation. The reasoning assumes that the poem cycle is precisely a piece of artistic creation for the critical paradigm of “women’s poetry” to build on. In the second article, Tang reorders his priorities. He places high emphasis on the text and assigns a low priority to the critical method of “women’s poetry.” Unfortunately, by reversing the order, Tang is still struggling with the difficulty in proving that his interpretation renders the messages in the poems convincingly. Approaching the poems in terms of their textual structure seems to be humble to the authority of the text. However, this approach presupposes formalist criticism as the principal interpretive method to guarantee the supremacy of the text. As has been argued by Toril Moi, formalist criticism “undermines some of the most basic tenets of feminist criticism” and embraces “patriarchal notions of cultural

criticism as a ‘value-free’ exercise.”¹⁴⁶ It remains firmly planted on the ground of patriarchal suppression upon women and their works.¹⁴⁷ Or, as Nancy Miller asserts, summoning all thematic messages under the umbrella of textual structure that is not gender registered disrespects the difference between male authorship and female authorship.¹⁴⁸ “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 that universal position.”¹⁴⁹ Therefore, Tang’s argument in the second article remains within the patriarchal epistemological framework against the feminist overtones in “Woman.”

2.3 Feminist Concerns in “Woman”

The following analysis attempts to reveal that Zhai’s poem cycle does not aspire to challenge male dominance but maps a territory for exhibiting how poetry as an art of metaphysics undermines the success of the patriarchy. My reading proposes that Zhai’s poem cycle does not fit in Tang’s framework of “women’s poetry” established in his first article and does not adhere to the description or the ideal of what Tang sets forth in the second article. The poem cycle “Woman” does not aim to declare its anti-patriarchal stance but encompasses a deconstructive treatment of the categories of life and death, light and dark, and mind and body that are set up by

¹⁴⁶ See Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (Routledge, 2002), 84-85. “It would of course be hopelessly reductive to argue that all aesthetic categories carry automatic political overtones. But it is just as reductive to argue that aesthetic structures are always and unchangingly political neutral, or ‘non-political’ as Jehlen puts it” (84).

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 85. “[F]eminist criticism is about deconstructing such an opposition between the political and the aesthetic: as a political approach to criticism, feminism must be aware of the politics of aesthetic categories as well as of the implied aesthetics of political approaches to art. . . . If feminism does not revolt against patriarchal notions of cultural criticism as a ‘value-free’ exercise, it is in imminent danger of losing the last shreds of its political credibility.”

¹⁴⁸ See Nancy Miller, *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing*, 106.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 106.

the patriarchy. In a sense, the poem cycle presents a searching critique of women's status of inferiority. It also exposes the inadequacy of Tang's critical belief in the second article that only by valuing the aesthetic merit over the feminist connotation can criticism do justice to the text.

In an article entitled "Writing for the Mind" published in February 1996,¹⁵⁰ Zhai gave a clear account of what motivated her to create the poem cycle "Woman."¹⁵¹ Zhai's article mainly expresses why "death" becomes the subject matter of her poems written before 1987.¹⁵² "Woman," a twenty-poem cycle with every five of them grouped into a series, is Zhai's first attempt at the poetic subject of death. It was written mostly after ten o'clock at night in a hospital ward which provided the poet with such images as death, blood, bone, spirit, and cuts.¹⁵³ These images reflect the nature of life and are mobilized into poetry by language. Zhai prefaces the poem cycle with an essay entitled "Night Consciousness"¹⁵⁴ in which she categorizes three dimensions of women's literature. She proposes a notion of "women's literature" 女性文学 which is different from feminine literature 女子气文学 and feminist literature 女权文学. Critics have maintained that Zhai bases the categorization on whether literary works bespeak the awareness of the oppression of the patriarchal culture.¹⁵⁵ Zhai expresses her doubt about her

¹⁵⁰ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, "Mianxiang xinling de xiezuo" 面向心灵的写作 [Writing for the mind], *Zuojia* 作家 2 (1996): 33.

¹⁵¹ It may be reasonable to assume that Tang's first article which was published in 1987 misses Zhai's account in this essay. However, Tang's second article, as has been explained previously in this paper, was written between late 1996 and early 1997, included in his book *Tang Xiaodu on Poets and Poetry* published in 2001, and later published by the academic journal *Shi Xuankan* in January 2005. It seems that Tang brushed aside Zhai's account in his second article which is mainly concerned with the formal aspects of the poems at the expense of the thematic factors.

¹⁵² I am not claiming that criticism of any text should satisfy the expectation of the author. What I am trying to argue is that if the author does articulate the thematic concern of a specific text, criticism may need to understand the concern, base further analysis of the text on the concern, and strive to speak back to the authorial understanding.

¹⁵³ The poet was taking care of her sick mother in the hospital ward. See Zhai Yongming 翟永明, "Mianxiang xinling de xiezuo," 33.

¹⁵⁴ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, *Wancheng zhihou you zenyang*, 3-6.

¹⁵⁵ See Luo Zhenya 罗振亚, "Jiegou chuantong de bashi niandai nüxingzhuyi shige" 解构传统的 80 年代女性主义诗歌 [A deconstructive analysis of women's poetry in the 1980s], *Journal of Literature, History and Philosophy* 文史哲 4 (2003): 162-68. Lü Jin 吕进, "Nüxing shige de sanzong wenben," 139-47.

clarity of the idea of “women’s literature” in an article called “More on the Subject of ‘Night Consciousness’ and ‘Women’s poetry’” published ten year after the essay “Night Consciousness” came out.¹⁵⁶ “Do influential critics still adopt the same set of criteria to evaluate the three dimensions of women’s literature? I doubt if it [the article “Night Consciousness”] is sufficiently lucid about what I meant to convey,” Zhai questioned.¹⁵⁷ In effect, in “Night Consciousness,” Zhai defines the category “women’s poetry” adequately by contrasting it with the feminine and the feminist:

The dimensions [feminine literature and feminist literature] seem to be of two distinct categories but end up identical in terms of their insignificant role in communicating concerns of human destiny. From this perspective, “women’s” literature should be considered a category of higher prestige than the other two. Truly female consciousness transfers the perception of human destiny into unique features of language and form, which becomes the driving force that pushes the transformation of the perception into poetry.¹⁵⁸

两者在各自的走向中似乎大相径庭，却又不约而同地在普遍人性意义上证明了自己的无足轻重。必须看到，在此之上，只有‘女性’的文学才是最高层次。进入人类共同命运之后，真正的女性意识，以及这种意识赖以传达的独有语言和形式，构成了进入诗的真正圣境的永久动力。

In contrast to the feminine and feminist literature, “women’s” literature, for Zhai, is the product of the truly female consciousness which is endowed with the talent for perceiving the subject of

¹⁵⁶ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, “Zai tan ‘heiye yishi’ yu ‘nüxing shige,’” 128-29.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 128.

¹⁵⁸ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, *Wancheng zhihou you zenyang*, 4-5.

life and death and turning that perception into the art of poetry. In this sense, it is reasonable that the recurrent imagery of life and death, light and dark, and night and day in the poem cycle “Woman” be read in relation to the female consciousness. This consciousness is proposed by Zhai as a genuine sense of death and an instinct for survival. Therefore, if the poems are read without referencing the connection between the meditation on the subject of life and death and the privilege of the female consciousness in poetic creation, they could be hazily labelled either as a declaration of female independence or a meditation on metaphysics without realistic concerns.¹⁵⁹

The following reading of the cycle attempts to argue that the poems make a site for the poet to counter the threat of death and also become a metaphorical space for a version of life that accommodates the conflict between life and death by registering death as the womb from which all forms of life emerge. “Woman” presents a speaker who has a premonition of her death and is present at the death scene of herself where she is at the same time giving birth to her baby. The entire cycle consists of twenty poems with each five of them grouped into respective sections. Therefore, it takes the form of a four-section cycle. This four-section division evokes a message of the four-season life cycle. However, two aspects of this seemingly conventional structure imply the inaccuracy of such an association. There are only images of three seasons in the cycle, Winter, Summer, and Fall, successively. The first and the fourth series are about Winter, while the second refers to Summer. The third series is particularly intriguing. The poet closes this series with two poems, one entitled “July,” the other one “Fall.” The poem “Fall” succeeds the

¹⁵⁹ In an interview with Zhai Yongming, the poet Yang li 杨黎 asked Zhai, “For you, ‘night consciousness’ is death consciousness or gender consciousness?” Zhai replied, “I think it alludes more to gender consciousness.” In Chinese, 杨黎：那么你的这种黑夜意识是死亡意识还是性意识？翟永明：我想更多是性意识。See Yang Li 杨黎, “Zhai Yongming caifang lu” 翟永明采访录 [An interview with Zhai Yongming], <https://www.poemlife.com/index.php?mod=subshow&id=30980&str=1751>

poem “July,” the central message of which is that “There will be a death in July / Summer is the best season for it” 七月将是一次死亡 / 夏天是它最适合的季节。¹⁶⁰ Why is Summer the best season for death? It is a season with the largest amount of sunlight which is the basic necessity of life. Why is such a season vibrant with life the most appropriate one for death to get in? There are four lines preceding these two: “You are a season not understood / I am the only one who knows the secret in the arms of death / I smile because I have the night after it / I have the power to laugh away this world” 你是一个不被理解的季节 / 只有我在死亡的怀中发现隐秘 / 我微笑因为还有最后的黑夜 / 我笑是我留在世界的权力。¹⁶¹ The last two lines here echo the last stanza in the first poem of the first series, the series of the season Winter.

Fresh moss in their mouths, the meanings they sought

Folded their smiles back into their breasts in tacit understanding

The night seems to shudder, like a cough

Stuck in the throat, I've already quit this dead-end hole.¹⁶²

鲜苔含在口中，他们所恳求的意义

把微笑会心地折入怀中

夜晚似有似无地痉挛，像一声咳嗽

憋在喉咙，我已离开这个死洞¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, *Nüren*, 17.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 16. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁶² Zhai Yongming, “Premonition,” in *The Changing Room: Selected Poetry of Zhai Yongming*, trans. Andrea Lingenfelter (Hongkong: Chinese University Press, 2011), 3. From the original Chinese version, we can see that there is no full stop at the end of the poem. However, the translation ends the poem with a period. I will elaborate on that later in this chapter when analyzing the relationship between the punctuation and the theme.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 2.

Moss is a source of oxygen which in turn is an absolute necessity for all forms of life. The meaning “they,” the unspecified men, sought is life or to live, which is kept in the mouth of the speaker who is dying. When she dies, she is said to have left the world which means to choke her to death. The speaker dies a life in the living world but right after dying she comes to live a life in the world of the dead, or in the poet’s words, the world of night or darkness. The poet seems to convey that there is a faint line between the living world and the world of the dead. This line between life and death is straddled especially when the form of the cycle is considered at the same time. Throughout the twenty poems, there is no ending period mark in any single one of them. The exception is that the last poem “The End” 结束 ends with a rhetorical question plus a question mark. It seems to speak of the poet’s candor of her doubts. The reply appears to have just been provided by the preceding poems in the form of blurring the distinction between life and death or beginning and end. The constant enjambment carries the free-flowing thought of living and dying over from one line to the other and one poem to the other. There has been a coming to life and passing away without a break.

The other aspect of the cycle that belies its subtle artistry is its symmetrically arranged structure and the linearity of its narrative. The poem cycle begins with a “Premonition” of a death and ends with “The End” of the life and the beginning of a new life. The scarcity of punctuation and no full stops at the end of any single poem contribute to the flow of fragile and tentative statements. Its confessional tone adds up to a mode of subjective dreadfulness. It is tempting to read “Woman” as the confession of the speaker’s dread of “the death of night” -- death.¹⁶⁴ In this line of reasoning, we may fail to explain why, in an interview with the poet Yang

¹⁶⁴ For a concise analysis of Chinese confessional poetry in relation to Sylvia Plath, see Jeanne Hong Zhang, “American and Chinese Confessional Poetry: A Case of Cross-Cultural Intertextuality,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* 31, no. 1 (March 2004): 11–26. For a detailed illustration of the introduction and translation of Sylvia Plath’s poetry into Chinese in the 1980s and its impact in

Li, Zhai insists that “Woman” is more concerned with gender consciousness than the consciousness of death.¹⁶⁵ But the statement implies that there is a gender awareness countering the threat of death. This implication delivers a message of the disguised connection between gender and the pronounced subject of life and death. The cycle is, however, intricately designed. There is a shift from dreadfulness of death to the realization of the meaning of death for life. The beginning stanza of the first poem in the cycle “Premonition” expresses the speaker’s fear of death:

A woman dressed in black arrives in the dead of night
Just one secretive glance leaves me spent
I realize with a start: this is the season when all fish die
And every road is criss-crossed with traces of birds in flight¹⁶⁶
穿黑裙的女人夤夜而来
她秘密地一瞥使我精疲力竭
我突然想起这个季节鱼都会死去
而每条路正在穿越飞鸟的痕迹¹⁶⁷

This woman in black dress coming in the dead of night is portrayed as a devil who comes to take the dead away. Why is the devil gendered as such? The implication here is that death has a gender which is female. In addition, even though this is a secret that is guarded among women, they are scared to uncover it. Apart from laying emphasis on the fact that the speaker is scared by

women’s poetry in contemporary China, see Jennifer Feeley, “Transforming Sylvia Plath through Contemporary Chinese Women’s Poetry,” *Frontier of Literary Studies in China* 11, no. 1 (2017): 38-72.

¹⁶⁵ See Yang Li 杨黎, “Zhai Yongming caifang lu.”

¹⁶⁶ Zhai Yongming, “Premonition,” 3.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

her premonition of death, these lines also announce a message that the binary oppositions of life and death collide in the logic of female consciousness. Such enlightenment flashes by in an “Instant” 瞬间 and is provided by the life and death of the twenty-year-old woman. Interestingly, the cycle consists exactly of twenty poems. The life of a twenty-year-old woman is “folded” and “silenced” 沉默 in the form of a twenty-poem cycle. Twenty years is transformed into an instant by language. “All years freeze in this moment” 所有的岁月劫持在一瞬间 / “So, in this moment, I painfully realize that” 于是在这一瞬间, 我痛楚地感受到 / “In another night, I calmly make a copy of the stone” 在另一个黑夜 / 我漠然地成为它的赝品.¹⁶⁸ The stone is a non-living object, which can also be understood as a never dying “life.” This “I” gains the life of the stone in a moment. This moment also turns the “I” into a calm state. The woman’s life journey is condensed in a moment, a moment when she finishes her own life and gives birth to a new life. Right in this moment she accomplishes the mission of prolonging life. The rigid divide between life and death can only be crossed through the female body.

The connection between the female gender and the deconstruction of life-death opposition is also highlighted in the poem “Mother” 母亲. This is the only poem in the cycle that has long lines. Many lines of the poem seem positively overloaded with commas. This is a poem about the birth of the speaker and the death of her mother. The speaker simply is so shocked about the fact that her mother died at the moment of her birth that she finds it hard to write smoothly unbroken sentences about it. The commas stop us as readers and invite us to think with the speaker and experience the shift of viewpoint as it occurs to her.

in your arms, I once laughed as if revealing the answer to a riddle, who is it knows

¹⁶⁸ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, *Nüren*, 4.

that you allow me to realize everything virginally, but I remained unmoved¹⁶⁹

在你怀抱之中，我曾露出谜底似的笑容，有谁知道

你让我以童贞方式领悟一切，但我却无动于衷

has its orphans, exposing all blessings mercilessly, but who understands best?

all those who have stood on their mother's hands will finally die from birth¹⁷⁰

有了孤儿，使一切祝福暴露无遗，然而谁最清楚

凡在母亲手上站过的人，终会因诞生而死去¹⁷¹

you are my mother, I am even your blood bleeding out at daybreak

a pool of blood forces you, astonished, to see yourself, you wake me up¹⁷²

你是我的母亲，我甚至是你血液在黎明流出来的

血泊中使你惊讶地看见你自己，你使我醒来¹⁷³

These lines outline the poet's shift of viewpoint on the relationship between life and death. Life is not the opposite of the dreadful death. Life and death are homogenous. As Zhai confesses in her essay "A Mexican Woman," her poem "Mother" speaks to Frida Kahlo's painting "My Birth" in the subject of life and death.¹⁷⁴ In Zhai's view, the relationship between life and death

¹⁶⁹ Translated by Simon Patton, <https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/poem/1212/auto/0/0/Zhai-Yongming/Mother/en/nocache>.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, *Zhishang jianzhu* 纸上建筑 [Architecture on the paper] (Shanghai: Dongfang chubanshan zhongxin, 1997), 64-72.

is the relationship between a woman who dies from a difficult delivery and a woman who is born in a pool of blood.¹⁷⁵ “Death links their fates. The death of a woman and the birth of another woman at the same time maintain the continuity of life” 死亡将她们的命运联系在一起，出生在某一天与死亡在某一天的女人共同保证了生命的延续性。¹⁷⁶ Life is death without end and death is life on end. The continuity of life is guaranteed by the womb of women. The same theme runs through the cycle and is reinforced in the last poem “The End” 结束. All poems in the cycle are more of a free verse except this last one. “The End” is structured into a four-stanza sestet. The line, “When it’s done, what of it,” 完成之后又怎样 repeats in every stanza. Repetition creates poetic structure and meaning is generated in the repetitive form. The repetition of the rhetorical question provides itself a reply that has embedded in it the speaker’s shift of viewpoint on the role of death and its significance to the meaning of life.

The poet accentuates the speaker’s contrasting attitudes towards death. The shift is crucial to the interpretation of the poem cycle’s stance on the series of binary oppositions of male and female, femininity and masculinity, and life and death. Previous scholarship relies heavily on the dualist opposition of male consciousness and female consciousness presented in the first poem “Premonition.”¹⁷⁷ Although it avoids over-simplistic conclusions, it nevertheless ends up in a reductionist position. The anti-patriarchal elements of the cycle have been defined in the female part’s power over the male counterpart. This reductionist treatment might be incurred by the misperception of the association of death with male oppression and the changing attitude

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 66.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 66.

¹⁷⁷ Andrea Lingenfelter, “Opposition and Adaptation in the Poetry of Zhai Yongming and Xia Yu,” in *New Perspective on Contemporary Chinese Poetry*, ed. Christopher Lupke (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 105-120. Naikan Tao, “Building a White Tower at Night: Zhai Yongming’s Poetry,” *World Literature Today*, vol. 73, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 409-16.

stressed throughout the rest of the cycle. From the above analysis, we can see that the poem cycle does not present itself as an undertaking that aims to express the poet's anger against patriarchal oppression. The emphasis on the shift of viewpoint of the role of death denies any potential authorial anger repressed behind the textual façade, which is reinforced by the classic work of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar:

through the violence of the double the female author enacts her own raging desire to escape male houses and male texts, while at the same time it is through the double's violence that this anxious author articulates for herself the costly destructiveness of anger repressed until it can no longer be contained.¹⁷⁸

However, by highlighting the female body as the only path to the deconstruction of the opposition of life and death, Zhai's poem cycle transcends the patriarchal binary and registers a sense of female identity.

I have sought in this chapter to demonstrate the contradictions surrounding the concept of "women's poetry." Tang Xiaodu, whom is believed to have been the first critic to put forth the concept of "women's poetry," was an editor of *Shikan*, the most influential journal of poetry and poetic theory and analysis in China. He witnessed and engaged in the practice of renewing the methods of literary criticism in the mid-1980s. His critical article on Zhai Yongming's poem cycle "Woman" demonstrates his effort to build a sociocultural criticism on the idea of "women's poetry" and mold it into traditional formalist criticism. This article is hailed for having advanced a feminist paradigm for the study of Chinese women's poetry. Rather ironically, Tang acknowledged, ten years later, in his second critical article on Zhai Yongming's poetry, that he should be faulted for implicitly positing the binary model on which he based his idea of a

¹⁷⁸ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 85.

potential “women’s poetry” in the previous article. More ironically, the second article does not focus on re-examining the anti-patriarchal implications of the poem from a real anti-patriarchal stance, but elaborates at length on how it echoes the critical approach adopted in the former article. Tang’s attempts to link feminist criticism to the aesthetic analysis of the poems belie the central feminist claim that women are historically and systematically oppressed and the oppression has been codified in literary texts and discourses. In the second article, Tang places strong emphasis on the text and assigns a low priority on the critical lens of “women’s poetry.” This approach presupposes formalist criticism as the principal interpretive method to guarantee the supremacy of the text and remains firmly entrenched in the ground of the patriarchal suppression of women and their works. Moreover, Zhai’s poem cycle “Woman” does not address itself to critiquing male dominance as claimed by Tang, but, coincidentally, maps a territory for exhibiting how poetry as an art of metaphysics overshadows the success of patriarchal oppression. In an attempt to address the paradox about the concept of “women’s poetry,” this thesis arrives at the conclusion that Tang’s reading of Zhai Yongming’s poems and his idea of “women’s poetry” are subsumed by the patriarchal male-female binary. Since Tang’s methodology has been uncritically endorsed by some of his peers as well as critics of the younger generation to analyze contemporary Chinese women’s poetry, this thesis thus far has striven to initiate a conversation with future scholarship about revisiting contemporary Chinese women poets and their poetry so as to redress any blindness to or misreading of the texts and contexts.

Chapter Three “Women’s Poetry” as a Poetic Strategy

As we will remember from Chapter One, the poet Zhai Yongming is first and foremost associated with the emergence of the critical concept of “women’s poetry” in the mid-1980s. Zhai’s publication of the poem cycle “Woman” together with the essay “Night Consciousness” kindled the debate on this topic. Zhai’s intervention turned her twenty-poem sequence “Woman” into a feminist manifesto and earned her the reputation as a feminist poet in the history of Chinese poetry. However, it also will be remembered that in the essay “Night Consciousness,” Zhai predicates her definition of “women’s literature” on patriarchal grounds where true literature is believed to be genderless. This masculine critical criterion for judging literature disguised as a standard of “great literature” fails to recognize women writers in a tradition where their works can be read properly, and it also fails to demarcate a site where the limitations or strengths of that tradition can be discussed thoroughly. In addition, the conclusions in Chapter Two reveal that Zhai’s poem cycle “Woman” does not address itself to dismantling male dominance as claimed by poetry critics within the framework of “women’s poetry” but maps a territory for transcending the patriarchal binary and registering a female identity.

In this chapter, I first turn my attention to how Zhai appropriates the idea of “women’s poetry” to pursue a poetic ideal that accommodates what to write and how to write it. Furthermore, I examine how, in her two additional essays on the concept of “women’s poetry,” Zhai marks a boundary between her poetry and feminism. In the first section, I examine how Zhai articulates her understanding of the idea of “women’s poetry” and its incommensurability to feminist criticism in these essays. To Zhai, “women’s poetry” is a poetic strategy that should be

adopted by women poets and that invites criticism of the “intrinsic” value of poetry.¹⁷⁹ Zhai believes that women’s poetry is underestimated due to the critical approach which has turned women’s literary creation into little more than a footnote to the political movement of women’s liberation.¹⁸⁰ Zhai understands literary feminism as a form of “political” criticism that neglects the aesthetic value of the text itself. However, although she brings up the connection between the idea of “women’s poetry” and artistic merit, Zhai never says what that artistic merit is. In addition, Zhai appears to preserve the aesthetic illusion that literature is somehow divorced from “extrinsic” reality and that the artistic merit of women’s literature can be valued even if the value system of the established order is sexist. I argue that elevating the value system of aesthetic criticism to the status of an absolute, Zhai unfortunately promotes the status quo where the operation of literature has long been studied within the male value system under the auspices of aesthetic analysis.

In the second part of this chapter, I focus on two of Zhai’s poems which have not been interpreted from a feminist perspective and share a thematic concern about technology and civilization.¹⁸¹ The purpose is to advance the notion that Zhai’s poetry may not set out to prove the validity of feminism but instead maps a territory for deconstructing the patriarchal imposition of inferiority onto the femininity. As has been observed in Chapter One, Zhai’s negative attitude towards femininity in the essay “Night Consciousness” has been hastily accepted by poetry critics as the premise of the critical concept of “women’s poetry.” However, Zhai admits in an interview that in an attempt to steer clear of the sentimental elements of femininity, she ends up

¹⁷⁹ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, ““nüxing shige’ yu shige zhong de nüxing yishi,” 10-11.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁸¹ The two poems are “Qingshang de ren, zhongshang de chengshi” 轻伤的人，重伤的城市 [Lightly Injured People, Gravely Wounded City] and “Xiang weilai” 想未来 [Envisioning the Future]. There is no existing scholarship in the Chinese and English languages on the feminist concerns in either poem.

perpetuating the feminine trait in “Woman.”¹⁸² Zhai asserts that feminine literature, for the women writers’ lack of female consciousness, has no artistic merit and thus is not authentic literature.¹⁸³ However, in a critical article on the poetry of traditional women poets,¹⁸⁴ Zhai contradicts herself when she insists that the feminine is a negative trait which is imposed on women’s works by the male critical system and that the feminine nevertheless registers the traces of women poets’ resistance against the male voice.¹⁸⁵ My focus here is the critique of the male critical tradition within the problematic of feminine poetry and the inconsistency of the female poet Zhai. Revealing Zhai’s endeavor to rewrite the past, ponder the present, and envision the future from a female perspective, I aim to understand the ways in which Zhai’s paradoxical intervention speaks not of her rejection of the so-called feminine tradition but her resistance to oppression. In this sense, Zhai engages with the political project of literary feminism through her asserted distance from it.

In sum, in this chapter, I argue that “women’s poetry” is the central project of Zhai’s poetry which challenges the patriarchal norms of criticism and the corresponding power structure, although Zhai’s prose statements on the idea of “women’s poetry” promote the status quo of the given male value system. Zhai’s inconsistency contributes to the re-consideration of the limitations of the critical concept of “women’s poetry” constructed by poetry critics. The critical concept of “women’s poetry” elides the unexamined past of patriarchal imposition on women poets, subsumes Zhai’s denouncement of the feminine past into the project of feminist

¹⁸² Jeanne Hong Zhang, *The Invention of a Discourse: Women’s Poetry from Contemporary China*, 67.

¹⁸³ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, “Heiye de yishi,” 4.

¹⁸⁴ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, “Nüxing yishi, furenzhijian, cisheng” 女性意识·妇人之见·雌声 [Female consciousness, woman’s opinion, and female voice], in *Wancheng zhihou you zenyang* 完成之后又怎样 [What will it be like after all is done] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2014), 66-78.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 66-78.

criticism, and disregards Zhai's poetic effort to overcome the confinement she identifies with preceding women poets who are negatively defined as feminine within the male value system.

3.1 "Women's Poetry" as a Poetic Strategy

In an essay "Reading, Writing, and My Memory," Zhai Yongming laments that most of her poems written between 1980 and 1982 are failed works, as the major subjects are old times, love affairs, and sentimentality 1980年至1982年我读了大量的书，写了不少失败之作，大部分是些风花雪月的胡乱抒情：对童年的回忆和带点理想主义色彩的爱情诗，在一些地方杂志上发表。¹⁸⁶ In the concluding paragraph of the essay, Zhai states:

It was from the poem cycle "Woman" that I really got into writing poetry. Although it has never been my favorite poem, it is the poem that makes the most sense to me. It is not as significant as some critics think, but simply because this poem cycle records changes in my understanding of writing. In this group of poems, I have found a beginning where I can move on, so I wrote in the last line of this sequence of poems, "How do I continue after completion?"¹⁸⁷

从《女人》开始，我才真正进入写作。尽管它一直都不是我最喜欢的诗，但却是对我最有意义的一首诗，不是如一些评论家所认为的重大的意义，而仅仅是因为它意味着我在写作中变化和分裂的内心，在这一组诗中，我找到了一个可以继续下去的开端，因此我在这组诗的最后一句中写道：“完成之后又怎样？”

¹⁸⁶ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, "Yuedu, xiezuo, yu wode jiyi" 阅读、写作与我的回忆 [Reading, writing and my memory], in *Zhishang jianzhu* 纸上建筑 [Building on Paper] (Shanghai: Dongfang chubanshe, 1997), 224.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 229.

Before “Woman,” Zhai wrote on traditional lyric themes in a way which was sentimental and nostalgic. In an interview with Zang Di,¹⁸⁸ Zhai reveals that she first mentioned the idea of “women’s literature” in the essay “Night Consciousness” for the purpose of articulating her ideal way of writing poetry.¹⁸⁹ Zhai also declares that the poem cycle “Woman” is a creative experiment of that poetic ideal.¹⁹⁰ In other words, to Zhai, the idea of “women’s poetry” is a poetic strategy that she proposed for cleansing herself of the former poetic subject and form.

Heated discussions on the concept of “women’s poetry” had taken place among poetry critics since the publication of the poem cycle “Woman” and the essay “Night Consciousness.” In response to the discussions, Zhai published two articles clarifying the idea of “women’s poetry.” The first article entitled “‘Women’s Poetry’ and Female Consciousness in Poetry” was published in 1989.¹⁹¹ In this article, Zhai claims that the idea of “women’s poetry” is what she called “female consciousness” in the works of women poets. Zhai does not provide us with a clear definition of the term “female consciousness” in this article or the previous essay “Night Consciousness.” In this article, Zhai only briefly mentions that there is no fixed pattern for “female consciousness” and that “female consciousness” will definitely be reflected in her works through the temperament of the female poet 真正的“女性意识”不是靠这些固定模式来表现，它必定会通过女诗人的气质在她的作品中有所表现，无论她写的是何种题材以及何种表达方式。¹⁹² We may infer from this account that “female consciousness” is the inner nature of

¹⁸⁸ Zang Di 臧棣 is arguably one of the most influential poets and poet-critics in China today. He is widely acclaimed for his innovative use of language that has defined a new generation of poetry after the misty and post-misty poetry.

¹⁸⁹ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, “Wancheng zhihou you zenyang,” 145-46.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁹¹ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, “Nüxing shige’ yu shige zhong de nüxing yishi,” 10-11.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 11.

women writers and that “women’s poetry” is whatever is written out of a consciousness which is innate to women poets.¹⁹³ We may also see that by connecting the idea of “women’s poetry” and a “female consciousness” that is claimed to be the essential nature of women poets, Zhai does not make the idea of “women’s poetry” more evident; rather, she ventures to embrace the principle of biological determinism. In addition, Zhai’s introduction of the term “female consciousness” into the exposition of the idea of “women’s poetry” implies that “female consciousness” becomes the subject matter and the formal guideline of “women’s poetry.” To Zhai, the idea of “women’s poetry” resolves the dilemma between what to write and how to write it.

In this article, Zhai also voices her disagreement with poetic critics. Zhai believes that the concept of “women’s poetry” was constructed by poetic critics as a reactionary political project against women’s liberation. In 1995, Zhai published another article “More on the Subject of ‘Night Consciousness’ and ‘Women’s Poetry’” to recapitulate this conclusion.¹⁹⁴ To Zhai, the critical approach of “women’s poetry” fails to recognize the profound artistic merit of women’s poetry 目前评论界对“女性诗歌”更多地是从社会学观点、妇女问题考察及女性内心世界分析等方面作定向研究，很少把诗歌文本孤立出来，从纯粹的诗歌价值和艺术的基本要素上进行具体分析。¹⁹⁵ What is implied in this judgment is that Zhai’s idea of “women’s poetry” is a

¹⁹³ Zhai actually attempted to explain the term “female consciousness” in the interview with Zang Di in 1997, eight years after the publication of this article. In the interview, Zhai expresses that “‘women’s consciousness’ is born, pouring out of our bodies into our verses. The poetic voice comes out of women’s throats, be it gentle or sharp, heavy or hysteric. From a female perspective, we experience all sorts of things in the world, and then express them by means of words. This is women’s consciousness in our works” (translation by Jeanne Hong Zhang). From this definition, we can see that Zhai maintains that female consciousness is the essential nature of women poets. See, Zhai Yongming, “Wancheng zhihou you zenyang,” 240.

¹⁹⁴ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, “Zai tan ‘heiye yishi’ yu ‘nüxing shige,’” 128-29. In Chinese, 什么时候我们才能摆脱“女性诗歌”即“女权宣言”的简单粗暴的和带政治含义的批评模式，而真正进入一种严肃公正的文本含义上的批评呢？[When can we get rid of the political mode of criticism which treats women’s poetry as the declaration of women’s rights and truly understand the text from the textual context?]

¹⁹⁵ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, “‘Nüxing shige’ yu shige zhong de nüxing yishi,” 10.

poetic strategy for women poets to prove the aesthetic value of their works and that Zhai expects a critical approach of “women’s poetry” to examine any inherent artistic merit in those works. To Zhai’s disappointment, the concept of “women’s poetry” is constructed as feminist criticism which Zhai faults for not evaluating women’s poetry as properly as formalist criticism. Zhai’s critique of the critical concept of “women’s poetry” exposes her prejudice against literary feminism and her obliviousness to the biased criticism conducted under the auspices of aesthetic analysis. On the one hand, as elaborated in Chapter One, although poetic critics unfortunately reinforce the patriarchal analytic mode while constructing the concept of “women’s poetry” as a feminist critical approach, we cannot deny that the concept of “women’s poetry” is aimed at questioning male supremacy in literature. Sexism in literature propagates women as feminine and naturally inferior, which contributes to the perpetuation of the established order that favors male works and emphasizes their supremacy. On the other hand, Zhai states her conviction that poetry criticism should be exclusively aesthetic, which reads as if there is no need for a criticism which takes into account the social and political context in which poetry is conceived and produced.¹⁹⁶ However, as Fraya Katz-Stoker observes, “Aesthetics, despite the philosophical overtones Kant lent to it, merely deals with relative cultural norms of taste. What the male cultural establishment decides is beautiful is often more a function of the dominant cultural

¹⁹⁶ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, “Zai tan ‘heiye yishi’ yu ‘nüxing shige,’” 129. Originally in Chinese, 无论我们未来写作的主题是什么（女权或非女权的），有一点是与男作家一致的：即我们的写作是超越社会学和政治范畴的，我们的艺术见解和写作技巧以及思考方向也是建立在纯粹文学意义上的，我们所期待的批评也应该是在这一基础上的发展和界定。[Whatever the subject of our future writing (feminist or non-feminist), we agree with male writers: that our writing is beyond sociology and politics; that our artistic insights and writing skills are purely literary; that the criticism we expect should also be developed and defined on this base] (translation mine). Interestingly, Zhai holds the view that when we talk about whether a poem is feminist or non-feminist, we are referring to the subject of the poem rather than the form. In addition, the subject is not as significant as the form, as formal elements define the literariness of a poem and thus its significance. Zhai contradicts herself when she insists on the discrepancy between form and content in this article even though she proposed in the previous essays that form and content are united under a mode of writing that is female-conscious. I propose to understand Zhai’s contradiction as a strategy to argue aesthetic merit in women’s poetry.

values than any inherent artistic merit.”¹⁹⁷ In other words, if the established male system of criticism stays unshaken, the studies of the so-called intrinsic operation of literature remain conducted within the framework of patriarchal imposition. Assuming the absolute objectivity of formalist criticism, Zhai perpetuates an aesthetic value system which has long subordinated women’s writing to male supremacy.

Although her prose statements on the idea of “women’s poetry” promote the status quo of the given male value system, Zhai’s poetic practices rewrite the trope of femininity, transforming it into an instrument for the poet’s recognition of female agency. Zhai’s poetry registers the effects of the definition of “femininity” accepted with mixes of acquiescence and rebellion. One of the ways we recognize Zhai’s acceptance of femininity as female temperament is the decreasing evasion of identifying female temperament 女性气质¹⁹⁸ with traits such as passivity, sentimentality, and vulnerability in her poetry. In the meantime, we recognize that Zhai’s poetry has taken some kind of liberating jump from the confinement of femininity inscribed in the history which forces femininity to take up its negative connotation and marginalized position. Zhai’s way of handling the image of femininity in the two poems that are analyzed in this chapter is developed around paradoxes of technology and civilization, body and mind, sentimentality and rationality, past and present, and present and future.

3.2 War, Body, and Femininity in “Lightly Injured People, Gravely Wounded City”

In the poem “Lightly Injured People, Gravely Wounded City” [Qingshang de ren, zhongshang de chengshi] 轻伤的人，重伤的城市, the feminine is projected onto the vulnerable body of a city.

¹⁹⁷ Fraya Katz-Stoker, “The Other Criticism: Feminism vs. Formalism,” in *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, ed., Susan Koppelman Cornillon (Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1973), 324.

¹⁹⁸ “Female temperament” is the term Zhai used to define her idea of “women’s poetry.”

The poet relies on the passive image of the city to interrogate the masculinity of civilization. The feminine body in this sense becomes a negotiating tool for the poet's artistic creativity and female identity.

Lightly Injured People, Gravely Wounded City

Here they come, the lightly injured

their gauze as white as their faces

Wounds sewn up better than the war's

Here they come, the lightly injured

Carrying their prized possessions

The parts that have not died

They strip off their uniforms they wash themselves clean

Paying by check and credit card

The gravely wounded city seethes with energy

Its pulse and temperature rise and fall

Faster than war

Slower than fear

Casting off its bandages and artificial legs

It has bled green fluid

And offered the unyielding power of stone

One of the lightly injured looks up

At those monuments to aesthetics

Six thousand bombs come pounding down
Leaving an arms depot in flames
Six thousand bomb craters
Like six thousand gravely wounded eyes
In a rush they illuminate the faces of
Thousands of married women
Married men unmarried men and women
Bodies covered in sulphur or asphalt
And at their feet, twisted metal

The lightly injured now set out
Heavily wounded maps in hand
They split up to search
For the new vessels of tall buildings
Forms thin and light and pointed
The brain of this city
Extends its spikes
So easily hacked off
But they've frightened away many wounds¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁹ Zhai Yongming, "Lightly Injured People, Heavily Wounded City," in *The Changing Room: Selected Poetry of Zhai Yongming*, trans. Andrea Lingenfelter (Hongkong: Chinese University Press, 2011), 134-37.

轻伤的人，重伤的城市

轻伤的人过来了

他们的白色纱布像他们的脸

他们的伤痕比战争缝合得好

轻伤的人过来了

担着心爱的东西

没有断气的部分

脱掉军服 洗净全身

使用支票和信用卡

一个重伤的城市血气翻涌

脉搏和体温在起落

比战争快

比恐惧慢

重伤的城市

扔掉了假腿和绷带

现在它已流出绿色分泌物

它已提供石材的万能之能

一个轻伤的人 仰头

看那些美学上的建筑

六千颗炸弹砸下来
留下一个燃烧的军械所
六千颗弹着点
像六千只重伤之眼
匆忙地映照出
那几千个有夫之妇
有妇之夫 和未婚男女的脸庞
他们的身上全是硫磺，或者沥青
他们的脚下是拆掉的钢架

轻伤的人 从此
拿着一本重伤的地图
他们分头去寻找那些
新的器皿大楼
薄形，轻形和尖形
这个城市的脑袋
如今尖锐锋利地伸出去
既容易被砍掉
也吓退了好些伤口²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 134-37.

This poem is constructed around two scenes: the contrast between a world of war in the past and a city for tourism at the present time. Each stanza of the poem contrasts the observation of an implied tourist at the present time against the war scene in the past.²⁰¹ In the first part of each stanza, we are guided by the implied tourist, as becomes gradually clear through the course of the poem, into an imaginary world of war in the past. The end of each stanza switches abruptly into the lives of people in the city at the present time, opposing their carefreeness to the wretchedness of the city.

This pattern of contrasts in diction repeats from stanza to stanza. However, the smooth flow of the speaker's vision from things of the past to lives of the present reconciles rather than intensifies the oppositions. It implies how the vision of past things also permeates here and now. In a sense, the reconciliation of past events and the present reaffirms how the civilized people who came out from the past wounds imagine the past defines who they are. People are in an easy state with their "wounds sewn up better than the war's." However, the "gravely wounded eyes" of the city "illuminate" the cruelty of the civilized. What the civilized people imagine about the past is not consistent with what the body of the city expresses. This episode of incongruity seems to be potentially demonstrating the incompatibility of the easiness and the world of modern lives. Underneath the easiness of the individuals are the wretched bodies of the city which underwent progressive destructions and (re)constructions. Such oppression of the city becomes the essential prerequisite for civilization. The goal of civilization is release from the control of nature. The history of civilization, therefore, is a history of enacting power and control over nature. In this

²⁰¹ In an essay "Lightly Injured People, Gravely Wounded City" 轻伤的人，重伤的城市, Zhai discloses that the poem was written in 2000 when she toured the city Berlin. See Zhai Yongming 翟永明, "Qingshang de ren, zhongshang de chengshi" 轻伤的人，重伤的城市 [Lightly injured people, gravely wounded city], in *Zhengru ni suo kandao de* 正如你所看到的 [Just as you have seen] (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2004), 164.

sense, civilization takes on an aura of masculinity and the city becomes the embodiment of the feminized nature.

The poem begins with an octave stanza. The first three lines in this stanza form a pattern which is repeated in the following three lines. The lines following the first three lines function as a transition from the imagined war scene in the past to the scene of a modern life. The simile in the second line helps to prove that the poet's association of the passers-by with participants in warfare is not a product of pure imagination. The comparison of people's faces to gauze is intentionally conducted in an awkward way. Instead of saying "their faces look like white gauze," the poet writes that "their gauze is like their faces." Stating that "their gauze" is like "their faces," the poet emphasizes that some quality or trait or action associated with the gauze is directly transferred to the faces. As the image of gauze symbolizes violent acts and as we are told in the next line with parallel syntax that in gauze are wrapped old war wounds, the poet shows us that these people have a past as warfare participants. The boundary between past events and present actions is further blurred, as the poet keeps the actions of the people in a continuous present by verbs in the present participle form—"过来了" in the original Chinese means "is approaching," "担着" is "carrying or shouldering," and "使用" means "paying." Although they are not indicated as inflected verbs as participles in the present, "strip off" and "wash" are used in the sense of ongoing action followed by the act of payment. What concerns me here is not primarily the grammatical effect of seeming to extend the action of warfare to the present, although the effect of an extended present echoes the aforementioned conclusion that past acts establish the identity of the modern society. Rather, I argue that the series of active verbs in this stanza reveals that men are not passive participants of war but active players. In this way, modern society established by those who are active in the destruction cause of war assumes an

identity as a controller. In addition, as analysed above, rather than attributing human traits, traits of their faces, to the non-human world, the non-human gauze, the poet transfers non-human conditions to human. This inversion of the convention of personification is subversive. It seems to make those people at the present time into things, which is a kind of reification. The implication here is that the powerful controller in war is depersonalized and objectified. The irony is that it has always been the oppressed who are depersonalized and objectified. In the context of this poem, the oppressed is the city and the city is projected as a feminized body. In this sense, the powerful controller is relegated to a status of femininity that has long been ascribed to the female. The power relation between masculinity and femininity is reversed. A connection with the next stanza has been established by this subtle message.

The next stanza introduces a pathetic fallacy: “The gravely wounded city seethes with energy / Its pulse and temperature rise and fall /.../ Casting off its bandages and artificial legs.” The city is compared to a body. The images chosen are human ones (“blood and breath” 血气 which has been metaphorically translated into “energy” is one; “pulse,” “body temperature” 体温, “bandages,” and “artificial legs” are the others). I would recommend that we read “血气翻涌” [seethes with energy] as connoting that the city is hot-blooded, quick to express its emotions: complex mixes of fearfulness and love. The feeling of love is revealed in the line that it “offered the unyielding power of stone,” providing the world after the war with a new shelter. All those human traits are transferred to the city through the use of metaphor. The city is thus personified. The city is physically wounded, but now “It has bled green fluid.” This line is an important shift in perspective. “Green secretion” 绿色分泌物 symbolizes the source of life. It “offered the unyielding power of stone.” Synecdoche is adopted in the last line. The city is represented through a specific part of it: “monuments.” What is interesting is that the city is portrayed as a

human and bestowed qualities such as receptiveness and fearfulness (“Slower than fear”). In this sense, the message conveyed in the second stanza stands in sharp contrast with what has been revealed in the first stanza. The civilized are powerful, destructive, and emotionless, while the city is passive and emotive. It is exactly this passive and emotional body, after being subjected to physical torture twice—to be “embodied” after being “disfigured” in the human war, that becomes the birthplace of a world of modern lives. The last two lines “One of the lightly injured looks up / At those monuments to aesthetics” indicate a recurrence of treating the city as a passive body. This body not only “gives birth to” a modern society but is also the nurturer of modern taste of “beauty.” The city is a body that is always taken advantage of. Such imagery is reminiscent of the female body. The poet’s choice of diction—“green secretion”—calls to mind what Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex*.

From birth, the species has taken possession of woman and tends to tighten its grasp ... at puberty the species reasserts its claim ... this whole occurrence has the aspect of a crisis. Not without resistance does the body of woman permit the species to take over; and this struggle is weakening and dangerous ... Many of the ovarian secretions function for the benefit of the egg, promoting its maturation and adapting the uterus to its requirements ... the woman is adapted to the needs of the egg rather than to her own requirements.²⁰²

In de Beauvoir’s view, the female body is organized to nurture the species and women’s imprisonment in the procreation cycle is part of the project of civilization.

However, the poet Zhai takes this one step beyond de Beauvoir. Zhai highlights in the third stanza that the city is an inflicted and vulnerable body that “mirrors” or “reflects” 映照

²⁰² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed., H. M. Parshley (New York: Knopf, 1953), 29-31.

(which is articulated as “illuminate” in the above translation) the vulnerability of the powerful world of modern lives. The superior-inferior dichotomy is unfixed. Power relationships are turned into a paradox. Here, in this stanza, number seems to be the main point: “Six thousand bombs,” “Six thousand bomb craters,” and “Thousands of married women / Married men unmarried men and women” present a stark contrast to the “one” arms depot. There is some sense of power hierarchy displayed in the contrast. The city which has been turned into “an arms depot” is inferior in strength and left virtually defenseless against the attack. However, two metaphors in the stanza help to shed the city’s status of subordination. The city is compared to an arms depot. Ironically, the war does not make the city weaker; rather, the destructive act turns the city into a place where military supplies are stored. The vulnerable body is transferred into the symbol of power. “Six thousand bomb craters / Like six thousand gravely wounded eyes” is another metaphor in which holes made by the explosion of bombs are being compared to the eyes of the wounded body. The force and strength of bombs is being transferred to the wounded and powerless city. The boundary between vulnerability and forcefulness is redrawn by the metaphor. In addition, the further description of these six thousand eyes turns the power relationship between the active players of the war and the passive city into a paradox. These eyes on the body of the city “reflect” the origin of those “Thousands of married women / Married men unmarried men and women.” These people have “bodies” in history that were “covered in sulphur or asphalt.” The implied message is that the body of the city “mirrors” the nature of modern society which is essentially a vulnerable body itself. Modern society discloses its identity as a vulnerable body, which is also the poetic trope of the last stanza.

In the last stanza, enjambment is utilized to connect the first four lines into a single meaning and grammatical structure. Our eyes tend to run over from one line to another. The

enjambment creates a strong sense of inclusion. The stanza intends to initiate each individual into the journey with the “lightly injured people” in their search for the new “tall buildings.”²⁰³ There is also an implication that people are contained within the map. The enjambment occurring in these lines that causes them to run over to the next is also needed to keep all people at the present time attached to the “Heavily wounded maps.” Wherever they go, people are kept under the control of the map. In addition, the maps are personified. Described as “heavily wounded,” the maps are linked back to the city in the past. The former body of the city was dismembered by the war. The city has been remade and is currently the physical body of the modern world in the form of “vessel-like buildings.” The message across the first four lines seems to be that people are confined to the map, which is compared to the body of the city. This body is the wounded city in a new shape. In other words, rather than taking over the city, this world of modern lives is ruled under the domination of the city. This message resonates with the imagery in the fourth line: “new vessel-like buildings” 新的器皿大楼. Modified by the noun “containers” 器皿, the definition of the key noun “building” becomes strict. These new buildings are compared to containers, which connotes that the city in the form of buildings contains modern lives. Subjected to physical reconstruction, the city confirms where the modern people belong and thus establishes the identity they search for. The vulnerable city defines what an asserted powerful modern society is.

The second half of the stanza is also constructed by enjambment. The subject of the grammatical structure— “The brain of this city”— is in apposition to “the new vessel-like

²⁰³ The fourth line is ambiguous. 新的器皿大楼 can be understood as “new tall buildings where containers are kept” or “new tall buildings which are like containers.” The noun 器皿 functions as an adjective here. What is searched for are the buildings rather than the vessels as indicated in the translation: “the new vessels of tall buildings.” I would suggest 新的器皿大楼 be translated as “new vessel-like buildings,” given the second half of the stanza is further exploration of this metaphor.

buildings,” which is the object of the first part of the stanza. The repetitive use of enjambment and the appositive structure contribute to the carrying-over of the sense of the last enjambment to the next one. I infer from the first half of this stanza that the city is empowered the moment it is disempowered by a society that believes the city is weak and passive. The destructive act turns the city into a powerful place for military supplies; whereas the vulnerable body of the city mirrors the nature of modern society. This message overflows into the second half of the stanza. The last two lines “So easily hacked off / But they’ve frightened away many wounds” re-address the paradox. The city has been rebuilt in thin, light, and pointed shapes. The rebuilding process is described as an operation of the body of the city. This operation, on the one hand, subjects the city to the infliction of flesh wounds, and, on the other hand, carves a new figure with a pointed head. The city has been cut into a new body with a sharp brain that is able to protect itself from being wounded (“But they’ve frightened away many wounds”). In addition, synecdoche is also employed in this last stanza. The “brain” is used as a substitute for the city. The brain is an organ that controls the body’s activities. The brain synecdochically stands for the city body’s real power that the history of civilization denies the city by taking advantage of the city’s vulnerability.

In sum, this poem begins by accepting what has been defined as feminine and revealing the feminine nature of the powerful. It moves on to disengage the superior-inferior dichotomy and turn the power structure between masculinity and femininity into a paradox. The poem ends with a re-affirmation of the paradoxical inscription of passivity and vulnerability on the feminized body of the city.

3.3 Technology and Femininity in “Envisioning the Future”

Zhai’s empowerment of femininity in the poem “Lightly Injured People, Gravely Wounded City” is developed around the paradoxes of war and modern society, and past and present.

Similarly, Zhai’s treatment of the image of femininity in the poem “Envisioning the Future” 想未来 [Xiang weilai] is pressed into the paradoxes of technology and civilization, and present and future. “Envisioning the Future” concerns the consequences of modern technology and medical science.²⁰⁴ I focus on examining how the poet presses the topic of medical technology to her own advantage to depict the paradox of femininity and masculinity.

Envisioning the Future

At this moment Mr. X’s semen
like thousands of arrows shooting into the sky
but missed Ms. N’s ovum
whose whereabouts are always unpredictable

Mr. X’s semen is grumbling pounding
the outer space If
one of them is blessed with good health and longevity
If the outer space it entered
is a membrane is it likely
to enter the other world

²⁰⁴ In an interview, Zhai Yongming explained that the poem “Envisioning the Future” was written to express her concerns about the development of technology. See He Yanhong 何言宏 and Zhai Yongming 翟永明, “Cong zui wu shiyi de xianshi Zhong xunzhao shiyi” 从最无诗意的现实中寻找诗意 [The poeticality in the most non-poetical reality], *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论 6 (2010): 70.

as the memory of the humankind

The air in the other world is round

spreading on the ground served up to our delight

Across the sky drift

little babies We could have ten

or a hundred sons and daughters

by the flick of a switch we'll get

the pretty babies desired sex hormone not necessary any more

This other world takes its own route

not from top to bottom

or east to west In this other world

are not straight lines but curves

The voluptuous curve of the course

formed in a bowl that can be lidded and uncovered

The desirable is drawn

and put back after used

Hot-tempered lovers

never satisfied

good-humored partners

insatiable

The chance encounter between them

in the other world
is one brief ice storm after another
They stumble on and across
delivering one after another
the crystalized unexpected
They wear it on the forefinger
Lovers never part ways
in this other world
every moment of time lost each dose of love
every drop of memory each beat of heart's content
recyclable
like a circulation device
It can activate the growth
from any stage we enter later
like a drizzle falls lightly in very small drops
We do not need quarrels any more
or any amount of impulses

What if Ms. N has left the room
What if the semen is not productive
What if human memory can
go in and out of the space freely
If the above ifs hold

what principles will Mr. X sitting on the sofa

lay down to us?

(translation mine)

想未来

正在此时 X先生的精子

如万箭齐发 升上天空

却找不到 N女士的卵子

她总是变幻自己的路线

X先生的精子抱怨着 踱来踱去

布满外星空 假设

其中一粒足够长寿

假设它进入的外空间

是一个薄片 它不可能

作为人类的记忆

进入另一个世界

另一个世界的空气 是圆的

铺在地上 随便我们吃

那儿的天空都漂满了

小 Baby 我们可以有 10 个
或者 100 个子女
只需动手 就可以得到
想要的漂亮宝贝 我们不再需要性激素
另一个世界有自己的线路
不是从上到下
或从东到西 另一个世界
没有直线 只有曲线
那线路美妙风流地
装在碗里 可以打开或盖上
我们可以从中取出想爱的人
用完之后又放回去

火爆脾气的恋人们
永不知足
温柔脾气的恋人们
也不满足
他们之间的茂密艳遇
在另一个世界里
只是一场又一场的冰风雨
他们相撞相遇

都分娩出一次又一次
水晶式的意外
他们把它戴在食指上
恋人们不再需要分离
在另一个世界里
每一滴时间每一滴爱
每一滴记忆每一滴痛快
都被允许回到起始
像一个循环装置
当我们想要得到任何时段
它都可以开启 然后
像一场水晶细雨 轻柔地落下来
我们再也不需要争吵
再也不需要一点点疯狂

假设 N 女士已离开房间
假设那些精子不够强壮
假设人类记忆可以
自由进出外太空
假设以上的假设成立
X 先生坐在沙发上

他要告诉我们哪些道理？²⁰⁵

This poem addresses the paradox that modern technology claims to ease the lives of people but ends up forcing them to conform to technological superiority. The poem starts with a scene of sexual intercourse. It then centers around the imagination of how romantic relationship and the sexual activity of bearing offspring could be managed with the involvement of technology. The poem, however, contains other elements besides this theme of medical technology such as the power relationship between the two sexes through the lens of technology. The poem actually presents two arguments: one against technological invention and one in favor of it. One important feature of the poem that helps us to follow the logic of the first argument is its diction. Lines in the second and third stanzas all argue against technological advancement. These two lines “The air in the other world is round / spread on the ground served up to our delight” compare lovemaking to a sport of egg-hunting, which is not all that appealing or romantic a simile. Further, consider these lines: “by the flick of a switch we’ll get / the pretty babies desired sex hormone not necessary any more” as another example. “By the flick of a switch” is a phrase with a strong hint of technological intervention. This phrase does not make the act of pleasure seem pleasurable but, instead, makes sexual intercourse an operating procedure to meet the end of procreation. In addition, these two lines, “We do not need quarrels anymore / or any amount of impulses,” summarize the thematic concern in the third stanza: medical technology has divested sexual love of emotion. Technological revolution is demonstrated as the victory of

²⁰⁵ Zhai Yongming 翟永明, “Xiang weilai” 想未来[Envisioning the future], in *Zui weiwan de ci* 最委婉的词 [The most euphemistic words] (Beijing: Dongfang chubanshe, 2008), 30-32.

reason over emotion. All these medical breakthroughs are portrayed as steps to desexualize human body and dehumanize the nature of human biology.

However, there is also a tolerant attitude toward medical technology inscribed into the overt suspicion of it. Technological experiments applied to the sexual activity of conceiving present evidence of the flimsiness of male supremacy. This message is communicated in the multiplicity of poetic voices of the poem. There are four points of view inscribed into the poem: the poet's, the speaker's, the addressee's, and the reader's. This multiplicity of voices makes the poem not a pure lyric voice, but more like a dialogue. In the first and second stanzas, the poet is speaking. The sexual activity is depicted from a female's point of view. It is the ovum that is in power. The male character is "grumbling," suggesting that he is habitually in ill-humor and cannot expect to be taken at his word. This negative connotation speaks of the inferiority of the male in sexual relationship from the perspective of the female. The enjambment in the second stanza ("is it likely / to enter the other world / as the memory of the humankind") also expresses the poet's doubt about male supremacy. The poet wraps the doubt in a question—to be human is to be male? The use of interrogative sentences is strategic. It helps to turn the first two stanzas which are structured through the poet's voice into functioning as the rhetoric of concession. The rhetorical concession acknowledges that it might be possible for the male's semen to enter "the other world" and assume dominance in that world. Therefore, the third stanza proceeds through the point of view of the "semen." But, as the shift in perspectives is structured in the form of rhetorical concession, the poet makes the concession only in order to better defeat it. In this context, the aim of concession is the play of irony: the male is not as authoritative as he asserts.

We follow the male's semen to that other world where the female egg is not as "unpredictable" as described by the poet's voice in the first stanza. Through the male's voice, the

female is compared to the air, which “is round / spreading on the ground served up to our delight.” The female is passive and submissive. The significance of female biology in the end of precreation is also downplayed, as “We could have ten / or a hundred sons and daughters / by hand we’ll get / the pretty babies desired sex hormone not necessary anymore.” In this other world, which is controlled by the male, the female is contained “in a bowl” and is an object that can be “drawn” and “put back after used.” The male voice in this stanza is not singular but a plural “we.” This indicates that there is an implied addressee to whom the male voice is selling and sharing this idea of the wonderful world. The inclusion of the implied addressee creates a dramatic dialogue that intends to invite each individual into adopting the viewpoint of the male voice.

The fourth stanza witnesses how the implied addressee takes the male voice’s perspective. Through the implied addressee’s voice, lovers experience too many unnecessary complications of emotion. The implied addressee becomes intolerant of the sexual relationships in the real world. After comparing the quarrelsome and impulsive lovers with those in the other world, the implied addressee willingly adopts the male voice’s position. The use of pronouns in this stanza reflects the attitude of the implied addressee. Lovers in the real world are addressed as “they” 他们. This means that the implied addressee does not identify with these lovers.

However, when it comes to the situation of lovers in the other world, the addressee’s voice becomes the “we” 我们 and is projected as identical with the male’s voice.

The “we” voice is also adopted in the last stanza. However, the speaker has shifted back to the first-person speaker or the voice of the poet, as the scene is flashbaced to the present time in the real world. The poem begins from the present time through the poet’s voice and ends also in the present time from the poet’s point of view. The poet adopts the rhetoric of concession in

the form of a question: “is it likely / to enter the other world / as the memory of the humankind.”

The poem also ends with a question. A first-person plural voice “we” is speaking. It seems that the question the poet raises in the beginning of the poem has not only been left unresolved but also generates a new question upon which the poet invites the reader’s critical judgment. The male’s voice and the addressee’s voice that the poem incorporates result in a patriarchal response to the question of male supremacy that the poet raises in the first two stanzas. Eventually, the use of a first-person voice initiates an identification of the reader with the poet. The reader’s response to the poet’s question can be described as representing a point of view which casts doubt on the male’s and the addressee’s viewpoints. The reader’s voice does not rejoin against the male’s and the addressee’s overt embrasure of technological superiority, but against their unyielding belief in male dominance in the sexual activity monitored by technology. This can be seen through the use of anaphora in this last stanza. The successive “What if” clauses are directed towards the questionable assumptions the male’s and the addressee’s voices have taken. Both voices make assumptions that the female is submissive [“What if Ms. N has left the room”], the male is always in power [“What if the semen is not productive”], and the male has been controlling what constitutes human memory [“What if human memory can go in and out of the space freely”]. In this sense, the poem through the poet’s and the reader’s voices is arguing for medical technology, as the technological development grants a site where male supremacy is untenable. In addition, the poem ends with a rhetorical question. As has been examined previously, the first-person plural voice “we” speaks in the form of a rhetorical question. It helps to invite the reader’s voice into the poem. There is also another message contained in ending the poem with a rhetorical question. Rhetorical questions are in effect statements. Therefore, this rhetorical question appears to provide the question the poet initiates in the beginning of the poem

with an answer. “Is [the semen] it likely / to enter the other world / as the memory of the humankind?” [Will men be in control of human history through acting as the controller of sexual activity?] “If Ms. N has left the room, . . . , what principles will Mr. X sitting on the sofa lay down to us?” [No, because medical technology helps to expose the impossibility of a future where the female refuses to invest.]

The first line “if Ms. N has left the room” creates an image of the “lack” of female biology. Luce Irigaray’s theory of female sexuality is informative in this regard. “Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters,” and “Her lot is that of ‘lack,’ ‘atrophy’ (of the sexual organ), and ‘penis envy,’ the penis being the only sexual organ of recognized value.”²⁰⁶ For Irigaray, patriarchal ideology sees the male sexual organ to be the only viable organ. The female sexual organ is understood as an absence of penis. This absence signifies a lack in the female sexuality which renders women inferior to men. Medical technology, depicted in this poem, recalibrates this sexual imaginary. On the one hand, the phallogentric discourse of male dominance collapses as the growth of the human race with the intervention of biological technology no longer relies on the actual sexual activity. On the other hand, the “lack” in the female sexuality, a deficiency that renders women inferior to men, helps to establish femininity as paramount for the expansion of the human race in a technology-dominated age. In this sense, medical technology empowers femininity. The human race could not have grown and will not expand if the female biology is lacking.

The poem offers two arguments: one against the power of biological technology and one for it. This does not make the poem incoherent, however. Biological technology is castigated for propagating rational power over emotion. This argument in effect shows how the power of

²⁰⁶ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans., Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), 23.

biological technology gets us to look afresh upon the so-called rational power, the marginalization of emotion, and the de-sexualization of human body. Such a perspective forms the basis of the second line of argument. The male speaker and the addressee's voice are presented as unyieldingly promoting the patriarchal ideology of rational power and overly denigrating the emotion-charged sexual relationship. The points of view of the male's and the addressee's voices are introduced through the rhetoric of concession, which means their viewpoints are presented to be defeated with the poet's argument. In this sense, the second line of argument becomes the counterargument of the first one. This formal style of double arguments helps us to understand how medical technology can be incorporated into the patriarchal discourse to perpetuate the inferiority of the female sexuality and how it also directs us to question the assumptions of male supremacy.

This chapter is also framed by the interplay of two arguments. The first section of the chapter examines the poet Zhai Yongming's prose statements on the idea of "women's poetry." Zhai employs the idea of "women's poetry" to resolve the dilemma between what to write and how to write it. Zhai connects the idea of "women's poetry" and a "female consciousness" that is claimed to be the essential nature of women poets, in order to disassociate women poets and "women's poetry" from the imposition of femininity. The second section of the chapter elaborates on how Zhai's poetic practices rewrite the trope of femininity and how the poet transforms femininity into an instrument for her recognition of female agency in poetry. The chapter concludes that Zhai's prose statements on the idea of "women's poetry" repudiate the feminine past and promote the status quo of the given male value system, but her poetry evinces her determined effort to overcome the confinement she identifies with preceding women poets who are negatively defined as feminine within the male value system.

Conclusion—Prejudice against Politics, Feminism, and Femininity

As this study has shown, the reductive approach of “women’s poetry” that critics have applied to Zhai Yongming’s poetry, although far from reflecting the poet’s stated position of her poetic aesthetics, is consistent with Zhai’s own disinclination toward feminism and femininity. Zhai understands feminism as a political project and considers it inferior to so-called aesthetic criticism. In conceptualizing a critical approach of “women’s poetry” which is non-political, contemporary poetry critics conveniently present Zhai as the spokesperson of the critical idea. Elevating the value system of aesthetic criticism to the status of an absolute, Zhai unfortunately promotes the status quo where the operation of literature has long been studied as a subset of the male value system within the rubric of aesthetic analysis. In an attempt to disassociate itself from politics, literary feminism in the Chinese context ends up reinforcing the binary mode of the patriarchal thought.

Zhai proposes a triad mode of female-authored literature. Feminine literature is the lowest in the order and of little aesthetic value. Zhai overtly disparages the feminine, in order to prioritize what she calls “women’s literature.” Poetry critics hastily accept Zhai’s negative judgment of the feminine and conveniently construct a critical concept of “women’s poetry” that attributes the failure of most women poets to the limitations of femininity. This critical approach of “women’s poetry” helps to illuminate the negative qualities of femininity which are part of the historical imposition of the patriarchal literary tradition. However, Zhai’s attitude towards femininity was not thoughtfully studied. Zhai’s prose statements reveal that she attempts to eschew the sentimental elements of femininity in her poetic practice, but her poetry ends up

perpetuating this trait. My interpretation of two of Zhai's poems reveals that rather than renounce the feminine elements with which the poet as a woman identifies, Zhai not only empowers the feminine but also associates the masculinity with the femininity that the patriarchal system ascribes to women. This inconsistency in Zhai's prose and poetry and the paradox of the relationship between the critical concept of "women's poetry" and the patriarchy kindled my interest in revisiting the scholarly debate on "women's poetry" and Zhai Yongming.

My goal was neither to expose the limitations of feminist literary theory by revealing its failure to accommodate a variation in the Chinese context nor to argue, as some critics have, that "a work of fiction always speaks for itself and what it says does not necessarily coincide with the author's private opinion."²⁰⁷ Rather, my intention has been to demonstrate that the unfortunate reinforcement of the patriarchal ideology during the construction of "women's poetry" as an anti-patriarchal critical approach and the inconsistency of Zhai's prose and poetry register the relentless imposition of the patriarchy.

My hope is that this study will, on the one hand, act as a corrective to reveal the limitations of the concept of "women's poetry," and, on the other hand, invite more scholarly reflections on the larger implications of feminist poetics and political criticism in the Chinese context through the "limitations" of Zhai's prose and extensiveness of her poetry. Zhai Yongming is acclaimed to be a chief figure of the so-called Third Generation of poets in contemporary China. It has been acknowledged that Chinese poetry of the so-called Third Generation enacted a departure from the political ideology. Members of this generation either renounced the use of language as political rhetoric and focused on articulating private experience or embraced an aesthetic ideal and concentrated on exploring the literary potential within

²⁰⁷ Lydia H. Liu, "The Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature: Negotiating Feminisms across East/West Boundaries," 41.

language. Zhai's intervention served as the catalyst for the scholarly debate on the concept of "women's poetry" and its relationship to a feminist poetics. Ironically, Zhai understands feminism as a political project and considers it inferior to the poetic ideal that arises in the patriarchal discursive establishment. The three poems of Zhai Yongming analyzed in this thesis demonstrate Zhai's desire to communicate the oppression of the patriarchy she has been suffering and her will to overcome the confinement of such oppression. Zhai's poetic practice exemplifies how she engages with politics through her asserted distance from it. I hope this study of the paradox of Zhai Yongming's poetic intervention and politics can initiate a conversation with future scholarship about revisiting Chinese Third Generation poetry as a possible corrective to the misreading of their texts and the political overtones that may or may not inhere in their works.

I have written this thesis because, as a junior scholar, I seek inspiration and a sense of critical community from literary critics, and, as a woman, I concern myself with why some women poets accept the problematic definitions of "woman," "woman poet," and "femininity" with mixed feelings of acquiescence and rebellion. Thinking back on my research in the paradoxical conclusions drawn by previous critics in their attempts to formulate the critical concept of "women's poetry," I feel a sense of belonging more than see the sense of the paradox. I am touched by the critics' efforts to apply their modes of criticism to the work of women poets when we all know that any mode of criticism may have limits beyond which it cannot be successfully employed. I share the hesitation in believing that I have the capacity to judge an author adequately as a critic. This is a disturbing awareness. But I think the effort pays off at the moment when much of what we think about the author and the text at the current moment can be called into question sometime in the future. The definition of "woman" is not initially created by

women but has retained a feminine gender that is made available to the woman as an essential part of her identity. Throughout her experience, the woman poet Zhai Yongming has needed to be proven female to justify herself as a poet. However, her artistic vitality has derived from an attempt to overcome the confinement of the assigned female identity. It is exactly her experience of the painful tension between aspiration and self-effacement that tugs at my heartstrings.

Academically, this study is a survey of the past: past debates on the concept of “women’s poetry” and protracted struggles of a woman poet with patriarchal imposition. Personally, it is a question of identity to which I do not as yet have a satisfactory answer.

I would like to conclude this thesis with a poem I dedicated to my departed grandmother. She gave me a past which I at once perpetuate and repudiate.

Grandmother

The coconut candy is the daily look of longing at your bedroom

The fifty-cent bill is the sweet smile flickering across your pockets

The factory that fellow townsmen collaborate to make cigarettes

Cuts off my expectation for you every day

You walk all the way

All year round carrying a large umbrella with a curved handle

The vendors watch for you

Illiterateness credulity

Have you loved

You love me in a unique manner of selfishness

You love everything that is yours
You love me as yourself by blood
You transfer to me the love earned from grandpa
In the form of a fifty-cent bill
You are transferred

I love you with my selfishness
The candies the bills
No longer fit in with my expectations
I start measuring your selfishness
I take you as myself
To hate
Ridding myself of my selfishness

You are gone
Love has gone away
It's too late to ask
The story of the unspeakable woman

奶奶

每天的盼望是藏在你卧室的椰香糖
每日的笑颜是开在你衣袋里的五角钱
那个满城人一起合谋制造香烟的工厂

隔断了我每日对你的期盼
你总是一路行走
一年四季 背着一把带柄的大伞
路上的商贩也盼着你
不识字 轻信
成了你被喜爱的理由

你用一种独有的自私来爱我
你爱所有属于你的
血脉让你把我当成自己 来爱
你把爷爷的爱转让给了我
用五角钱的方式
转让了自己

我也用我的自私来爱你
那些糖 那些纸币
不再联系着我的盼望
我开始比较你的自私
我把你当成自己
来恨
恨掉了我的自私

你走了

爱也不在场了

我来不及问的

那无法诉说的女性的故事

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