Performing a Poetic Temporal Weave: Gender and Femininity in Zhai Yongming's Poetry

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A woman dressed in black　　穿黑裙的女人夤夜而来
　arrives in the dead of night
Just one secretive glance　　她秘密的一瞥使我精疲力竭
　leaves me spent
(Lingenfelter, "Premonition" 3)　　(Zhai, *Zhai Yongming de shi* 1-2)

The opening lines of "Yugan" 预感 ("Premonition"), the first poem of Zhai Yongming's 翟永明 most famous and celebrated poem-series "Nüren" 女人 ("Women"), create a striking sense of darkness and mystery and reveal immediately the central interest of this twenty-poem cycle, that is, the experience and fate of women. The speaker of the poem is "spent" because she is overwhelmed by a "premonition" triggered by the secretive yet powerful glance of "a woman dressed in black." The premonition comes from a shared understanding of the oppressive nature of the world, in which "I see night's darkness in the light of day" 我在白天看见黑夜 and "my fingerprints / can reveal no more grief" 我的指纹 / 已没有更多的悲哀可提供 (Lingenfelter 3). Despite the foreboding outlook, the speaker is defiant of her fate. Claiming "I've already quit this dead end hole" 我已离开这个死洞, she seeks to "create night to save mankind from disaster" 创造黑夜使人类幸免于难 (Tao and Prince, "The World" 世界 78).

In her essay "Tantan wo de shiguan" 谈谈我的诗观 ("On My Poetic Vision"), Zhai points out that her poetry is driven precisely by "a destructive premonition" that pushes her to dive deep into her psyche. Centering her writing on what she cares about most – the fate of her gender, she attempts to move beyond her own inner space. Such struggles, Zhai contends, represent "a sense of eternity beyond time" (149-50). This temporal understanding not only lies at the heart of Zhai's early works; it continues to evolve and inform her poetic creation for decades. This essay attempts to examine, through the lens of time

and temporality, Zhai's poetic exploration of gender and femininity in different stages of her literary career, ranging from the early 1980s to the present. I argue that Zhai's poetic career originated from a strong sense of gender awareness that she defines as "black night consciousness" 黑夜的意识 (*heiye de yishi*) and a desire to create a distinctly female voice, both of which are explored in her early poems through the poetic presentation of women's time that is cyclical or eternal. In her later poems, Zhai consciously strives to configure a new sense of temporality by interweaving the past and present together. Such experimentation with temporal structure helps her articulate a new poetic voice that moves beyond the male/female gender binary – a voice that is at once feminine and beyond femininity, allowing her to reflect on history and social reality.

"Black Night Consciousness" and Women's Time

Zhai received wide recognition following the 1986 publication of her poem-series "Women" and the essay "Black Night Consciousness" in nationally renowned journals *Poetry* (*Shikan* 诗刊) and *Poetry News* (*Shige bao* 诗歌报). The writing of "Women," as she explains in her essay "Mianxiang xinling de xiezuo" 面向心灵的写作 ("Writing from the Heart"), has its spatial origin--a hospital room that is associated with such phrases as "death," "blood," "bones," "dead souls" and "wounds" (39), but the articulation of gender consciousness and female sensibility in this poem-series is closely tied to a temporal concept, that is, the "black night." Rather than treating night as part of natural temporal rhythms, Zhai makes it a distinctively gendered concept. "Women," as Naikan Tao observes, "is dominated by images of yin and pervaded by its mystical darkness" (409). The "black night" is, therefore, evoked and employed to represent women's experience and uncover a distinctively female voice and perspective. Zhai further elaborates upon the significance of the "black night" in her essay "Black Night Consciousness." Seeing it as the gateway to female consciousness, Zhai urges women to empower themselves with the discovery of "black night consciousness," fight against their seemingly "irreversible fate" and seek "the precarious light that gradually appears in the darkness" (4).

The temporal dimension of "black night consciousness" corresponds closely to "feminine time" in Julia Kristeva's essay "Women's

Time." Kristeva identifies two conceptions of time. One is linear time, the "time of history," which is usually associated with the masculine and seen as "project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding" and "as departure, progression, and arrival" (17). The other is the temporality of female subjectivity, the feminine time, which is characterized by repetition and eternity and linked to two types of temporalities--the cyclical time that is associated with "cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm" and the monumental time that is "all-encompassing and infinite like imaginary space," both of which exist outside and beyond linear time (16). In her explanation of "black night consciousness," Zhai maintains that every woman needs to confront her own "abyss," a psychological space defined by her temporal experience. Two forces are at work simultaneously, one is "the defiance against the violence of fate" and the other is "the submission to the truth of the inner calling" (3), both of which are related to the experience of time as cyclical or monumental. Zhai writes that at birth "misfortune and I form/ The fearful twin of this world" 我与不幸构成/ 这世界的可怕的双胞胎 (Zhai *Qianshuiting,* "Mother" 11) and that "there is no escaping the circle of Fate" 无法逃脱圆圈的命运 (Lingenfelter, "Revolving" 旋转11), but as "a most tender and perceptive woman" 最温柔最懂事的女人, "I long for a winter, for an immense dark night" 渴望一个冬天，一个巨大的黑夜 (Tao and Prince, "Soliloquy" 独白 78). The dark night leads to women's deepest inner space that is at once cyclical and eternal. It is characterized by a never-ending process of "disillusionment and reaffirmation," but with the discovery of "black night consciousness" it also makes way for "a level of pure knowledge" that is "separated from experience of self, society and humanity" (3, 5-6).

Zhai continues to ponder the relationship between gender consciousness and temporal experience in her poem-series "Jing'an Zhuang" 静安庄 ("Jing'an Village") and "Siwang de tu'an" 死亡的图案 ("The Designs of Death"). Set in the village where Zhai spent time as a *zhiqing* 知青 ("sent-down youth": urban youth sent to the countryside to learn the ways of rural peasant folk) during the Cultural Revolution, "Jing'an Village" is organized by months and explores the experience of the speaker in twelve months from her arrival to departure. While the spatial significance of the setting has been highlighted by such

scholars as Tang Xiaodu and Naikan Tao, who consider Jing'an Village a "huge spatial metaphor" of life (Tang 30) or "an Eliotian wasteland" that represents "the spiritual state of the whole nation" (Tao 411), it is worth noting that the critical reflection of life or nation is done primarily through the depiction of women's experience. The opening poem "First Month" 第一月 sets the entire poem-series in darkness at night, as the speaker claims, "I came across a pitch-dark time upon first arrival" 第一次来我就赶上漆黑的日子 (Zhai *Qianshuiting* 31). Rather than serving as a key to women's consciousness, the black night in "Jian'an Village" is a metaphor for women's experience in history, represented by the endless suffering women must endure in their marital and reproductive lives. The speaker, at nineteen, arrives at this unfamiliar place only to find it a "morbid village" 病态的村庄, where "an ancient melody creeps out to self-annihilation/ nothing but time can bury such remote origins" 爬出一支古老的调子自我毁灭/ 除了时间，并无其他以埋藏这样长久的/ 根源 (Tao and Prince, "Jin'an Village" 91). Tang Xiaodu calls this poem-series "the poem of listening" (29), but the speaker invites the readers not so much to listen to the sounds "of circulation and reproduction" from hidden places that frequent the village (Tao and Prince 90), but to the "sounds beneath the ground" that lead to "the depths of silence" (Tao and Prince 80). The speaker repeatedly calls Jing'an Village a "village of silence" 鸦雀无声的村庄, as voiceless women live generation after generation in this place "always without resistance and slowly reaching the depths of silence" 以一向不抵抗的方式/ 迟迟到达沉默的深度 (Tao and Prince 83). In contrast to the submissive silent women in the village, Zhai makes the speaker of the poem a defiant warrior who "brought poisonous sounds into this region" 把有毒的声音送入这个地带 and "would grow into a disease" 发育成一种疾病 (Tao and Prince 89). This poem-series, therefore, is both a critical reflection of women's silent suffering throughout time and a call for a female voice that disrupts the cyclical nature of women's experience.

Written in 1987, "The Designs of Death" further explores women's experience through time by tracing the emotional distress and existential awakening of the speaker in seven consecutive nights, as she loses her mother to cancer and "discerns the truth of death" in the wake

of grief. Zhai considers the organizing time frame the "eternal seven nights" 永恒的七夜 that is different from the "calm and pure" gestation period that comes before it or the "end of time that will arrive sooner or later" (40). The eternity of the "seven nights" bespeaks the truth of women's existence that the speaker uncovers--that is, it follows a cyclical path along the eternal circle of life and death. The birth of women marks the beginning of their misfortune and lifetime of suffering, as Zhai claims in "Women" and contends further through the trope of women's wounded bodies in this poem-series. In "The First Night" 第一夜, the lonely suffering of women upon birth is revealed through the outcry of the speaker, "My mother, your body/ Used to be my sanctuary/ Deserted by you, I lie between heaven and earth/…/ My body will preserve the sufferings of all the dead in the world" 我的母亲，你的身体/ 曾是我的藏匿所/ 被你遗弃，我躺在天地之间/…/ 我的躯体 将保有全世界死者的痛楚 (Zhai, *Qianshuitin* 51). The speaker attests in "The Seventh Night" 第七夜 that the "color of death" is best represented not with words but "with the wounds all over her body" (61). The secret and truth of death that the speaker seeks and discovers eventually is that birth and death are the same for women, as "birth is nothing but a vicious imitation of [death]" 诞生只是它恶意的模仿 (Zhai, "The Sixth Night" 第六夜 60) and "the living are the cemetery of the dead" 生者是死者的墓地 (Zhai, "The Seventh Night" 第七夜 62). Women are trapped in the repetitive cycle of life and death with no prospects for change or progress, because as mothers and daughters, they "are suffering on the umbilical cord of life and death, / Born into the twin destinies— / Of past and future" 在生与死的脐带上受难/ 孪生两种命运/ 过去和未来 (Zhai, "The Fifth Night" 第五夜 58).

Despite her efforts to explore women's experience and consciousness in her poems, Zhai has always been uneasy with the critical concept of "women's poetry." Unsatisfied with the gendered hierarchy within literary criticism that contributes to the marginalization of women's literature and the tendency to overlook its literary and aesthetic values while focusing on gender specificity, Zhai claims that she is "first and foremost a poet, and then a poetess" (8). The tension between the urgency to assert women's consciousness and empowerment through a distinctively female voice in her poetry and

the eagerness to claim an equal footing within the literary scene by putting aside her female identity in her criticism reveals Zhai's struggle with the two gendered temporal conceptions Kristeva maps out in her essay,[1] as she seeks to both stay outside and beyond linear temporality and be "inserted" into history.

To resolve such a tension, Zhai envisions a new form of writing for female poets that "will move from conceptual writing to more technically-conscious writing" (12). She considers the 1993 poem "Kafeiguan zhi ge" 咖啡馆之歌 ("Song of a Café") a turning point in her own writing, because with its dramatic structure and a repositioned speaker as an "objective narrator," it completes the long-expected transformation of poetic expression by shifting away from the Plath-like confessional mode of her early poetry and adopting a new subtle and prosaic narrative tone (29).[2] The "technically-conscious writing" is exemplified precisely by this conscious repositioning of the speaker "I." As "I" moves from the subjective to the objective position, Zhai changes the speaker from a lyrical speaker that identifies with the poet and directly expresses the poet's thoughts and emotions to a narrative speaker, allowing her to experiment with new forms of temporal representation of women that is no longer associated exclusively with women's psyche and to women's time, allowing for juxtapositions of past and present and reflections on history and reality.

Dialogues with the Past: Creating a Distinct Female Voice

In ancient times,	在古代，我只能这样
I could only write to you	
Like this, without knowing	给你写信　并不知道
Our next meeting	我们下一次
Where it will be	会在哪里见面
At present time,	现在　我往你的邮箱
I fill your email box	
With clusters of stars	灌满了群星　它们都是五笔字型
made of wubi fonts	
They stand up, run for you	它们站起来　为你奔跑
Or stop somewhere over the sky	它们停泊在天上的某处
I am not concerned	我并不关心
	(Zhai, *Qianshuiting* 212)

Framed as a love poem, Zhai's "Zai gudai" 在古代 ("In Ancient

Times") explores how romantic relationships unfold differently in the past and present when modern technological advances have transformed the ways in which we travel and communicate. Contrasting past and present in alternating stanzas, this poem not only expresses a sense of temporal-spatial transformation, but also demonstrates how Zhai has "opened up her poetic vision" and shifted her attention to "observations of reality, incorporations of historical situations, and configurations of an ideal gender concept" (Zhou Zan 102, 104). Many of her poems written since the mid-1990s are structured in ways that facilitate dialogues across time and space, such as "Shisishou suge—zhi muqin" 十四首素歌—致母亲 ("Fourteen Plainsongs – For Mother"), "Shijian meiren zhige" 时间美人之歌 ("The Song of Historical Beauties"), "San meiren zhige" 三美人之歌 ("The Song of Three Beauties"), "Bianzhi he xingwei zhi ge" 编织和行为之歌 ("The Song of Weaving and Behavior"), and "Yu Xuanji fu" 鱼玄机赋 ("Ode to Yu Xuanji"). Through the juxtaposition of past and present, Zhai not only allows the speaker to shift away from the self and engage in dialogues with the past, creating what Luo Zhenya calls a "poetics of communication" 交流的诗学 (*jiaoliu de shixue*) (150), but also moves beyond the restriction of gender identity to explore "the reality of gender in different historical periods and different life conditions as well as the impact such reality brings to writing" in her poetic endeavors (Zhai 45).

Andrea Lingenfelter discerns a "revisionist historicism" in many of these poems, arguing that Zhai attempts to restore the reputations of historical beauties by taking on both Confucian misogynistic ideologies and contemporary cultural attitudes (xvi). Such revisionist efforts are part of Zhai's on-going struggle to create a distinct female voice in her poetry. In "Nüxing yishi • furen zhijian • cisheng" 女性意识·妇人之见·雌声 ("Women's Consciousness, Women's Opinion, Women's Voice"), Zhai points out that "*cisheng*" 雌声 (the female voice) was often regarded as inferior in the historically male dominated Chinese poetic tradition, as it was usually associated with the feminine "*guige qi*" 闺阁气 (air of the boudoir), as opposed to the masculine "*zhangfu qi*" 丈夫气 (manly spirit), which is considered far superior (77). Rather than subscribing to such a gendered standard, Zhai seeks to

redefine *cisheng,* claiming that *cisheng* should be a distinct female voice that is not necessarily feminine but represents "a mode of thinking and expression different from that of men" and "a singular poetic standard independent from the existing aesthetic system" (78). Zhai's re-writing of women's experience in history, therefore, aims not merely at bringing justice to the scapegoated women or "constructing the shared destiny of ancient beauties and contemporary women" (Niu 177), but more importantly at offering her unique voice by taking on an active role in writing about women and asserting women's transition from being written in the past to actively writing in the present time.

"The Song of Historical Beauties" is a perfect example that expresses Zhai's concern over the objectification of historical beauties and her determination to provide a different perspective through writing. If "Jing'an Village" is a "poem of listening" that guides the readers to listen to women's "depth of silence," "The Song of Historical Beauties" is a poem about seeing and visualization. In "Shijian meiren he meiren de shijian" 时间美人和美人的时间 ("Historical Beauties and Beauties' Time"), Zhai explains that this poem is about "memories of 'time,' or the memories of beauties in different time periods" and that such memories are explored through a different type of speaker "I" whose narration is no longer confessional but both subjective and objective at the same time (46-47). The speaker "I" is a poet, who collects materials and turns them into poetry, as "I write and write, writing myself into middle age" 我写呀写，一直写到中年 (Lingenfelter, "The Song of Historical Beauties" 141). This line is repeated multiple times in the poem to emphasize the active role the contemporary poet takes in writing and rewriting about women's experience in history. What the speaker writes about, as "I" transforms into an omniscient eyewitness to history and claims that "I saw everything" 我看见了一切 (Zhai, *Qianshuiting* 140) about the three historical beauties--Zhao Feiyan 赵飞燕, Yuji 虞姬, and Yang Yuhuan 杨玉环, is ultimately the victimization of women by the male gaze and male-centered discourse. While portraying distinctive moments of the beauties' tragic lives in three visually stimulating vignettes, the speaker cautions how the beauties often fall victim to the voyeuristic looks around them, describing Zhao Feiyan as being "Surrounded by hungry eyes and/ The

admiration of all creation/ Watching as her flesh is laid bare" 四周贪婪的眼光以及 / 爱美的万物 / 就这样看着她那肉体的全部显露 and questioning "Who else is there? Eyes fixed on this mound/Of images of spilled blood and broken bones" 还有谁？注视着这一堆/淤血和尸骨混和的影像 after the death of Yuji (Lingenfelter 143).

Zhai claims that there is a "voyeur" (*kuiwang zhe* 窥望者) in the poem who is constantly "looking" and that he/she (whether it is the poet or the reader of the poem) holds a special vantage point that allows the discovery of moments or details from a different perspective (47). From this voyeuristic perspective, history and memory can be understood differently by creating a poetic world in which time is shared simultaneously by the poet and readers of the present and the beauties of the past, so that "we carry with us the memories of them, and they also allow us to witness 'everything'" 我们身上都有她们的记忆，她们也因让我们目睹了"这一切"，而与我们共享时间 (Zhai 2014: 47) The "everything," found in the writings of the speaker (the poet), carries a distinct female voice drastically different from that of men. Such a voice exposes the scapegoating of women as "When catastrophe looms/When cities erupt in flames/ Men, oh men/ Delight in denouncing women for their crimes" 当大祸临头/ 当城市开始燃烧 / 男人啊男人 / 乐于宣告她们的罪状 (Lingenfelter 147), and reveals in parenthesized lines within the poem that rather than being the cause of all disasters, these beauties were devoted to their art and men with no ambition in politics, as they were "Desiring only to dance with the wind, to dance with the wind" 只欲随风起舞、随风舞, "Wanting only to follow his horse, to be with him" 只愿跟随着它，跟随他, and "[hearing only] the unbroken flow of whispers, unbroken strings of oaths" 听见绵绵私语，绵绵誓. (Lingenfelter 143, 145 with minor changes)

As a contemporary poet who is particularly interested in creating a unique female voice in her works, Zhai's poetic engagement with the past and historical beauties unavoidably touches upon the issue of women's writing in pre-modern China. Her 2005 "Ode to Yu Xuanji" uses a dramatic structure to rewrite and reflect on the tragic life of the famous Tang Dynasty poetess Yu Xuanji, who was executed for allegedly murdering her servant girl out of jealousy. Divided into five

sections that integrate different narrative modes, such as storytelling, monologue, dialogue, and analysis report, "Ode" reads almost like "defense arguments" that seek to subvert the male-authored account (Luo and Li 125). The significance of this poem, however, lies beyond its restorative efforts. As Justyna Jaguścik observes, Zhai "also inquires into the reasons behind the marginalization of women writers" and acknowledges that while writing gave women "brief moments of self-fulfillment" and even empowerment, in pre-modern China "the status of 'woman poet' was only available to female authors who showed 'delicate restraint' in their writings and obeyed the rules of the patriarchal order in their lives" (Jaguścik 64-65).

It is precisely the erasure of Yu Xuanji from the male-dominated literary canon that makes it pressing for Zhai to uncover the "modern consciousness" of this "ancient female poet" (Zhai, *Nü'er qiang* 253). Zhai portrays Yu as a poetess who was completely ahead of her time and defiant against the patriarchal order, as she writes, "Yu Xuanji, she wrote like men/Made friends like men" 鱼玄机 她像男人一样写作 / 像男人一样交友, and repeatedly poses the rhetorical question, "What was the use of writing Boudoir-plaint poetry?" 又何必写怨诗 throughout the poem's second section entitled with the same question (Zhai, *Qianshuiting* 217). Such repetition highlights Yu's unconventional approach to poetry, as she refused to be restricted by gender specific topics. Zhai exclaims that Yu was "Born and died eight hundred years too early" 早生早死八百年 and that her "Identity as a beautiful woman covered up her matchless talent" 美女身份遮住了她的才华盖世 (Zhai, *Qianshuiting* 219). This line is a rework of part of Yu Xuanji's own poem "Visiting the South Tower of Chongzhen Monastery, Viewing the Names of Successful Exam Candidates Written on the Wall" 游崇真观南楼，睹新及第提名处. In her essay on the writing of "Ode to Yu Yuanji," Zhai uses Yu's line "I lament how the silk gowns conceal my poetry" 自恨罗衣掩诗句 (*zihen luoyi yan shiju*) as its title and argues that Yu clearly demonstrated her female consciousness in this poem. She interpretates "*zihen*" (I lament) as the representation of Yu's sense of "self-confidence and self-respect," because Yu was confident that she could have also passed the exam and served the country if men and women were given

equal opportunities (Zhai, *Nü'er qiang* 256). Interpreting Yu's line "Looking up I envy the names on the list in vain" 举头空羡榜中名 as Yu's expression of 'unyieldingness" 不服 (*bufu*) (Zhai, *Nü'er qiang* 252), Zhai writes in "Ode," "Staring at those Saints and Masters from high above/ She would never ever yield" 望着那些高高在上的圣贤名师/ 她永不服气 (Zhai, *Qianshuiting* 219). By interweaving the past and present and the texts of an ancient female poet with her own, Zhai not only manages to "supply an ongoing, oracular voice to the female poetic tradition" (Da 686), but also emphasizes how times have really changed due to modern social and technological developments. Zhai laments that Yu was born and died in a wrong era as she "didn't have a lawyer nor could she retract her testimony," and hypothesizes how Yu's life would have been completely different if she were living in the present time when women could have "justified jobs" and criminal analysis could rely on "high tech" (Zhai, *Qianshuiting* 220-21). Within this new social context in the present time, Zhai finds it even more important for women to have their own distinct voice, as having female consciousness, while may not cost lives, continues to be "subjected to scrutiny and skepticism" (Zhai, *Qianshuiting* 221).

Zhai's poetic dialogues with the past, therefore, are firmly anchored in the present and aim at changing women from "being absent" or "being written" in male-dominated discourses to active writers and visible beings themselves, because modern feminist movements have made women realize that "We are those without past / Without history / Helpless women / Lost in the darkness of time" 我们是那些没有过去/ 没有历史/ 无依无靠的女人/ 迷失在时光的幽暗中 (Zhai, *Nü'er qiang* 177). It is essential for female poets and artists to express their unique *cisheng* to subvert the old and articulate a new voice to reflect not merely on femininity, but more critically on women's experience, their relationship to history as well as the tradition of women's writing.

"We Are All Male-Female": Writing Beyond the Gender Binary

As a female poet, Zhai recognizes that the art world is dominated by men at all times and in all places. Similar to ancient Chinese female poets whose works were judged based on the presence of "*cisheng*" or "*zhangfu qi*," modern female artists around the world, such as Georgia

O'Keeffe, Lee Krasner, Rosa Bonheur, and He Xiangning, were all forced, to different extents, to erase the gender specificity of their works in order to have them widely circulated and accepted (Zhai, *Nü'er qiang* 171). Female artists are always confronted with the paradoxical question of gender identity, as they want to overcome their "to-be-looked-at-ness," but are also afraid that the expression of female consciousness will make them fall back to where they used to be (Zhai, *Nü'er qiang* 173). What female artists dream about, Zhai contends, is a special kind of androgyny (*cixiong tongti* 雌雄同体), captured best in what Louise Bourgeois wrote, "We are all vulnerable in some way, and we are all male-female" 从某方面来说，我们都是男/女性 (Male/Female) (Zhai, *Nü'er qiang* 175).[3] Finding a new form of writing for female poets, therefore, is to explore the possibility of writing in ways that challenge the very notion of identity and relinquish the dichotomous understanding of gender. In "Zai tan 'heiye yishi' yu 'nüxing shige'" 再谈"黑夜意识"与"女性诗歌"("Black Night Consciousness" and "Women's Poetry" Revisited), Zhai discusses how "genderless writing" and "ungendered identity for writers" have been an important topic of discussion among feminist writers around the world and how she hopes that "women's poetry" can take on a new "voice" that "does not rely on the framework of male/female gender binary but retains an independent and distinctive style" (12).

Zhai's 2015 long poem "Sui Huang Gongwang you Fuchun shan" 随黄公望游富春山 ("Following Huang Gongwang through the Fuchun Mountains") serves as a perfect example for her efforts to write beyond the gender binary. Divided into thirty sections, this long poem continues to engage with the past to reflect on the present. But unlike the poems discussed above, it shifts its focus from the exploration of women's issues to broader issues of artistic tradition, social reality, and the impact of digital media. Zhai writes in the forward that when she first saw Huang Gongwang's most celebrated painting "Fuchun shan ju tu" 富春山居图 ("Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains"), she was attracted not only to this famous Yuan Dynasty landscape painting, but also to its handscroll format, because it is "a discreet and fluid mode of representation" and the sectional and sequential viewing makes the movement of the objects flowy and ever-changing and the interaction between the painter and audience

close and private (Zhai, *Sui Huang Gongwang* 2). Zhai emphasizes that she strived to imagine and imitate the ways in which this painting was appreciated in ancient time and hopes that the writing of this long poem, whose length corresponds to that of the long handscroll, can be seen "as an homage to the high art of traditional Chinese painting" (3). What makes Zhai's long poem exceptional, according to Shang Wei, is that the poet "frequently travels between present and past, reality and the painted image" and presents to the readers "a grandiose 'landscape' that stretches across ancient and modern eras and cuts across space and time by stitching together a montage of contemporary life through her real and imaginary journeys" (77).

In one of the footnotes, Zhai points out that she does not plan to "deal with the question of gender" in this poem, as it is not at issue within the tradition of Classical Chinese painting, but she also acknowledges that "gender issues still existed" (59). Therefore, as Justyna Jaguścik points out, Zhai alludes to the issue of the invisibility of women in public spaces and couples it with the problem of the exclusion of women from the male dominated literary sphere in various sections. The speaker of the poem, Jaguścik argues, assumes a "female vantage point" and challenges the patriarchal cultural order through the strategic use of gender mimicry (Jaguścik 74, 76). What complicates the situation, as Jaguścik also observes, is that Zhai "has concurrently claimed multiple times that in her own writing she has never aimed at fixing the gender of the lyrical 'I' as essentially feminine" (Jaguścik 76). The speaker "I" in this thirty-section long poem, as Zhai explains in a footnote, "is a changeable and unstable subject that can be male or female, modern or traditional" (9). The voice of the poem cannot be simply identified within the gender dichotomy—at times the speaker adopts a male persona using stereotypical lexicon found in male-authored classical Chinese poems; at other times the speaker claims a distinctively female voice while insisting on her fluid identity, "I can be a girl or a woman in the countryside / I can also be a female knight-errant, or/ A medicine harvester, or a Taoist nun" 我可以是村妇是村姑/ 也可以是一个侠女 我可以是/ 采药人 也可以是一个女道士 (52); but most often, the speaker is "a time traveler, / I must have multiple lives/ Each life wanders through every mountain and water"

作为一个时间穿行者/ 我必然拥有多重生命/ 每重生命都走遍每重山水 (25). What Zhai creates in this poem is a voice that is both feminine and beyond gender, capable of moving beyond the polarized gender identity and traveling freely across time between past and present and across different mediums between image and language.

The uncertainty and fluidity of the speaker's identity makes it possible for Zhai to initiate within the poetic space of this long poem a dialogue between the past and present, between visual art and written poetry, and between a female poet and the various forms of art (painting, poetry, and even cinema) with which she engages. Zhai is particularly interested in exploring how modern industrialization and technological progress have impacted our lives. Even though in other poems she acknowledges that things may have changed for the better, especially in terms of women's empowerment as discussed above, in this poem the present is portrayed in a much more negative light. The contrast between the past and present is best captured in section three, as Zhai writes,

Past: mountains were gradual, 过去：山势浑圆，远水如带
and distant waters were belt-like
Present: the fishing platform still exists, 现在：钓台依旧，景随人迁
but the scenery changes as people move
Past: there were organic matters 过去：先人留下有机物
left behind by our ancestors
Present: there are plastic bags 现在：三尺之下塑料袋
three feet under (Zhai, *Sui Huang Gongwang* 12)

The present world is depicted as plagued with ecological problems as Zhai "enters the discursive space of ecocriticism" (Jaguścik 77). Apart from the issues of pollution and ecological destruction, Zhai records her concerns about industrialization and urbanization's encroachment on the natural landscape in section twenty-six: "Time always gets implicated in the changes / On a fleetingly disappearing stripe of mountains and waters / Some footprints have been transformed into inscriptions and seals" 时间总是会被变化所累 / 在一段飞逝而去的山水中 / 有一些脚迹 变成题跋和印鉴 (63). Zhai explains in the footnote that when she visited Fuyang the second time, she noticed that the high buildings completely blocked the view of distant mountains

that Huang Gongwang used to see in his time. If the natural landscape disappears, she wonders if the art of Chinese landscape painting will also die off, just as species are facing extinction (63).

Zhai is deeply concerned about the negative impact of industrialization and urbanization because what is associated with the disappearance of natural landscape and the art of traditional painting is the fading of the traditional literati's philosophy of life. In section four and five, Zhai compares two different outlooks on life, one traditional and the other contemporary, through the concept of "*rongxi*" 容膝 (with just enough space for the knees). She writes in section four, "Heaven and earth are just enough space for the knees: an old man sitting for a long-time playing chess /…/ A bottle of wine splashes up philosophy / A gust of wind brings over poetry" 天地一容膝：枯坐这里下棋的老人 /…/ 一窝酒溅起哲学 / 一阵风卷来辞赋 (14). Starting section five with the same line, Zhai writes, "Heaven and earth are just enough space for the knees: the post 90s sitting for a long-time in an internet bar /…/ A virtual "I" appears / A glass of blue drink makes "me" addicted" 天地一容膝：枯坐在网吧的90后/…/ 一个虚拟的"我"现身 / 一杯蓝色饮品让"我"上瘾 (16). Taken from Ni Zan's 倪瓚 painting "Rongxi Studio" 容膝斋, the term "*rongxi*," according to Zhai, represents the ancient literati's cosmic views and attitudes toward life, which entail a sense of contentment against the vastness of the world and multitudes of things. The post 90s generation, on the other hand, are escaping from themselves, from life, and living in their simulated virtual world (15). The past is idealized in the poem as an era of harmony between human and nature and the heyday of poetry and art, while the present is an "era of image-reading" 读图时代 (*dutu shidai*) in which poetry and art become sidelined by the overflow of images and information immediately accessible through digital media.[4]

In the "era of image-reading" in which digital media dominates the way that information is circulated and shared and people blatantly claim, "I do not read poetry" 我不读诗 (64), Zhai, as a poet, is also confronted with a series of pressing questions, which she explores in section twenty-seven: "How do we read contemporary poetry? /… How do we understand contemporary art? /… How do we understand

contemporary reality?" 我们怎样阅读当代诗？/…/ 我们怎样理解当代艺术？/…/ 我们怎样理解当代现实？(66). These questions eventually lead to a dead end, as each round of question and answer incurs another around that ultimately reaches "the dead knot of modernity" 现代性死结that is "pitch black, crazy messy, and full of problems" 漆黑一团/ 乱麻一捆、问题一堆 (66). The alternative is to go back to the past, as Zhai writes, "Or / Let us go back to Shakespeare / Huang Gongwang or another master who has left us" 或者 / 还是让我们回到莎士比亚 / 黄公望 或者某位远去的大师 (66-67). The past is again evoked as a source of inspiration and a means to tackle the issues we are facing today. As a poet who travels between past and present, Zhai discusses her philosophy of life in the third installment of her 2007 poem "Zai chuntian xiangnian chuantong" 在春天想念传统 (Thinking about Tradition in Spring), as she stares into the past with "a heart of mountain watching" 一颗望山的心:

When no one is around　　在无人时　也守住自己的心
　Stay true to your heart
Hold on to your beliefs　　守住自己的意念
When the wind rises,　　风来拜　临风咬牙
　grit your teeth against the wind
When the clouds hover,　　云来梳　截云为床
　carve out a cloud to make it a bed
At other times　　更多时候
　Observe the space between　　观察自己的眉心
　your own eyebrows
It is far better than　　胜过观察远方的城市
　observing the cities afar　　(Zhai, *Zui weiwan de ci* 111)

In "Following Huang Gongwang," the "heart of mountain watching" is transformed into a mountain itself: "My deep thoughts are unrestricted / My heart is also evergreen / I am a mountain, mountain is just like me / My heart reaches the peak before I do" 我的冥思行云流水 / 心也终年青翠 / 我就是山 山也如我 / 我的心先于我到达顶峰 (62). The most important thing that a contemporary poet needs to do in this world of confusion and alienation, as Zhai demonstrates, is to stay true to oneself, as this is where the power to fend off challenges and overcome difficulties lies and where true poetry originates from.

Conclusion

Zhai is always pushing forward to seek new poetic forms and expressions and persistently asks, "What happens after the accomplishment?" 完成之后又怎样 (Zhai, *Qianshuiting* 27). In 2020, she published the poem-series "Hui lan ji" 灰阑记 (The Chalk Circle)[5] in the renowned literary journal *October* 十月, which won the "2020 *October* Poetry Award," as the poem-series was considered to "continue the exploration of the central issue of women's creative power by projecting it into a deeper layer of historical imagination" (Zhang 2021). Published as part of the special issue on "New Women's Writing" 新女性写作 (Xin nüxing xiezuo), the five individually titled poems in "The Chalk Circle" explore from different perspectives: women's experience in society across time and space, as mothers ("The Chalk Circle" 灰阑记), as witches ("Three Witches" 三女巫), as stage artists ("Ecstasy—For the Women Artists on Stage" 狂喜—献给一小块舞台上的女艺术家), as photographers ("Searching for Vivian" 寻找薇薇安), and as poets ("To Lesbos" 去莱斯波斯岛). The following lines from "To Lesbos," in which the speaker travels to Lesbos through the pages of Sappho's sheepskin book, can serve as the concluding lines of this article, as they best represent Zhai's ongoing search for a new form of women's poetry and a distinct female voice that overcomes the gender binary:

The paths to Lesbos	去莱斯波斯岛的路
Are abundant By boat	有很多条 可乘船
By airplane By nude-swimming	可飞行 可裸泳
I choose only one path:	我只选一条：
Through the pages of sheepskin books	附着于羊皮纸页
To the island surrounded by blue ocean water	去往蓝色海水簇拥的岛
To visit our origin of poetry? The origin of gender?	去探访我们的元诗？元性别？

(Zhai, *Hui lan ji* 170)

Notes

Kristeva identifies two generations of feminists: the first fights for equality by embracing linear temporality and rejecting traditionally feminine attributes when "deemed incompatible with insertion in that history" (Kristeva 1981: 18), while the second demands recognition of difference and specificity, demonstrating a "radical refusal of the subjective limitations imposed by this history's time." (20) Kristeva, however, welcomes the emergence of a new generation with a third attitude that challenges the very notion of identity and acknowledges that "the very dichotomy man/woman as an opposition between two rival entities may be understood as belonging to metaphysics." (33)

[2] For a detailed study on the intertextual relations between Zhai's "Women" and the poetry of Sylvia Plath, see Zhang (2002).

[3] The English text here is quoted from Hustvedt (2016: 30).

[4] In section twenty-one, Zhai uses the term "*dutu shidai*" to refer to the present time in which the blue screens of digital media push people to the edges of information explosion. For a detailed discussion of "the sceneries of '*dutu shidai*'," see Shang Wei (2015): 101-09.

[5] The title of this poem-series "Hui lan ji" is borrowed from a Yuan Dynasty *zaju* (drama) by Li Qianfu in the same title. The original Yuan drama has been adapted into various versions, most notably by the German playwright Bertolt Brecht in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. The title poem of the poem-series is Zhai's reworking of this famous drama. She writes in the note that her poem has changed the perspective of the storytelling, from the perspective of the two mothers to the son, to discuss the shackles of motherly love (168).

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