
Posthumanism, Temporality, Ecofeminism, Femininity, and Visuality in the Poetry of Zhai Yongming: An Introduction

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Contemporary Chinese poet Zhai Yongming 翟永明 (b. 1955) burst onto China's literary scene in 1984-85 with an explosive poetic sequence titled *Nüren* (女人, "Woman" or "Women"). It was quickly acclaimed by the influential literary critic Tang Xiaodu 唐晓渡 as a profound feminist intervention into the poetic world of China in the mid-1980s.¹ It is helpful to remember that the early years of the post-Mao Era in China, marked as beginning with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the precipitous downfall of the Gang of Four, was, in hindsight, a moment of almost unimaginable ferment, elation, and tension. Mao's death and the fall of the Gang of Four brought an end to the ten-year period known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, a time during which, virtually speaking, no literary works that did not receive Chinese Communist Party sanction could be published. Some poetry during the Cultural Revolution was written, but only in private and for private consumption, with highly selective informal circulation among close coteries of individuals. It was not until after the Cultural Revolution, the political demise of the Gang of Four, and the rehabilitation of Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) and his assumption to the position of Vice Premier—but de facto political strongman in China—that there was any loosening of political control over literary publication.

Different literary genres in China have taken different routes in their development during the intellectual renaissance of the late-1970s and the 1980s that was made possible by the Reform and Opening-Up Era (改革开放 *Gaige kaifang*). Quite soon after the fall of the Gang of Four, fiction writers began producing narratives that laid bare the horrible experiences that were visited upon them, their families, and friends in what became known as Shanghai Wenxue 伤痕文学 (variously translated as "Scar Literature," "Wound and Scar

Literature,” or “Literature of the Wounded”). A number of poets such as Bei Dao 北岛 (b. 1949), Mang Ke 芒克 (b. 1951), Duo Duo 多多 (b. 1951), Gu Cheng 顾城 (1956-1993), Shu Ting 舒婷 (b. 1952), Wang Xiaoni 王小妮 (b. 1955), Shi Zhi 食指 (b. 1948), Yang Lian 杨炼 (b. 1955), and others began making their poetry available publicly in samizdat or unofficial journals, poetry that in some cases had been written and hidden during the Cultural Revolution and in other cases had been recently composed. These samizdat journals, such as the most famous *Jintian* 今天 (Today), were mimeographed. Much of this poetry was highly imagistic and evocative in nature, written in individual styles that in most cases stylistically interrogated the common written expression during the Maoist Period familiarly known after the fact as “Maospeak” or Maoist discourse (Mao wenti 毛文体). This poetry came as such a shock to the establishment intellectuals that it was disparaged as “obscure” or “misty,” or in the Chinese parlance “Menglong” 朦胧, a moniker that stuck and eventually shed its pejorative tone. Menglong poetry crystallized the dominant lyrical mode in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and it was published in these informal journals that were distributed hand-to-hand and often pasted or tacked onto walls, like Democracy Wall in downtown Beijing. It was an exhilarating time in China, when a country that had just shaken off not only the ten years of political dogmatism of the Cultural Revolution, not to mention violent internal strife, but also thirty years of near diplomatic isolation as China lurched forward into a more international and less ideological posture vis-à-vis the rest of the world, especially the West and the capitalist world. No one knew where the boundaries were. No one knew where the possibilities ended. It was a time of experimentation unthinkable only a few years before.

This was the basic historical milieu when Zhai Yongming began publishing poetry in the mid-1980s. In the context of considerable thematic and stylistic creativity in the realm of poetry, Zhai took the initiative to raise the stakes a solid notch and begin addressing themes that were explicitly feminist, or as some have said, feminine, an event that captured the attention of literary aficionados across China. It is difficult to overestimate her stature in China over the past 37 years, a towering literary figure who, despite being relatively unknown outside Chinese-speaking communities, is in fact one of the most important

poets on the world stage of our time. In these 37 years, Zhai's poetry has explored a wide range of themes and topics and conveyed itself in an array of different styles, all under the rubric of the avant-garde. Her writing has reached a readership throughout China and the Sinophone realm. She is not the only prominent woman poet of these past several decades, but she is without a doubt among the most creative and forceful.

One of the most compelling features of Zhai Yongming's poetry is the way it has continued to press the bounds of representation and probe topics both intimate and public, constantly renewing its energy and ingenuity and igniting the imagination of ever-increasing numbers of readers. This issue's special section featuring the poetry of Zhai Yongming is emblematic of the wide formal and substantive range of her work. An added bonus is the opportunity to highlight the work of five scholars of contemporary Chinese poetry who represent some of the highest quality research in Chinese cultural studies emerging today. The contributors are all scholars who are active in a wide variety of circles, both Sinological and comparative, and all have participated in the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, in some cases for many years.

The suite of articles on Zhai Yongming begins with a provocative essay by Polish scholar Joanna Krenz, who draws on her knowledge of The Bible as well as her comprehensive familiarity with Zhai's poetry to weave together an analysis that includes a discussion of Biblical allusions in Zhai's poetry, Zhai's apprehensiveness toward artificial intelligence and digital culture, and the ethical and environmental ramifications of the prospect of a posthuman world that is no longer solely governed or governable by humans. Krenz homes in on the fact that in the most recent decade of her poetic growth, Zhai has increasingly documented how technology has affected human life and the ecology of the planet. The centerpiece of Krenz's essay is her explication of Zhai's poem "Di Ba Tian" (第八天, "The Eighth Day"), but in a tour de force argument, her essay touches upon a half-dozen of Zhai's other poems as well as the work of major scholars of Buddhism, technology, cybernetics, and theories of companion species.

The author of the second essay, Yanhong Zhu, like Krenz, is one of the leading experts writing on contemporary Chinese poetry

in English today. Zhu returns to arguably the most central theme of Zhai Yongming's poetry: the status of women in China and the place of female poets and intellectuals within it. Although this is not a new topic, Zhu takes a completely novel approach to the question by fixing on the temporal element, and how it factors into Zhai's musings on gender and gender construction. Zhu draws on the landmark article on women's time by Julia Kristeva that appeared in English translation in *Signs* in 1981. Zhu also has engaged a number of Chinese-language scholars in shaping her argument. A thorough investigation of the nexus of gender identity and the notion of temporality in Zhai's verse, Zhu deals in detail with almost a dozen of the poet's most esteemed poems and incorporates some discussion of Zhai's key essays as well. Ultimately, Zhu demonstrates how Zhai is a poet constantly striving to pursue new vistas and has grown deeply uncomfortable with the conventional notion of binary gender identity. As she has been moving toward more fluid notions of gender for more than a decade, Zhai's thinking and writing reflect a similar social development in Western societies; however, it is beneficial to keep in mind the social and political context of China, which is not as open as Western societies. Given that, we must appreciate just how radical intellectuals such as Zhai are and how considerable are the risks that they take.

Although similar to Krenz's essay in that her article centers on Zhai's environmental concerns, Géraldine Fiss takes quite a different approach and has a totally different emphasis. Fiss returns to Zhai's earliest poetry as well as her well-known essay on black night consciousness to reconsider these works in light of environmental thinking. Building on this sensitivity to the environmental implications of Zhai's early work and that of the 1990s, Fiss eventually turns to her more recent poems, such as a powerful poem that addresses the massive earthquake in Zhai's home province of Sichuan in 2008. Not only did an untold number of people die (most estimates hover around the number of 87 to 88 thousand deaths with 375 thousand injured and 18 thousand missing), but one of the most tragic aspects was that many of the dead were children, and most of the children were singletons, in keeping with the Chinese One-Child Policy. All lives are of course precious, but for so many Chinese people it is considered especially heartbreaking to be rendered childless by this catastrophe. Moreover,

a myriad of questions arose regarding the quality of construction of the buildings in which these children died, many of which were hastily erected during the rapid economic rise of China in the post-Mao era. Fiss reveals how this and others of Zhai's poems articulate a connection between womanhood, nature, and urbanization.

In one of the most lucid and incisive examinations of Zhai Yongming's "feminist" (or "feminine") theory, Wenzhu Li returns to the core of Zhai's poetic and prose work in her early years and offers a corrective to the fundamental misunderstanding that Li believes has beset the scholarship on Zhai from the earliest days to the present. Li is particularly interested in the notion of the "feminine," which she sees as forming a kind of discursive marker for Zhai delimited by the patriarchal ideology that imbued the tradition of Chinese poetry from time immemorial. After offering the careful reassessment of her early work, both poetry and prose, as well as a reevaluation of some of Zhai's major critics, such as Tang Xiaodu, Wenzhu Li then shifts to a meticulous exposition of Zhai's later poem "Qingshang de ren, zhongshang de chengshi" (轻伤的人, 重伤的城市, "Lightly injured people, gravely wounded city"), a poem inspired by Zhai's visit to the German capital Berlin. In the end, Li's multifaceted argument suggests that there are empowering aspects to the notion of femininity for women.

In the final essay of our feature section on Zhai Yongming, Laura Velazquez pushes the overall conception of Zhai's poetry in another direction: ekphrasis and the relationship between the written word and visual culture. Additionally, Velazquez leverages her native facility in Spanish and Latin American culture to provide an entry into Zhai's work that few scholars can, bringing into conjunction Zhai's poetry, prose, and the photographic image. In a fascinating exhibition in 2019, Zhai commingled photographs with her own poems and in at least one case invited the reader/spectator to view the poet as identifying with her subject, illustrious Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. Taking Zhai's explicitly multimedia visual/textual project as her point of departure enables Velazquez to read back into Zhai's poetic oeuvre and illustrate how she is, and always has been, a highly visual poet who privileges visibility in her written work throughout her career and projects herself onto the image of her subject. Velazquez also observes that Zhai's poetry contains erotic elements that undercut conventional

heteronormative scopic regimes and illuminates how Zhai's work can be viewed as a queer ekphrastic text.

Zhai Yongming was born in Chengdu, Sichuan in 1955 and has spent most of her life there. However, it would be a misapprehension to label her a regional poet. Sichuan is a unique place in China—in the central/southwest part of the country, isolated until recently by mountain ranges all around, forming a wide, temperate basin, and for more than two millennia enjoying a geographical position that allowed it to evolve nearly separately from the central and eastern areas of China proper. As a result, Sichuan always has had its own strong intellectual and literary tradition. The Sichuan basin has been an incubator for sophisticated literati for millennia. In the post-Mao era, the cities of Chengdu and Chongqing, themselves distinct entities, have been hotbeds for intellectual productivity. Several of the most respected contemporary poets, such as Ouyang Jianghe 欧阳江河 (b. 1956), Xiao Kaiyu 萧开愚 (b. 1960), Bai Hua 柏桦 (b. 1956), and Sun Wenbo 孙文波 (b. 1956) all hail from Sichuan. So does Zhai Yongming. Zhai, like these others, is a national poet of great significance and impact, whom all people with a serious interest in contemporary Chinese poetry recognize as important. She has had an enormous and dedicated following in Chinese-speaking communities worldwide for many decades. In Chengdu, since 1998 and until recently, she owned and managed the White Nights Bar 白夜酒吧 that became a mecca for poetry enthusiasts and for her own fans, a salon of sorts. Over the 37 years during which she has published poetry, Zhai has never rested on her laurels, never become complacent. Her literary creativity has never ossified. She is among possibly a dozen or so of the best poets in China over the past two generations whom all people who value world literature *must* know. Zhai's work is amply available in English translation as well as in other languages. Our hope is that this issue that features her as a literary figure in a broad spectrum of ways will elevate her profile among general readers and bring attention to her work, alerting our readers to the paramount importance of Zhai Yongming as an excellent creative writer.

I thank Joy Landeira, Executive Director of RMMLA and Managing and Book Review Editor of *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, for her stalwart support of this Chinese Feature

Issue on Chinese literature and culture. I also would like to express a debt of gratitude to the two anonymous peer reviewers for their supportive comments.

Notes

¹For an outstanding introduction to the life and poetry of Zhai Yongming, see the biographical essay by Yanhong Zhu, one of our authors in this Chinese Feature Issue (Zhu 2021: 298-307).

Works Cited

Zhu, Yanhong. "Zhai Yongming" in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Chinese Poets since 1949*, edited by Christopher Lupke and Thomas Moran (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Cengage/Bruccoli Clark Layman, 2021), pp. 298-307.