
Black Night Consciousness and Ecofeminist Poetics in the Works of Zhai Yongming

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Zhai Yongming 翟永明, one of the most important Chinese women poets of our time, situates “genuine female consciousness” at the heart of her work. In the 1984 preface to her linked suite of twenty poems, *Woman* (Nüren 女人, 1984), titled “Black Night Consciousness” (Heiye yishi 黑夜意识), she writes: “While it participates in the shared fate of humanity, a genuine female consciousness, and the unique language and form that express that consciousness, can also construct a durable impulse that enters into the poem’s true and sacred precinct” (Sze 160). By linking a certain idea of femininity, as well as feminist engagement, with the essence of being a poet, Zhai foregrounds a feminine archetype in herself and in her times and tries to understand it further by “expanding her own self to fuse with a universal image of woman” (Tao 412). Throughout her poems, the principle of *yin* 阴 is pervasive and becomes linked to moments of darkness, water, and the spectral light of the moon.

But as we read Zhai’s poetry collections and essays from the mid-1980’s to the present—a time span of nearly forty years—it becomes apparent that her concern with “night consciousness” changes over time, and gradually evolves through three distinct stages. In the initial phase of her work, which begins with the publication of *Woman*, Zhai for the first time articulates a female point of view in modern Chinese poetry and stresses the unique nature of women’s experiences and perception. Avant-garde for their time, the poems in *Woman* place the lyrical subject at the center and articulate the difficulties of constructing a coherent self-identity through the act of writing, revealing a strong affinity with American confessional poets, particularly Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) (Feeley 2017 and Zhang 2018). In the second stage of Zhai’s poetic oeuvre, we see a clear movement from the pervasive color black to white, the “color of colors” (*yanse de yanse* 颜色的颜色), which begins to function as the central medium for her poetic discourse in the 1990’s (Tao 413). Utilizing a variety of concrete images to suggest

purity, energy, silence, and elegance, this poetic mode has a loose, more flexible structure and reveals a new persona for her discourse. Rather than relying on the color black to probe the depths of inner life within the first person “I,” she now uses the color white to change the relationship between subject and object and more frequently uses the second person pronoun “you.”¹ As Zhai avers, “this white” imparts to her poetry “a different shape, tone, rhyme, and rhythm” that permits her to move from the physical to the transcendent, and accompanies her discovery of painting, sculpture, dance, music, and drama. Finally, in the third stage, we see a powerful concern with ecological disasters, and particularly the unsettling relationship between womanhood, nature, and urbanization. I argue that more recent poems like “Report on a Child Prostitute” 关于雏妓的一次报道 (Guanyu chujī de yīcì baodao) and “The Testament of Hu Huishan” 胡惠珊自述 (Hu Huishan zishu) invite readers to think about and interpret reality along the lines of ecofeminism. Similar to Plath in the 1960’s, Zhai identifies herself with the vulnerable ecosystem, and she consciously focuses on victims of the radical processes of globalization, marketization, commercialization, and war. Her poems serve as social and ecological critique of ills like prostitution, urban poverty, and crime, while she as a poet plays the role of sympathizer, observer, eyewitness, and mediator. By tracing these distinct stages in Zhai’s poetic career, we observe a transformation of her inward-oriented “black night consciousness” that reveals women’s interior lived realities in different, more outward-looking and ecocritical poetic forms while the feminist impetus at the core of her work remains imperative.

Black Night Consciousness as a Way of Knowing and Saving the World

Zhai’s essay “Black Night Consciousness” is an unequivocal and vital statement of her feminist poetics. Declaring, “every woman faces her own abyss,” Zhai identifies “the reality of the black night” as the truest and most direct impulse that embodies the power that lies in poetry. Creating this black night, and bringing women’s consciousness, beliefs, and feelings to the foreground, is her primary purpose and will, she asserts, lead to a process of complete awakening:

Now is the moment when at last I’ve become powerful. Or perhaps I should say that now I’ve finally become aware of the world around me and of the implications of my place in

it. An individual and universal inner consciousness – I call this Black Night consciousness – has ordained that I be the bearer of female 女性 (*nǚxìng*) consciousness, beliefs, and feelings, and that I directly take that charge upon myself, and put it into what I see as the best work I can do on behalf of that consciousness. Namely, poetry. (Sze 157)

Zhai is seeking a language of the unconscious and of initial perception, which she considers unique to the female of the species. However, as Michael Day and other scholars have pointed out, her quest is personal by its very nature (2005). Despite first impressions, the preface is in fact a statement of her personal poetic credo, not a manifesto designed to serve as a rallying point for all female poets or even all Chinese female poets. She states: “I do represent myself, and it is my limitations that make me unique as a poet” (Sze 158). This point is important to Zhai because, in response to the *Woman* cycle and its preface, what she has termed a “black tornado” 黑旋风 (*hei xuānfēng*) swept through China during the latter half of the 1980’s as a multitude of women poets heeded her call and published their own work. What Zhai had intended as a personal poetic exploration into language, culture, and her own unconscious at times devolved into a superficial exercise that threatened to obliterate the value of her efforts. In the June 1989 issue of *Poetry Monthly* 诗刊 (*Shikan*), Zhai offered her opinions on the fashion, saying: “As a joke I often say that I should change the first line of “The Black Room” from “All crows under heaven are black” to “All women under heaven are black.” She also proceeded to change the last line in one of her poems from “I am a woman” to “I am myself.”²

Throughout her essay, Zhai distinguishes the black night from naked daylight, and continues to search for the one steady light that exists in the depths of that Black Night. By focusing on the dark and taboo experiences that define women’s lives, the poet gains clarity of perception and insight. This “terrifying light that lies in the midst of the Black Night” will enable both poet and reader to face reality and to “annihilate fear.” In this way, by becoming aware of women’s intrinsic connection with the “consciousness of black night,” true women’s literature can be created. The experience of pain and “the kingdom of death” are necessary for the poet’s understanding of black night consciousness.

And for precisely this reason, when a woman poet lays claim to her mythological world, that world is not only linked with the moments of birth, but it is also connected to the kingdom of death. In the increasingly blurred boundary between the two, you have to see yourself clearly in order to maintain the reality of the Black Night in your own heart. Only when you are permeated by the Black Night consciousness that you've unearthed through the revelation of the pain that lies inherently within you, can you truly annihilate your own fear. This is why some people have said to me: "A Woman poet's most powerful opponent is herself." I believe this is true. (Sze 159)

As Zhai clearly articulates here, her primary purpose throughout the poem cycle *Woman* is the revelation of an inner psychological darkness to "the bright light of shared language" (Sze 160). The effect of her art is that women who would normally feel invisible in the daytime can be "seen" in the enlightening poetic space. In nearly all of her poetic texts, Zhai's exploration of feminine consciousness becomes intertwined with a profound immersion into nature. As her poems "Monologue" 独白 (Dubai) and "The World" 世界 (Shijie) underscore, the lyrical subject and the natural world form an integral whole. The self is not divided from the environment, and instead the natural world ceaselessly transforms and flows into the speaker. Even as her nocturnal writing style serves as a gateway for women's self-reflexive, progressive thoughts, she simultaneously draws attention to the interconnectivity of all things, and the intersection between women-focused and nature-focused consciousness.

When we read the poem "Monologue" it immediately becomes clear that the female lyrical subject is one with nature. Indeed, womanhood, nature, and the exploration of consciousness are deeply connected to each other, and the self at the center of the text owes its existence to the earth, sky, water, and sunlight.

I, a rhapsodist, am full of the charm of the abyss
given fortuitous birth to by you. earth and sky
unite as one, you call me a woman
and strengthen my body

I am as soft as the white-feathered body of the water
carrying me in your hands, I hold this world

dressed in a corporeal mortal-embryo, in sunlight
I am bedazzled, although you find it hard to believe
(Patton)

我，一个狂想，充满深渊的魅力
偶然被你诞生。泥土和天空
二者合一，你把我叫作女人
并强化了我的身体

我是软得像水的白色羽毛体
你把我捧在手上，我就容纳这个世界
穿着肉体凡胎，在阳光下
我是如此眩目，是你难以置信
(Zhai Nüren 13)

The speaker “I” 我 (wo) reveals that she was “given fortuitous birth by you” 偶然被你诞生. Though we do not know precisely who she means by “you,” the rhythm and punctuation of the poem lead us directly to the phrase “earth and sky unite as one, you call me a woman and strengthen my body” 泥土和天空 / 二者合一，你把我叫作女人 / 并强化了我的身体. This structuring of the poetic melody establishes in the reader’s mind a fluid interchange between poetic speaker, the earth, and the sky, which are linked to each other by birth. The effect of these words is to bring about an elimination of the distinction between self and other, and between human and non-human worlds. Zhai further enhances this perception in the second stanza of the poem in which the speaker describes herself to be “soft as the white-feathered body of the water, carrying me in your hands” 我是软得像水的白色羽毛体你把我捧在手上. But, even while the water carries her, she “holds this world [. . .] in sunlight” 我就容纳这个世界 [. . .] 在阳光下, and the world itself has become “dressed in a corporeal mortal-embryo” 穿着肉体凡胎. The creative, speaking self here becomes a maternal being, who is simultaneously the mother and child of the universe. Throughout the poem, as its title reminds us, the poet’s attention is focused upon the interior consciousness and thoughts of one speaking self.

The construction of female physicality, sexuality and subjectivity is further enhanced in the celebrated poem “The World” in which all of nature exists as a vehicle for the poet’s senses and sensibility.

Perceiving the natural world from a female angle, the woman poet once again evokes elements of nature to create a link between self-identity, procreation, and creativity:

[. . .]

even though this subject is long past. In dreams I am haughty
I approach softly, am impregnated by the sky
there black clouds incubate the setting sun,
the sockets of my eyes are filled by an ocean
white coral grows out of the depths of my throat

Waves strike me
as the midwife strikes my back, in this way
the world bursts into my body
alarming me, making me feel a measure of wild joy

I still treasure it, in the mood
of that mighty wild beast, I gaze at the world, lost in thought

[. . .]

the roots of black desires for these primitive rock forms.
Relying on my blood to grow
I've been witness for the world
and so make black night to spare all men disaster
(Day 6)

虽然那已是很久以前的事，我
在梦中目空一切
轻轻地走来，受孕于天空
在那里乌云孵化落日，我的眼眶
盛满一个大海
从纵深的喉咙里长出白珊瑚

海浪拍打我
好像产婆在拍打我的脊背，就这样
世界闯进了我的身体
使我惊慌，使我迷惑，使我
感到某种程度的狂喜

我仍然珍惜，怀着那伟大的
野兽的心情注视世界深思熟虑

[. . .]

原始的岩层种下黑色梦想的根
它们，靠我的血液生长
我目睹了世界
因此，我创造黑夜使人类幸免于难
(Zhai Nüren 7-8)

In “The World,” the darkness of women’s experiences and consciousness becomes interwoven with all things in the world. The poet extends her emotion into nature, and her imagination into a mystical world, in order to understand the self profoundly. Ever present, the lyrical speaker is “impregnated by the sky” and there “black clouds incubate the setting sun, the sockets of my eyes are filled by an ocean, white coral grows out of the depths of my throat” 在那里乌云孵化落日，我的眼眶盛满一个大海，从纵深的喉咙里长出白珊瑚. In an intriguing way, physicality conjoins sexuality, interiority, and exteriority, as the black clouds become the point of origin for the sun, and the ocean and living corals are fused with her body. A few lines later, the speaker reminds us that the “roots of black desires for these primitive rock forms” in fact “rely on her blood to grow.” The life force that creates the world--as well as the poet’s own creativity--come from inside her body, and from the circulation of her blood. The body itself constitutes a mine of creativity on which the poet--and the world--draw. Most important, the poet here foregrounds her crucial role as a “witness for the world.” It is this key task of observation, witnessing, and truth-telling which allows the poet to “create black night to spare all humans from disaster” 我创造黑夜使人类幸免于难. The dark night consciousness of womanhood here assumes the life-giving role of saving all of humanity. In this way, the poet underscores the importance of uniquely feminine memories, perspectives, and ways of understanding the world, in the most weighty and consequential terms.

“A Feeling for Writing”: A Journey from Interior Black to Exterior White Worlds

In the late 1980’s, after her initial success, Zhai had used the symbolic “black” for so long that she began to feel signs of satiety

with it. In an interview at the time, she said: “I became tired of the dark night” (Tao 413). Her interest in fantasy, night, and dream, which stemmed from her concentration on the subconscious as a special field of contemplation and insight, gave way to a desire to view things from a more removed psychological distance. The turning point came when she wrote the poem cycle “Death’s Design” 死亡的图案 (Siwang de tu’an) shortly after the long illness and passing of her mother in 1987. In his discussion of this poem, Naikan Tao notes: “Observing from a distance means clarifying the essence of things; to move close to death is to approach the light--to anticipate the finale of life and its significance” (413). This poem cycle, which signals a major shift in her poetic career, served for Zhai as “a dark window that let in a beam of light to shine on the depths of my heart” (Day 2005). From this moment onward, we observe a change in outlook and poetic tone in Zhai’s works, as she begins to observe all things in the world seemingly from the outside, while using the color white as a nexus for her feelings, thoughts, language, and imagery. As she remarked at the time: “The white color I have seen so far from the uproar of the world – calls me” (Tao 413). Before turning to an example of her poetry from this period, it is fascinating to consider how she articulates her new-found poetics in her essays, in which she frequently explains her own reflections on poetry, life, and art.

Written in the early 1990s, Zhai articulates her approach to the art of poetry in a short piece, “Waiting for a Miracle to Happen” 等待奇迹发生 (*Dengdai qiji fasheng*).

Poetry is an everlasting yearning for unknowable worlds and unattainable objects.

Poetry is the revision of currently existing language and the rediscovery of that which has already been discovered. Poetry is a reason some people need to go on living. The place where most people come to a halt is precisely the place from which the poet sets out. Most people kill time; the poet creates it.

(Zhai *Poetry International* 2006)

For Zhai, poetry is more than her life’s work; it is her religion. She also writes in order to provide solace and refuge to others, as “poetry is a reason some people need to go on living.” She asserts that poetry possesses a creative force and is able to actually “create time” in the

sense that it renders visible and illuminates forces that underly and determine reality. In Zhai's case, this foregrounding of the function of poetry also arises from the need to revive selfhood, gender the self, and articulate the silenced female self.

Writing poetry is a process that involves waiting for a miracle to happen. That instant which we strive so hard to get close to is the instant we comply with the will of Heaven.

Poetry will always be a form of inquiry: transcending language, intellect, beauty and even death, it hangs its question marks high up on the brow of time. [. . .] A poet concentrates all her passions on a feeling for writing 文字情 (*wenzì qíng*). She discovers things of the utmost importance in characters and words invested with ordinary meanings. The rise and fall of the tones of the characters give assistance to the secret games she plays in her heart of hearts, and helps her to deduce the intriguing rhythms of the ineffable. [. . .] As well, she should have a "third eye" 天眼 (*tiānyǎn*) that opens when confronted with moments of mystery. At the same time as the poet writes "prophetic remarks" for the world, she is also the one being "prophesied" about through her language. (Zhai *Poetry International* 2006)

In this part of her essay, in which Zhai articulates her new poetic credo, she engages ancient ideas in classical Chinese poetics. Speaking of "the will of heaven," she posits poetry as a form of inquiry that transcends language, intellect, beauty, and even death. Like the first anthology of Chinese poetry, the *Book of Songs* 詩經 (*Shijing*), she celebrates the power of poetry to lend shape to that which is ineffable in human existence and, in so doing, to reach and influence the human heart and mind. Crucially, in order to succeed in her task of "deducing the intriguing rhythms of the ineffable," the poet must possess a "third eye," which in the original Chinese is actually named "heaven's eye." This point of view, adopted by the wise and observant poet, is more than a bird's eye view, as it is able to fuse inward and outward perspectives in order to uncover "moments of mystery" which, in turn, become "prophecies" in the poet's hand. It is significant to bear in mind, however, that even while the poet serves as decipherer of reality and prophet of the future, "she is also the one being prophesied

about through her language,” and therefore writes herself into being through the art of poetry. This, Zhai asserts, is the “miracle waiting to happen” in a poem.

In a subsequent essay, “For the Vast Minority” 献给无限的少数人 (Xiangei wuxian de shaoshuren), that appears at the end of her 1996 collection *Call it Everything* 称之为一切 (Chengzhi wei yiqie), she solidifies her poetic thinking, and further underscores the significance of communication with others, to whom she wishes to convey essential matters in her heart.

My poetry as always is being offered to the minority in my heart. They may be strangers, whom I have invented in my mind, but more often they are specific friends I have around me; my poetry seems to be written for them, as if my heart had, at the time, something it urgently wished to discuss with their hearts. This may also explain why my poems always have a dimly visible “third person” in them, a hidden person who is at the center of an attentive listening. For this reason, my poems bear no relation to the latest trends, nor to urgent currents of thought in the contemporary world. They are merely the products of my watching over a changing era from the site of words and the backs of pieces of paper. In fact, they are of little importance and are not appreciated and recognized; the wonderful thing is that they are understood by me, as well as a minority of people who like and who understand things that “have absolutely no meaning.” (Zhai *Poetry International* 2004)

The important thing, for Zhai, is the act of “attentive listening” to the contemporary world, and to encapsulate things in words which seemingly “have absolutely no meaning.” She believes it is necessary to “watch over a changing era” and to express these thoughts, even if they are not appreciated or recognized by the majority of people in the world. Though she walks to the rhythm of her own drum and creates poems that “bear no relation to the latest trends,” Zhai is concerned with bearing witness to reality and to “understanding things” deeply, even if they seem trivial and unimportant on the surface.

In this essay, we also observe her newfound interest in “the appearance of things” which she would like to capture in her poems to create some order in the world. She writes:

Sometimes, I hope that my poems won't be like my oversensitive nerves, feeble, chaotic, imbalanced. I would prefer to put in order certain substances on the basis of the appearance of things. In fact, I believe even more that certain plain things are more worthy of interest than their exteriors would suggest: we neglect their deeper levels. I hope that with the spade of my poetry I can dig past the surface dust covering images and vocabulary, and keep on digging until I reach the core of things, a core that resembles sand and pebbles: hard, forceful, drained of excess moisture and therefore the most reliable foundation for the great building of aesthetics. (Zhai)

Whereas in her earlier poetry Zhai was exclusively concerned with the complex, multi-layered realities of individual women's subconscious perceptions, she is now more interested in "plain things" which, as she writes, can be "more worthy of interest than their exteriors would suggest." She urges the reader to look behind the superficial façade of seemingly simple elements of the everyday world. For herself, she likens her task to that of a worker or farmer who uses the "spade of poetry to dig past the surface" and to keep digging until she reaches "the core of things." These lines indicate that Zhai is now adopting a more outward-oriented stance, and seeks not to look deeply within her mind, but instead toward lived experiences, realities, and the hardships encountered by women in the world.

Witnessing Reality in the White Light of Language

When we read Zhai's more recent contemporary poems "Report on a Child Prostitute" and "The Testament of Hu Huishan" it is clear that she has undergone a transformation and is no longer primarily concerned with revealing the "dark night" of women's interior consciousness. Instead, she directs her gaze outward, into the world, in order to uncover and shed light on grievous crimes against humanity, particularly young girls. The perspective she adopts in these poems is intrinsically linked to the interconnection between nature, womanhood, and black night consciousness, which we saw in many of her earlier poems. The difference here, however, is that she does not primarily probe the inner psychological realities of her suffering female speakers. Instead, she lends voice to young girls who are enduring the impact of male domination, while at the same time

highlighting pollution and other detrimental human damage upon the environment.³ Adopting a forceful ecofeminist stance, Zhai establishes a direct equivalence between the objectification and marginalization of young girls and the natural world, utilizing poetry as a way to bring the darkness of this oftentimes hidden reality into the clear light of precise, unequivocal poetic language. In “Report on a Child Prostitute” we read:

[. . .]

Three months for a child prostitute

That’s nearly 100 days

Over 300 men

Not an easy number for a child

She’s never understood why

So many old, ugly, filthy men

Want to press themselves to her belly

She doesn’t understand what it’s all about

She only knows her body

Is becoming light and empty that something’s been taken
from it

Some people think child prostitutes are pretty dumb

But she wouldn’t know about that

She spends her nights counting

She counts over 300

Nameless figures residence unknown

Collectively they’re consumers

Their numbers like ancient symbols in a graveyard

Vanishing before dawn

Reading the paper I keep thinking:

You can’t write a poem about this

You can’t turn poetry into something like this

You can’t chew up a poem

Or hammer words into teeth to eat away

These diseases these incisions

These large sums added to her twelve years

(Lingenfelter 147-151)

雏妓的三个月
算起来也快100多天
300多个男人
这可不是简单数
她一直不明白为什么
那么多老的，丑的，脏的男人
要趴在她的肚子上
她也不明白这类事情本来的模样
只知道她的身体

变轻变空 被取走某些东西
雏妓又被认为美丽无脑
关于这些她一概不知
她只在夜里计算
她的算术本上有300多个
无名无姓 无地无址的形体
他们合起来称作消费者
那些数字像墓地里的古老符号
太阳出来以前 消失了

看报纸时我一直在想：
不能为这个写诗
不能把诗变成这样
不能把诗嚼得嘎嘣直响
不能把词敲成牙齿
去反复啃咬 那些病
那些手术
那些与12岁加在一起的统计数字
(Zhai Zhai Yongming de shi 264-267)

Whether she is aware of it or not, Zhai in this poem utilizes an ecofeminist perspective by foregrounding a disturbing, exploitative relationship between womanhood, nature, and urbanization. Ecofeminism is a hybrid feminist theory that draws on classical feminism and is opposed to male domination and prejudice. The most distinctive attribute of ecofeminism lies in its analysis of the interrelationship between womanhood and nature under male supremacy. An open theoretical framework which allows for a variety of interdisciplinary perspectives, it advocates diversity and transgresses

binary oppositional structures between men and women, culture and nature, as well as sensation and emotion. Ecofeminists challenge the very notion of development and believe that development is based on the Western patriarchal system and bourgeois economic progress. The asset of the ecofeminist movement is to listen to the outcry of the subaltern and the oppressed, and to emphasize that the plight of womanhood springs from a discourse of development that destroys natural resources and social diversities. In her poems, we see that Zhai is deeply concerned with the negative impact of rapid economic development and seeks to protect and save material and cultural systems that have been damaged by urbanization, technology, politics, and pollution. In her texts, women and young girls become identified with the vulnerable ecosystem and are aligned with a “pure state” of being. Their social identities become marked by mobility, changeability, insecurity, and uncertainty.

Specifically, by adopting the simple, matter-of-fact language reminiscent of a newspaper article in “Report on a Child Prostitute,” she portrays a young girl in an acute state of objectification as well as ignorance. The nameless child in the poem becomes equated with what is natural, innocent, unadorned and easily destroyed. A young human being, who still exists in a natural state prior to language and understanding, becomes caught in a merciless web of powerful circumstances she cannot begin to comprehend. Alienated and hunted in the mechanized urban setting, she is a poetic symbol for the exploitation and destruction of living beings amid the struggle for economic survival. At the same time, Zhai does permit us entry into the victim’s feelings and perceptions when she writes: “She only knows her body is becoming light and empty/ that something’s been taken from it 只知道她的身体 变轻变空 被取走某些东西.” Though the young girl is not the speaker in this poem, the poet allows us insight into her mind and feelings by focusing not so much on cognitive thought, but rather on a bodily sensation of emptiness and loss. Zhai succeeds in capturing the perspective of a young child, who does not have the words to express what is happening to her, or what she feels.

Zhai also succeeds in this poem to momentarily reverse the power relationship between young girl victim and adult male perpetrator. The only way in which the men make an appearance

in this poem is as “nameless figures/residence unknown 无名无姓 无地无址的形体。” They are faceless in this poem, lacking any physical presence or individual characteristics, and are directly linked to anonymous destructive powers of the economic system on the one hand, and traditional Chinese culture on the other. “Collectively they’re consumers, their numbers like ancient symbols in a graveyard. Vanishing/ before dawn 他们合起来称作消费者那些数字像墓地里的古老符号太阳出来以前 消失了。” In this poem, men are seen as the embodiment of civilization, progress, reason, and power. Benefiting from the existing cultural system and systematic disempowerment of women and girls, they are the dominant species in the concrete urban jungle, who hunt, rule, and possess. The male desire for sex, possession, and aggression is a threat to the female body, which causes tremendous frustration and sorrow to the speaker in the poem: “you can’t turn poetry into something like this, you can’t chew up a poem or hammer words into teeth/ to eat away these diseases/ these incisions/ these large sums added to her twelve years 不能把诗嚼得嘎嘣直响 不能把词敲成牙齿去反复啃咬 那些病那些手术 那些与12岁加在一起的统计数字。” The poet is outraged by the objectification and commodification of the female body and believes that gender oppression is reminiscent of natural oppression, both of which serve male desires and interests.

Zhai further emphasizes her ecofeminist message in another poem, “The Testament of Hu Huishan”:

Where do they lie I cannot find them
No one remains who knows their names
They too had mothers and fathers
 mothers and fathers who also burned like flames
They too had umbilical cords
 umbilical cords that took their parents’ lives
Winding towards the ground
They too had milk teeth
 but no one remains to save them

[. . .]

This is the longest fissure on the face of the earth
It swallowed us all and all that remains
Are huge numbers numbers large enough

to make an even greater number of people weep
When the grade of concrete used for my memorial
Is better than that of my school could my frail body
Lift up the mighty earth
Could I turn my body and release energy from underground
So people on the surface would see

The bodies of my entire class lie crushed
The corpses of those boys and girls sticking out
Flowers in the crevices between stones
thrusting out their final bright beauty

We who are now silent
Can no longer show others
The sort of force that turned our school to rubble
(Lingenfelter 159-161)

他们躺在何处 我找不着
他们的名字 再也无人知道
他们也有父母 父母也像火焰般燃烧
他们也有脐带 脐带把父母的命
往地下缠绕
他们一样也有乳牙 再也无人收藏

[. . .]

这是世界上最长的裂缝
把我们一併吞下. 剩下的
只有数字庞大 大到让更大数目的人流泪

当纪念我的水泥标号
超过学校 我瘦小的身体
能否把强壮的大地抬起
我能否翻个身 把地底的能量送出去
让上面的人看到

整个班级的身体都压在这里
男女同学的躯体冒出
象石缝里的鲜花. 冒出最后的鲜美

一声不响的我们
已不能让某些人看见
曾经是怎样的能量 把学校变成废墟
(Zhai Xingjianju 3-5)

Zhai wrote this poem after visiting a small memorial hall built in memory of a young girl, named Hu Huishan, by the architect Liu Jiakun 刘家琨, who is often called “an architect of memory.” As Liu explains, he created this memorial “not for the state, nor the nation, nor the regime, nor to commemorate a great figure. Nor was it created as an educational site to uphold nationalism or heroism. It was erected to commemorate a life lost in the earthquake, an ordinary but priceless life--that of Hu Huishan, a third-year student in class one at Juyuan Middle School in Juyuan Township, Dujingyan, Sichuan” (Liu 2009). Like the creator of the memorial, which the public are not permitted to visit, Zhai also believes that “treasuring the value of ordinary lives will be the foundation of our nation’s revival” (Harman and Bruce 2020). And, like the building, she has created a poem that foregrounds the unjust loss of innocent life. Speaking in the voice of the young dead girl, Zhai focuses in this poem on the destroyed empty space, and the need to shed light on corruption and greed that led to the death of so many children. Zhai wants to illuminate “the sort of force / that turned our school to rubble” 曾经是怎样的能量 把学校变成废墟. The force that she speaks of in this poem is a human, social, and economic force that dehumanizes, subjugates, and kills those who have no power.

In this way, the poem tells us that women and children are just like cultivated lands, destroyed forests, and hunted prey, for it is through the forces of the market economy that these invisible members of society are further impoverished and disempowered. Urbanization and industrialization work to reinforce gender inequality and to impoverish womanhood socially, economically, and culturally. Zhai’s exploration of the relationship between women’s lived realities, urban environments, and the natural world is fundamental to the formation of her ecologically informed poetics. These ecofeminist sensitivities in her creative practice are insightful and helpful in calling for a reconstruction of socially just societies, which in some of her other recent work becomes linked to the importance of building a

harmonious ecological universe and global ecosystem that allows the soil, the air, animal life, human beings, and especially women, to lead healthy, natural lives free of violence and injury.

Linking Black Night Consciousness and Ecofeminist Poetics

When we read Zhai's poetic creations throughout the past four decades, it is clear that nature, woman, and the exploration of consciousness are always her primary concerns. Using poetic language to uncover and depict the true nature of reality is the high calling of her art. Her poems seek to reach "the core of things" and to reveal these truths by means of a sensitive "feeling for writing" and viewing the lived realities of women and girls from the perspective of "a third eye." But while her priority as a young poet in the collection *Woman* was to create dark, heavy, collage-like obscure imagery to allow her reader to gain glimpses of women's internal psychological trajectories, her objective in her more recent work is to reveal the dark forces that engulf women, girls, children, and other vulnerable beings equally. Examining reality in the world with a careful, sensitive, deeply intuitive and sympathetic gaze, she seeks to bear witness to the suffering and deprivation she perceives. While in her early poems she seeks to bring to the foreground the internal darkness within women's hearts that had remained unacknowledged for so long, she now adopts a more forceful ecofeminist perspective to pinpoint in clear, direct, unequivocal language the injustice and dehumanization she seeks to stop. Her anger and outrage are no longer hidden beneath the surface of imagery and words; instead, these poems are testimonials to ugly truths, and lend voice to those who cannot speak. While she uses her gifts as a poet to diagnose and call for attention to matters of great urgency, she also succeeds in carefully observing a multitude of disempowered victims to enable us to understand what it means to be caught in the impenetrable darkness of their fate.

Notes

¹ We see this change in the poems she wrote while abroad in New York City in the early 1990's, such as "I Stand at the Intersection of Perpendicular and Horizontal Streets" 我站在直街横街的交点上 (Wo zhan zai zhi jie heng jie de jidaodian shang) and the poetry collections *Living in this World* (人生在世 Rensheng zai shi, 1986) and

Song of the Café (咖啡馆之歌 Kafeiguan zhi ge), published in 1993.

² Zhai rewrote her poetry collection *Woman* in 1996 and changed several poems to make them less violent and difficult to understand. At this time, she also made this alteration to one of the poems.

³ She engages in this kind of ecocritical critique and highlighting of human damage inflicted upon the environment in her recent landscape poem "Roaming the Fuchun Mountains with Huang Gongwang." See Jagusić, Justyna. "The Time Travels of a Handscroll: Past and Present in Zhai Yongming's Landscape Poem 'Roaming the Fuchun Mountains with Huang Gongwang'." *International Communication of Chinese Culture*, 2019. vol. 6, no. 1. 71-84.

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