

Self-Closure through Self-Disclosure:  
Rethinking “Women’s Literature” in 1990s China

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## Abstract

In the cultural realm of 1990s mainland China, “women’s literature” (女性文学) rose as a literary genre that attracted much attention. In its upsurge, there are ambiguities and biases lying in the academic discussion as well as the commodification of the idea of “women’s literature.” Focusing on this cultural phenomenon, this thesis investigates the politics behind this central concept’s signifying process, especially how the 1990s literary critique created boundaries and ambiguities for this key notion. To posit the research in the larger background, this thesis also examines the multilayered socialist and post-socialist Chinese context on which the production of this genre is grounded. In the 1990s discussion, two works were oftentimes considered as representatives of “women’s literature,” *A Private Life* (私人生活) and *A War of One’s Own* (一个人的战争). Therefore, this thesis also seeks to propose an alternative way to the 1990s critique by reading them as the writing of a gendered personal history, which aims to present female protagonists’ self-closure through self-disclosure.

## Résumé

Dans le domaine culturel de la Chine continentale des années 1990, la « littérature féminine » (女性文学) est devenue un genre littéraire qui a beaucoup attiré l'attention. Dans son essor, il y a des ambiguïtés et des préjugés dans la discussion académique ainsi que la marchandisation de l'idée de « littérature féminine ». Axée sur ce phénomène culturel, cette thèse étudie la politique derrière le processus signifiant de le concept central, en particulier comment la critique littéraire des années 1990 a créé des limites et des ambiguïtés pour cette notion clé. Pour situer la recherche dans le contexte plus large, cette thèse examine également le contexte socialiste et post-socialiste chinois à plusieurs niveaux sur lequel la production de ce genre est fondée. Dans le débat des années 1990, deux œuvres étaient souvent considérées comme des représentantes de la « littérature féminine », *Une Vie Privée* (私人生活) et *Une Guerre à Soi* (一个人的战争). Par conséquent, cette thèse cherche également à proposer une voie alternative à la critique des années 1990 en les lisant comme l'écriture d'une histoire personnelle genré, qui vise à présenter l'auto-fermeture des protagonistes féminines par l'auto-divulgation.

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## Introduction

A war of one's own means a hand clapping itself, a wall blocking itself, a flower destroying itself. A war of one's own means a woman married to herself.

This woman often closes doors and windows, and stands in front of a mirror, taking off her clothes one after another. Her body rises and falls, and her soft underwear on the chair is full of rhythms, just like some invisible life is hidden inside...<sup>1</sup>

In 1994, a Chinese novel titled *A War of One's Own* (一个人的战争) was published, which soon became the cornerstone for the author, Lin Bai (林白), to be known in the Chinese literary realm.<sup>2</sup> This novel, to some extent, was unsettling for many Chinese critics at that time. As is shown by the opening paragraphs of the novel excerpted above, the text not only utilizes multiple analogies to portray the psychology regarding individuality, self-reflection, and gendered and sexed experiences of a woman, but is also written from the perspective of an unravelling female's private life, including her sexual experience.

Two years after Lin Bai's novel was published, another novel titled *A Private Life* (私人生活) by the female author Chen Ran (陈染) came out.<sup>3</sup> Though in some way different in their plot and narrative styles, these two novels, nevertheless, resemble each other, to a large extent, in their thematic focus, representation of a female protagonist, and writing techniques. Portraying the coming-of-age story of a female protagonist, both texts overlap in their focus

<sup>1</sup> “一个人的战争意味着一个巴掌自己拍自己，一面墙自己挡住自己，一朵花自己毁灭自己。一个人的战争意味着一个女人自己嫁给自己。这个女人经常把门窗关上，然后站在镜子前，把衣服一件件脱去。她的身体一起一伏，柔软的内衣在椅子上充满动感，就像有看不见的生命藏在其中。” Lin Bai 林白. “Yigeren de zhanzheng” 一个人的战争 [A War of One's Own]. *Huacheng* 花城 2 (1994): 4. Translations in this thesis are my own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> Lin Bai was born in 1958. Her most famous works in the 1990s are *A War of One's Own* 一个人的战争 and *Speak, Chamber* 说吧，房间.

<sup>3</sup> Chen Ran 陈染. “Siren shenghuo” 私人生活 [A Private Life]. *Huacheng* 花城 2 (1996): 4-80. Chen Ran was born in 1962. Her most famous work in the 1990s is *A Private Life* 私人生活. She also published many short stories and novellas. *A Private Life* was translated into English by John Howard-Gibbon New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

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on the reflection on patriarchy, trauma, women's sexual desire and experience, as well as the double existence of verbal aphasia and the drive to write the female protagonist. As a result, these two novels were commonly recognized by Chinese scholars as representative works of "women's literature" (女性文学) in 1990s China.

"Women's literature," sometimes also referred to as "women's writing" (女性写作), is a concept used by mainland Chinese critics in the 1990s to indicate a particular literary genre concerning women writers' literary production and activities. The concept of "women's literature," at first glance, seems to merely attribute writing practices to women. However, the reason why it attracted much attention in the 1990s is that it was the first time in Chinese socialist (1949-1978) and post-socialist (1978- ) literary history when women's gender and sex were systematically given much significance to forge a literary genre and interpret literary works. Apart from Lin Bai and Chen Ran, other female writers such as Hai Nan (海男), Hong Ying (虹影), Xu Xiaobin (徐小斌), Xu Kun (徐坤) and so on, famous for their common focus on women's issues and female sexuality, as well as their reflection on gender dynamics, were also recognized as pioneers of "women's literature".

Focusing on both the concept of "women's literature" and the literary works by two representative female writers, Lin Bai and Chen Ran, this thesis will examine the fracture between this generalized term and its limited referent, and more importantly, the social, ideological, and discursive forces underlying the emergence of this fracture. Rather than considering "women's literature" as a stable concept, I see it as the result of linguistic and cultural construction. Therefore, it is the social forces behind this construction process that

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need to be excavated. In examining the ambiguity and prejudice in the term's referencing function, I will investigate both the concept of "women's literature" and the texts by Lin Bai and Chen Ran not merely from a gendered perspective but locate them in the larger context of China's socialist and post-socialist periods. In doing so, I seek to propose an alternative way of reading their works as individual narratives, which is an alternative to mainstream narratives. By "mainstream narratives," I mean a collaboration of mass-oriented discourse and patriarchal discourse in the 1990s literary realm that can both be traced to socialist Chinese literary tradition. In other words, this thesis intends to contribute to the discussion of Chinese women's writings and cultural ecology in the 1990s by not only examining literary texts by women, but also excavating how the genre of "women's literature" is constructed, where its boundaries are drawn, and what might be the historical and ideological factors underlying its construction.

The concept of "women's literature" (女性文学) appeared in Chinese literary criticism in the 1980s and was ambiguous from the very beginning because of a general demarcation of gender without further addressing whether "women" refers to the author, the object of writing, or a gendered writing style and position. Yet, ever since the 1990s, what obfuscates its connotation even further is its common overlap with three other terms in critical discourse, "feminist literature" (女性主义文学), "body writing" (身体写作), and "private writing" (私人化写作). These three concepts respectively refer to different denotations of "women's literature": anti-patriarchy, women's body and sexuality, and the mind, interiority, and personal life of an individual female subject. Thus, these denotations endow "women's

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literature” with more layers of ambiguity. On one hand, its confusion with these three other concepts not only draws a particular boundary of how to interpret these women writers’ works, but also functions to define what external and internal images women should bear. On the other hand, various social, cultural, and ideological factors underlay the way “women’s literature” was utilized in the cultural realm of 1990s China. In other words, rather than simply utilizing “women’s literature” as a standard and stabilized definition of Chinese women writers’ works, it is more important to consider it as a term being defined under certain rules, politics, and social background.

While Chinese scholarship intentionally equates “women’s literature” with feminist, erotic, and rhetorically internalized writing through the terminological confusion, it also strategically overlooks some important aspects in the use of the term. Compared to other literary schools in the post-socialist Reform era, such as “root-seeking literature,” “avant-garde literature,” and “neo-realist literature,” the idea of “women’s literature” conflates the works of different women writers by their gender identity rather than literary style and motif. Also, although “woman” signifies a gender category, the academic discussion of specific texts under the title of “women’s literature” from the 1990s oftentimes focused only on a particular cluster of female authors, especially the writers who revitalized and exposed female’s private life and sexuality with literary eloquence. In other words, what is often consciously neglected by Chinese literary critics’ use of the term “women’s literature” is what these women writers’ own emphasis of their identity, which is, first and foremost, of existing and writing as an individual person, and “the difference among individuals is larger



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than gender difference.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the critical discourse that seemingly advocates women’s liberation in fact operates in a way that limits and eroticizes female subjectivity.

The effect of such treatment of the term “women’s literature” in the Chinese academic field both celebrates and delimits the possibility of women’s writing, and thus, creates an enclosed discursive field for the works of some women writers. To indicate an “objective” attitude towards “women’s literature,” scholars tend to characterize their works as “ground-breaking yet also limited.” Also, their paradoxical attitude can be observed from the overlapping usage of concepts. When considering “women’s literature” as “feminist literature,” the 1990s critics attributed the limitation of “women’s literature” to its total rejection of the male gender; when analysing it as “body writing,” they criticized the women writers’ unhealthy obsession with female sexuality; when equating it with the term “private writing,” they disapproved the authors’ indulgence in narrating individual woman’s private life rather than the life of the masses. As a result, the idea of “women’s literature” serves as a platform on which various criticisms operate together to create a complicated discursive ecology that needs to be queried and problematized.

Yet, these discourses did not emerge groundlessly, they are, rather, conditioned by the social and cultural context of post-socialist China, an epoch which both breaks away and inherits from the highly politicized Mao era. Although not bearing any visible political discourse, the perception of “women’s literature” as limited and awkward in 1990s criticism

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<sup>4</sup> “个体差异比性别差异更大。” Lin Bai 林白. “Shengming reqing hezai—yu wo chuangzuo youguan de yixie ci” 生命热情何在——与我创作有关的一些词 [Where Does the Passion of Life Lie—Some Words about my Composition]. *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论 4 (2005): 62.

can still be traced to Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art" (在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话) in 1942,<sup>5</sup> the radical ideological discourse that governed cultural production during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign in the mid-1980s. Apart from inheriting mainstream political and critical discourse, the cultural environment of 1990s China was further complicated by the development of the market economy. Therefore, it is also worth contemplating how forces such as publishing and mass communication operated in producing and defining the idea of "women's literature."

One event in 1990s China that influenced the emergence of "women's literature" is the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) held in Beijing in 1995. Ever since the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art, conferences have become one of the major sources for Chinese political and cultural authorities to provide guidance for the development of literature, culture, and criticism.<sup>6</sup> When this tradition was transplanted into the 1990s, a

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<sup>5</sup> Bonnie McDougall and Zedong Mao, *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary*, trans. Bonnie McDougall (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, 1980).

<sup>6</sup> The development of contemporary Chinese culture (1949- ) is to a large extent in parallel with the political environment, and conferences have become one of the mediators between the trajectory of culture and the shifting of political winds. For example, the fundamental standard of socialist realism [translated by McDougall as "proletarian realism"] for literature and art was first established at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art in 1942 and reemphasized at the Second National Conference of the Representatives of Literary and Art Workers (中华全国文学艺术工作者第二次代表大会) in 1953. Moreover, while official conferences regarding the development of culture were mainly focused on class issues during the socialist period, authorities started to stress the function of culture in serving post-socialist Chinese development during the 1980s. McDougall and Mao, *Mao Zedong's "Talks,"* 76. Zhou Yang 周扬, "Zhou Yang zai wenxue yishu gongzuozhe dierci daibiao dahui shang de baogao" 周扬在文学艺术工作者第二次代表大会上的报告 [Zhou Yang's Report at the Second National Conference of the Representatives of Literary and Art Workers], China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, accessed July 3, 2021, [http://www.cflac.org.cn/wdh/cflac\\_wdh-2th\\_Article-02.html](http://www.cflac.org.cn/wdh/cflac_wdh-2th_Article-02.html). Zicheng Hong, *A History of*

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period when Chinese market economy had started to rapidly develop, the 1995 conference bore both political and commercial significance. The FWCW not only demanded the systematic publication of women writers' works around 1995 as "presents offered" (献礼) to the conference but also transformed "women's literature" into a selling point and boosted the relevant publishing business.

Although under these social and historical contexts, Lin Bai and Chen Ran were defined as pioneers of "women's literature," their 1990s texts cannot be completely encompassed by this simplified classification. The significance of their works, to a large extent, lies not only in the semi-autobiographic writing about femininity and women's body, but in what I interpret as a rediscovery of "personal history." Adopting monologic narrative in some of their most famous 1990s works, such as *A Private Life* and *A War of One's Own*, both women writers not only depict their female protagonist/narrator as silent, solitary, and filled with the internal drive to escape from the collectivity, but they also use distinct writing techniques to create alternative personal histories narrated by their soliloquies. By "alternative," I mean a position of stressing the peculiarity and alterity of the literary subject rather than immersing it in the mass-oriented and authoritative discourse that tend to cancel individual difference. In other words, the tension in their texts emerges not merely from a gendered position but more from their choice of using an individual subject to soliloquize her aphasia outside the crowd. It is the tension between the double or paradoxical drive of what I

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*Contemporary Chinese Literature*, trans. Michael M Day (Leiden: BRILL, 2007). Zhou Yang 周扬, "Jiwang kailai, fanrong shehui zhuyi xinshiqi de wenyi" 继往开来, 繁荣社会主义新时期的文艺 [To Carry on the Past and Open a Way for the Future, to Promote Literature and Art of the New Era of Socialism], China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, accessed July 3, 2021, [http://www.cflac.org.cn/wdh/cflac\\_wdh-4th\\_Article-03.html](http://www.cflac.org.cn/wdh/cflac_wdh-4th_Article-03.html).

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call “self-closure” and “self-disclosure,” between the individual narrative and the collective narrative, that the female textual subject seeks to reflect on and respond to.

To examine the ambiguity and bias of the key notion, this thesis will analyse the concept of “women’s literature,” its sociohistorical context, and Lin’s and Chen’s so-called representative texts within the chapters. By addressing the ambiguity of the concept “women’s literature,” Chapter One “Boundary and Instability: The Concept of ‘Women’s Literature’” will examine the aporia in Chinese academic discourse between the impossibility of forming a clear connotation for the term and the success of its usage making an apparent clear denotation. I will review in detail the multi-dimensional meanings co-existing in the concept of “women’s literature” enabled by Chinese scholarship and the ways in which they collaborate to define the literary works of some individual women writers. Also, this chapter will explore how the Chinese critics’ misuse of the term would simultaneously promote and confine the interpretation of these women writers’ composition.

Chapter Two “From Socialism to Post-Socialism: The Context of ‘Women’s Literature’” examines the way in which the critical discourse in the Mao era and the 1980s established an overall pragmatic and phallogocentric literary perspective, which excluded or marginalized the writing of femininity, sexuality, and individuality. This chapter will also demonstrate how the post-socialist market forces conjoined with academic critique to facilitate the production and operation of discourse, which not only disregarded women writers’ own standpoints in literary and critical interpretations of their works, but also incorporated these women

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themselves into this discursive mechanism, for example by making a connection between their literary writing and their personal lives.

Turning from deconstructing critical discourses and contexts to the close reading of the literary texts, Chapter Three “Self-Closure through Self-Disclosure: Rereading ‘Women’s Literature’” will reinterpret the representative works of Lin Bai and Chen Ran, *A War of One’s Own* and *A Private Life*. I will not only analyze the features of their works, such as their mutual focus on the female subject’s own imagination, fragmented memory and narrative fictionality, the motif of one’s body, as well as the shared style of monologue and stream of consciousness, but also examine how these features serve as their individual effort to build idiosyncratic narratives uttering the personal story, which is often left out by the grand and mass-oriented narratives. Following the analysis of the construction of personal histories, this chapter will also focus on how both female protagonists create alternative self images for themselves, with which their narrations of personal history are able to move away from social reality to construct a gendered and unique personal reality. Negotiating between reality and fictionality, between self-closure and self-disclosure, the writing of these two novels serves as what is described by Lin Bai as releasing the personal experiences, which were once considered as taboos by the collective narratives, from the repressed memories.<sup>7</sup>

Following the above analysis, this thesis will conclude with the issue of “naming the identity.” While Chinese literary criticism in the 1990s signaled a literary trend of “women’s

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<sup>7</sup> Lin Bai 林白. “Jiyi yu gerenhua xiezu” 记忆与个人化写作 [Memory and Individual Writing]. *Huacheng* 花城. 5 (1996): 125.

literature,” this concept, nevertheless, reveals a complex cultural and ideological background of socialist and post-socialist China with which its usage is intertwined. While it has been a historical burden for female writers to choose between the titles of “author” or “woman author” in modern and contemporary Chinese history, what is revealed in the issue of “women’s literature” in 1990s China is that the mainstream cultural, political, and economic discourse converged to define and delimit the meaning of the gender identity of “women” for these women writers, which was something guided by patriarchy and the mass-oriented discourse. Therefore, in the tension between Lin Bai and Chen Ran’s composition and the 1990s literary criticism, between the identity of “author” and “woman author,” there exists the anxiety for both naming and being named in the complex cultural ecology of 1990 mainland China.

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## Chapter One

### Boundary and Instability: The Concept of “Women’s Literature”

In her 1996 article, Chinese scholar Dai Jinhua observes that “one of the most noticeable features of women’s writing in the 1990s is the high level of consciousness and self-awareness about gender.”<sup>8</sup> The 1990s were a time when most mainland Chinese literary critics focused on the discussion and debate about the rise, legitimacy, and limitations of women’s writing about lived experience as women and female.<sup>9</sup> In comparison, Dai viewed this literary phenomenon from a broader perspective of the discursive system: “What any sophisticated woman writer would inevitably encounter in her writing career is...first and foremost, the trap of language and the web of discourse.”<sup>10</sup> Dai observes a paradox here: while women writers in 1990s China, who had gained an avant-garde “self-awareness about gender,” attempted to seek and construct their own language and narrative, their literary creations were still published, received, promoted, and criticized by the discourse of a cultural environment that was, to a large extent, patriarchal.

Among all the “linguistic traps” concerning women’s composition in the 1990s, a highly representative one is the concept of “women’s literature” (女性文学). Despite the high

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<sup>8</sup> “九十年代女性写作最引人注目的特征之一便是充分的性别意识与性别自觉。” Dai Jinhua 戴锦华. “Qiyu yu tuwei—jiushi niandai nüxing xiezuo” 奇遇与突围——九十年代女性写作 [Adventure and Breakthrough—Women’s Writing in the 1990s]. *Wenxue pinglun* 文学评论 5 (1996): 95.

<sup>9</sup> In the context of 1990s China, the discourse about the separation between gender and sexual orientation has yet to be prevalently known. Therefore, in this thesis, the concepts of “woman/women” and “female,” as well as “man/men” and “male,” can basically be deemed as equivalent.

<sup>10</sup> “任何一个成熟的女作家在其写作生涯中都必然遭遇的...首先是语言的陷阱与话语的网罗。” Dai, “Qiyu yu tuwei,” 98.

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frequency of its appearance in many 1990s scholars' analyses of literary history and certain women writers' texts, there existed, and still exists, much confusion about the connotation of this term. Arguably, there exists a tension between its lack of consistent signification in different arguments and its wide adoption as a term with stable as well as ontological meanings. In other words, although this central concept is constituted by two notions in their seemingly broadest sense, "women" and "literature," its referent as constructed by 1990s academic discourse neither incorporated all women writers nor all genres of literature. While literary critique adds ambiguity and instability to the signification of "women's literature," it nevertheless creates boundaries for the term so that it falls within the mainstream discourse of patriarchy and socialist politics: women are sometimes stipulated to concentrate on their bodies and the domestic space, sometimes to remain virtuous and focus on the masses.

As an established literary genre, "women's literature" is necessary and irreducible for literary analysis. Yet this does not mean that the construction of this concept and even the genre itself cannot be problematized. It has been suggested by Spivak in her deconstruction of concepts that "[i]t is important to remember that each of these names is determined by their historical burden in the most empirical way,"<sup>11</sup> which means it is important to unravel certain institutional and hegemonic elements underwriting the production of concepts. Therefore, the reason why the signifying process of "women's literature" is underlined in this thesis is because more than the meanings of the concept, it is important to examine how it is

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<sup>11</sup> Gayatri Spivak, "Feminism and Deconstruction, Again: Negotiations," in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 149.



shaped and, adopting the word by Tani Barlow, “value-coded.”<sup>12</sup> This examination can thus serve as a means of diving into the various social, ideological, geo-political, cultural, and historical contexts and discourses that underwrite certain manners of conceptualization in language.

Therefore, concentrating on the key notion of “women’s literature,” this chapter will examine its connotation and denotation in the scholarly narratives of 1990s mainland China. More importantly, in the analysis of a concept’s construction and usage, it is necessary to deal with both the indicative and symbolic signification of language and the productive function, politics, and mechanics of language manipulation. Therefore, this chapter will also investigate how the scholarly usage of this concept simultaneously shaped the discursive context and was shaped by the discursive context in the 1990s.

### **The Paradox of “*Tamen*”**

One year after the 1995 Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW), a Chinese female writer and scholar, Xu Kun, commented on the dramatic influence of this cultural event: “In 1995, Chinese women experienced an unprecedented collective carnival under the attention of hundreds of millions of people, and Chinese women’s literature also experienced an unprecedented ‘climax.’”<sup>13</sup> Quoting these words, Li Jiefei, a male literary

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<sup>12</sup> Tani Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 32.

<sup>13</sup> “1995年，中国女性在亿万世人瞩目之下经受了一次空前绝后的女性集体狂欢，中国的女性文学也经历了一次前所未有的‘高潮体验’。” Xu Kun 徐坤. “Nüxing xiezu: duanlie yu jiehe” 女性写作：断裂与接合 [Women’s Writing: Rupture and Connection]. *Zuojia* 作家 7 (1996): 70.

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critic, illustrated his thoughts in a 1997 article concerning not only the condition of Chinese “women’s literature” as motivated by the FWCW but also Chinese women’s composition before and after the 1990s in general.

Li is a Chinese scholar who has worked at the Institute of Literature at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) since the 1980s. CASS is the official research institute in the field of humanities and social sciences under the direct supervision of the mainland Chinese government. Li’s research mainly focuses on contemporary (socialist and post-socialist) Chinese literature, on which he has published various academic articles and monographs. When, in 1995, another critic named Ding Laixian published an article criticizing Lin Bai for exposing matters of female privacy and sexuality in *A War of One’s Own*, Li was among many scholars who supported Lin and sought legitimization for women writers’ more radical literary techniques.<sup>14</sup> In this context, his article titled “The Fiction by ‘*Tamen*’” (“她们”的小说) incorporates most of the major issues regarding “women’s literature” in the 1990s, including the feminist stance, the female body and sexuality, the focus on “the personal,” and the academic discussion around these topics. Although the article is a defense of female writers and a comprehensive analysis of “women’s literature,” some linguistic strategies and the use of concepts in this article also reveal some of the confusion in Li’s arguments that was common in 1990s literary critique. Li’s article can

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<sup>14</sup> Xiao Qingguo 肖庆国. “‘Lilunhua siwei’ yu jiushi niandai nüxing wenxue lunzheng” “理论化思维”与九十年代女性文学论争 [“Theoretical Thoughts” and Arguments Regarding Women’s Literature in the 1990s]. *Dangdai wentan* 当代文坛 3 (2020): 183-185.

therefore serve as a starting point for discussing the more complicated academic discourse around “women’s literature” in 1990s China.

In this article, Li uses the term “*tamen*” (她们, the feminine form of “they” and “them” in Chinese) to categorize a particular group of women writers.<sup>15</sup> Briefly surveying the literary compositions by women in Chinese history,<sup>16</sup> Li asserts that “*tamen*” could only refer to the women writers who “discard male experience, the male perspective, male rhetoric, and, simply put, no longer use men’s expression but have found a way of signifying that purely belongs to women.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, while arguing that this term can only be applied to the women writers in 1990s China, such as Xu Kun, Xu Xiaobin, Lin Bai and Chen Ran, he also excludes other women writers in modern and contemporary Chinese literary history, such as Ding Ling (1904-1986), Zhang Ailing (1920-1995), Tie Ning (1957- ) and Can Xue (1953- ), for not yet having achieved the standard.

To conceptualize the term *tamen*, Li explains it on two levels. First, by accentuating the plural form of the term, he indicates that women’s composition in 1990s China is a collective action, in which female authors use “a way of signifying that purely belongs to women.”

Thus, even though works by authors such as Xiao Hong, Ding Ling, Zhang Ailing, and Can

<sup>15</sup> The women writers mentioned by Li includes Xu Kun, Xu Xiaobin, Lin Bai, Chen Ran, Jiang Zidan and Hai Nan.

<sup>16</sup> Li believes literature by women overall displays a developing pattern. While arguing women’s writings in the classical form are only “ornaments of male’s discourse,” he also claims the breakthrough point appeared during the May Fourth period, in which women such as Bing Xin, Lu Yin and other female writers started to write “openly” (开放) and “independently” (自主). Li Jiefei 李洁非. “*Tamen*’ de xiaoshuo” “她们”的小说 [The Fiction by “*Tamen*”]. *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论 5 (1997): 68-74.

<sup>17</sup> “作为小说而言，这种新秩序主要是指，女性作家的写作如何摒弃男性经验、男性视点、男性句法，一句话，不复使用男性的表达而找到一种纯粹女性的表意方式。” Li, “*Tamen*,” 75.

Xue already showed some level of awareness of gender as Li mentions,<sup>18</sup> such awareness had yet to become prevalent among female authors. He therefore argues that their writings can only be viewed as expressions of individual consciousness that laid the foundation for the collectivity of *tamen* that matured in the 1990s.

Li also elaborates the “methods and details” that can help to further pinpoint the writings by *tamen*.<sup>19</sup> He indicates that the group of *tamen* “reached a consensus” on “the rhetoric of the body” (躯体修辞学) and thus incorporated women’s bodies and sexuality as important motifs in their writing.<sup>20</sup> Beyond the portrayal of women’s bodies, Li believes that another significant posture of *tamen* is “to concentrate on the self, the individual narrative or marginalized writing, which becomes their self-isolation to escape from involvement in men’s context.”<sup>21</sup> Arguing that “socialization” is the synonym of “masculinization,” he identifies literary themes such as memory (回忆) and dreams (梦境) as the perfect path for women writers to avoid masculine discourse and to “self-exile” (自我放逐) in their interiority.<sup>22</sup> In other words, both body writing and narratives of the personal theme are deemed by Li Jiefei as essential tools for female authors to “obtain clear self-consciousness

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<sup>18</sup> Li argues that the works of Ding Ling, Xiao Hong, and Zhang Ailing “reveal the tendency of abandoning and resisting male discourse,” while Can Xue was ground-breaking in the individualization of women’s writing style. Li, “*Tamen*,” 72-73.

<sup>19</sup> Li, “*Tamen*,” 78.

<sup>20</sup> Li, “*Tamen*,” 78. The idea of “the rhetoric of the body” is raised by another critic, Nan Fan. Nan Fan 南帆. “Quti xiucixue: xiaoxiang yu xing” 躯体修辞学：肖像与性 [Rhetoric of the Body: Portrait and Sexuality]. *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣 4 (1996): 30-39.

<sup>21</sup> “只关注自身、个人化叙述或边缘化写作，成为她们免于卷入男性语境的一道屏障...” Li, “*Tamen*,” 80.

<sup>22</sup> Li, “*Tamen*,” 80-81.

about gender,”<sup>23</sup> and therefore provide standards for evaluating whether a woman writer belongs to the group of *tamen*.

In his analysis, Li raises another concept, “feminist poetics” (女性主义诗学), which includes the orientation of anti-patriarchy, the writing technique of returning to women’s bodies and interior feelings. Equating *tamen* with “feminist writers,” Li believes building a sophisticated feminist poetics is the only way for women writers to obtain a language of their own, as well as to break the domination of masculine discourse, logic, ethics, and aesthetics.<sup>24</sup> In introducing his ideas regarding feminism, Li also mentions the influence of foreign feminist theories and thoughts on women’s fiction in 1990s China: “Undoubtedly, without the communication of foreign feminist thoughts, without the direct enlightenment by foreign feminist fiction texts, it was impossible for the composition of Chinese women’s fiction to reach the ‘climax.’”<sup>25</sup> He thus takes Cixous as an example to illustrate how the group of *tamen* agree with and adopt her idea of converging women’s awareness of their bodily desire and literary writing.

Though praising *tamen*’s efforts in building a “feminist poetics” and attempting to correct misinterpretations about women writers’ works in Chinese criticism,<sup>26</sup> Li Jiefei also

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<sup>23</sup> “我们才可以第一次用女性主义所自豪的‘她们’一词来称呼这些有着明确性别自我意识的中国当代女性作家...” Li, “*Tamen*,” 75.

<sup>24</sup> Li, “*Tamen*,” 76-78.

<sup>25</sup> Li, “*Tamen*,” 75.

<sup>26</sup> Li lists several works by authors such as Xu Kun, Xu Xiaobin, Chen Ran, Hai Nan and Jiang Zidan, and indicates that the function of their writing women’s body, sexuality and desire is to form a resistance and challenge to the patriarchal logic. He thus criticizes the term “quasi-erotic fiction” (准黄色小说) that another scholar, Ding Laixian, has given to “women’s literature.” He also says that Ding’s anger towards these works is exactly an effect of feminist writing, that it has created fear inside the masculine discourse. Li, “*Tamen*,” 75-77.

points out at the end of his article the limitations of the literary works by *tamen*: to him, the drawback lies in how they form a total resistance to male discourse, suggesting overcorrection and paranoia. Therefore, he warns that resistance of masculine discourse by feminist writing should only be an approach rather than the ultimate objective.<sup>27</sup> In his perspective, the current trend of feminist literature has the danger of creating a female-dominated order, while the future of gender dynamics exists in “the intention of both male and female to understand each other.”<sup>28</sup>

Apart from the insight Li offers for research on women’s composition in 1990s China, his argument is problematic on the level of inventing and using the concepts. Despite the fact that Li uses the criteria of literary style and narrative to identify some writers that are at the center of “*tamen*,” the boundary of “*tamen*” remains difficult or even impossible to demarcate. If being a “feminist writer” means to adopt the literary positions and features that Li summarizes, is it still possible to describe a woman writer as a part of “*tamen*” if her writing accords with some of the standards but contradicts others? In fact, the standards for belonging to “*tamen*” might be self-contradictory; for example, the literary technique of “personal narrative” (个人化叙述) does not necessarily lead to self-marginalization from society as Li understands it but is oftentimes linked to external motifs such as social conditions and historical changes.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Li, “*Tamen*,” 83.

<sup>28</sup> Li, “*Tamen*,” 82-83.

<sup>29</sup> For example, *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (长恨歌) by Wang Anyi blends grand history with personal history. Wang does not appear as one of the central figures in the discussion of the genre of “women’s literature” or the group of “*tamen*” in 1990s literary critique, at least not as often as Lin Bai and Chen Ran. The action of merging the so-called “personal narratives” and women’s gender identity by Li is also problematic, since the theme

Another aporia in Li's argument lies in the idea of "feminist writers." According to his definition, the "feminist writers" are influenced by theories and methodologies that were introduced from abroad, yet he fails to offer direct evidence for this assumption. Moreover, both Lin Bai and Chen Ran, the two representatives of "feminist writers" mentioned by Li, have said that they are not familiar with feminist theories.<sup>30</sup>

In evaluating literary works by women in 1990s China, Li Jiefei believes "women's fiction" is both groundbreaking and limited, which is similar to the attitude of many other Chinese critics. However, his arguments in the article form a paradox in themselves. On one hand, he points out that it is because of the guidance of "the male-centered value system" that many male critics bear the conviction that only literature touching on society and universal humanity is valuable.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, he also attempts to remind women writers that it is irrational to equate all the literary and cultural works created by men as products of patriarchy, since many of them also show universal values and aesthetics shared by all human beings that are worthy of celebration.<sup>32</sup> In other words, Li both criticizes the concept of "human values" as the product of patriarchy and promotes it as being shared by all people, irrespective of their gender. This contradiction in his attitude also echoes his idea of taking "masculinization" and "socialization" as similar concepts. Li's critique reveals the instability

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of "the personal" was already revitalized during the 1980s as a revision of the dominating grand narratives in the socialist period. Both male and female writers in post-socialist China worked on the rediscovery of this motif. Li, "*Tamen*," 77.

<sup>30</sup> Chen Ran says she does not understand the meaning of feminism, and Lin Bai also admit that she "knows little about the theories of feminism." Chen Ran 陈染 and Wang Shuo 王朔. "Guanyu xiezuo de duihua" 关于写作的对话 [A Conversation about Writing]. *Dajia* 大家 4 (2000): 79. Lin, "Shengming reqing," 62.

<sup>31</sup> Li, "*Tamen*," 77.

<sup>32</sup> Li, "*Tamen*," 83.

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within the scholarly narratives of 1990s China regarding feminism and women's composition.

There is, moreover, some confusion of terminology in Li's argument. When summarizing the literary history of Chinese women's writings in the 1990s, he uses the three notions, "women's fiction" (女性小说), "feminist fiction" (女性主义小说) and "feminist literature" (女性主义文学) interchangeably and as synonymous with "women's literature." Yet Li also uses the term "women's literature" to describe women's writings before the 1990s, which, as he argues, did not fully achieve female writers' goal of becoming independent from and parallel to male writers.<sup>33</sup> The three interchangeable terms of "women's literature" are also used as synonyms by Li to refer to the literary works by "*tamen*," without further mentioning their signification, interrelationship, and relationship with "women's literature before the 1990s." Therefore, in both the diachronic dimension of literary history and the synchronic dimension of women's composition in 1990s China, there is a confusion between broad and narrow definitions in Li's critical discourse. That is to say, Li not only regards the approach of feminism as a general methodology in women's composition of 1990s China, but his emphasis on the genre of fiction also overshadows other genres adopted by women writers of the 1990s. As a result, when the concept of "feminist" is broadened to the idea of "the approach utilized by women writers," and "fiction" to the more general "literature," not only are general concepts reduced to a limited scope, but narrow terms are also endowed with a general signification representing the whole. This confusion of terms creates a state of

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<sup>33</sup> Li, "*Tamen*," 76.



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instability and ambiguity in their signification, which is projected onto the concept of “*tamen*.”

Li Jiefei’s article is highly representative of literary criticisms in 1990s China: it covers most of the dimensions concerning “women’s literature” analyzed by other critics, including the issues of the feminist position, body writing, individual narrative, the influence of Western feminist theories, the limitations of and solutions for the genre of “fiction by *tamen*,” and the examination of the group of “*tamen*” in the scope of mainland Chinese literary history. Moreover, the problematic issues in his arguments, such as the unstable signification of concepts, the contradictory attitude in the criticism, and the contradiction between scholarly analysis and the women writers’ own ideas and statements, are also highly prevalent in academic publications of the 1990s and later.

Therefore, in its examination of the notion of “women’s literature,” Li’s article functions as an ideal starting point for the analysis of this thesis on two levels. Firstly, as a sample that covers most of the central discussions around the notion of “women’s literature,” it represents the overall condition of literary criticism in 1990s China regarding this key notion. It can serve to unpack the fabric of the rhetoric about terminologies and the ideological matters implied in the academic critique that revolve around this central concept. Secondly, and more fundamentally, the source and mechanics of the multiple confusions and contradictions in Li’s statements are precisely the central focus of this chapter. That is to say, just as the “naturally” built synonymous relationship among “women’s literature,” “women’s fiction,” “feminist literature” and “feminist fiction” needs to be problematized, the core of this thesis

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will examine in what way the concepts' seemingly ontological yet unstable significations might be the effects of certain politics and social contexts.

### **The Construction of "Women's Literature"<sup>34</sup>**

Building upon the analysis of "*tamen*," this section is focused on the generation of the key concept of "women's literature" in 1990s Chinese academic discourse and literary critique. This concept not only contains meanings about gender that fall under traditional patriarchal views but is also confused with three other notions, "feminist literature," "body writing," and "private writing." The concept of "women's literature" was therefore established as a term without an adequate referent. Concentrating on the interweaving of scholarly discourse, this section will investigate how 1990s academia tended to incorporate women's composition, a newly emerging and somewhat marginalized practice, into the mainstream. The analysis in this section will also pave the way for Chapter Two, which investigates the cultural, political, and economic context of socialist and post-socialist China that underwrites the emergence of the concept of "women's literature."

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<sup>34</sup> The examining of the concept of "women's literature" in this thesis is mainly based on the research of around 200 papers regarding this topic published in the 1980s and 1990s, most of which are from official "core journals" (核心期刊), including *Fiction Review* (小说评论), *Contemporary Writers Review* (当代作家评论), *Literary Review* (文学评论), *Literature and Art Forum* (文艺争鸣), *Literature and Art Studies* (文艺研究), *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (当代文坛), and so on. This thesis also refers to the reviews written by main academic figures that contributed to the discussion about "women's literature" in the 1990s, including Dai Jinhua, Xu Kun, Li Jiefei, Wang Fei, Liu Siqian, Wang Xiaoming, Wang Kan, Zhang Yiwu, as well as Lin Bai and Chen Ran themselves. Scholars' analysis about the concept of "women's literature" are rather diverse, but they can also be categorized into three general aspects, which are this notion's confusion with the terms of "feminist literature," "body writing," and "private writing" that will be examined in the following paragraphs. While each of these aspects are paid attention by various scholars, the critiques cited in this section are the ones that this thesis finds the most elaborated and representative.

Although this thesis is mostly focused on the concept of “women’s literature” in Chinese literary criticism, including its connotation and denotation, as well as the politics of its usage in the 1990s, it is also necessary to trace its etymology, which will offer a more lucid picture of its development. The notion of “women’s literature” first appeared at the early stages of the Chinese post-socialist period, namely, the early 1980s, and was endowed with a somewhat ambiguous signification from the very beginning. One of the earliest remarks about “women’s literature” in literary criticism was by scholar Wu Daiying. In her article “A Free Talk on ‘Women’s Literature’ of the New Era” published in 1983, she notes that the notion of “women’s literature” has both a broad meaning and a narrow meaning: while the former “generally refers to all works by female authors,” the latter “particularly indicates the works portraying women’s life from the perspective of women’s own experience.”<sup>35</sup>

Although not mentioning her own affiliation, Wu nevertheless develops most of her arguments about “women’s literature” based upon what she calls the “narrow meaning.” She believes that “women’s literature,” because of the female writers’ own horizon and psychological condition, is less skillful than men’s writing at depicting sociohistorical matters but more expert in portraying interiority and unconsciousness, as well as adopting a peaceful, elegant, and soft writing style. In other words, in Wu’s perspective, there is a certain realm that “women’s literature” seeks to collectively develop, namely, the sentimental, beautiful,

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<sup>35</sup> “[‘女性文学’ 的含义]有广义的泛指一切女作家的作品；也有狭义的，专指那些从妇女的切身体验去描写妇女生活的作品。” Wu Daiying 吴黛英. “Xinshiqi ‘nüxing wenzue’ mantan” 新时期“女性文学”漫谈 [A Free Talk on “Women’s Literature” of the New Era]. In *Nüxing wenzue yanjiu ziliao* 女性文学研究资料. Nanchang: Baihuazhou wenyi chubanshe, 2007, 1.

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and “feminine” dimension of literature, which is facilitated by women’s natural gender identity.<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, from the very emergence of the term “women’s literature,” there has been conceptual ambiguity in its definition, which has also accompanied the scholarly discourse around the notion, including multiple discussions and debates about the scope of object to which it refers, into the 1990s and even the new millennium. The aporia is that the Chinese criticism uses “women,” a gender identity rather than a literary style, in attempting to draw the generic boundary for a group of literary works and writers; therefore, the development of the scholarly discourse is based on whether the critics believe there are certain essential features rooted within the gender itself, or in other words, whether the idea of “women’s literature” can describe a kind of uniformity in literary composition.

Taking a step further and considering the broad and narrow significations of this concept, if one believes that the identity of “women” cannot imply consistency but is diversified and full of potential, and “women’s literature” refers to nothing but all the works written by women, then the idea of “women’s literature” would be meaningless. Highlighting the authorship in the genre’s name would indicate nothing about the genre itself. If one believes, on the other hand, that there exists an idea of “femininity” that signifies women’s overlooking on social matters and their focus on individual topics and interior sentiment, then an issue would arise of placing the works by women writers that take less interest in

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<sup>36</sup> Wu, “Xinshiqi nüxing wenxue,” 8-11.

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“femininity” outside this broad category of “women’s literature.” As a result, many women writers in the 1980s were unwilling to be identified as “women writers.”<sup>37</sup>

As Hong Zicheng has noticed, from the 1980s to the 1990s, the debate over “women’s literature” in the realm of literature and criticism shifted from the legitimacy of this notion to its connotation. This transformation was also influenced by the introduction of feminist theories, the development of women’s literary compositions, and the FWCW held in Beijing in 1995.<sup>38</sup> If, in the 1980s, women’s literary works had yet to form a clear consciousness regarding women’s identity in relation to patriarchy, more women writers in the 1990s found the common ground of contemplating sex and gender dynamics. Therefore, inheriting the discourse from the 1980s, the critics of the 1990s to some extent solidified the notion of “women’s literature” with the connotation of focusing not only on individual, private, and “feminine” topics but also women’s bodies and sexuality and an antipatriarchal stance.

Despite the shift of academic discourse in the 1990s, the criteria of “women’s literature” were unable to draw a clear boundary for the term, especially when referring to the corresponding authors. Many writers were positioned at the margins of “women’s literature,” which meant their works were only occasionally included in this category.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, two authors, Lin Bai and Chen Ran, were consistently upheld as the main figures representing this

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<sup>37</sup> “It was their common belief that referring to them as ‘woman’ writers, saying their work was ‘women’s literature,’ was deprecatory, or at least implied a ‘consideration’ that carried a lowered standard for their literary activities. Furthermore, they were usually unwilling to refer to themselves as ‘feminists.’” Hong, *A History*, 413.

<sup>38</sup> Hong, *A History*, 413-14.

<sup>39</sup> This category includes some writers that started or resumed their literary career, including Chen Rong, Zhang Jie, Nie Ning and so on, as well as some younger writers mostly born in the 1970s, including Wei Hui and Mian Mian.

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literary trend. This is because their works were believed to be in perfect accord with the above standards of “women’s literature.” Or, to put it another way, Chinese critics in the 1990s to some extent constructed the denotations and criteria of “women’s literature” based on their interpretation of Lin Bai’s and Chen Ran’s works as feminist, erotic, and self-revealing.

In this regard, the notion of “women’s literature” gains more layers of ambiguity by being given several denotations. In 1990s literary criticism, “women’s literature” is generally interchangeable with three other concepts: “feminist literature” (女性主义文学), which signifies the stance of revising male-dominated discourse; “body writing” (身体写作/躯体写作), which means the writing about women’s bodily and sexual experiences; and “private writing” (私人化写作/私语写作), which indicates the women authors’ focus on individual lives and private matters.

#### *“Feminist Literature”*

“Feminist literature,” also known as “feminist writing” (女性主义写作), is one of the three concepts that was used most frequently as a synonym for “women’s literature” in 1990s China. The term “feminist” was generally used in 1990s literary criticism to refer to an approach that opposes and revises masculine discourse and the patriarchal order. The interchangeability of “feminist literature” and “women’s literature” is oftentimes demonstrated by how the latter concept is defined by the connotation of the former. Wang Kan, for instance, argues in his article that the idea of “women’s literature” is, first and

foremost, the literary practices taken up by women as a means of striving for discursive power. As a result, he believes that “‘women’s literature’ in the strict sense must reveal women’s subversion of men’s logocentrism.”<sup>40</sup> Resonating with Wang, other scholars, including Chen Bing and Zhang Zhizhong,<sup>41</sup> also demarcates “women’s literature” by the standard of feminism or at least women’s gender consciousness.

Another approach that Chinese scholars adopted in equating “women’s literature” with “feminist literature” was to consider “women’s literature in the 1990s” as the latest stage in the history of “women’s literature,” a stage that developed into feminism. For instance, two scholars, Yang Shaojun and Guo Jianbin, divide the history of modern and contemporary Chinese “women’s literature” into three evolving stages. They consider “feminist literature” as the third stage, which is “the stage of independent creation” (自主创造时期) that takes the

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<sup>40</sup> “严格意义的‘女性文学’必须体现出女性对男性逻各斯中心主义的颠覆。” Wang Kan 王侃. “‘Nüxing wenxue’ de neihan he shiye” “女性文学”的内涵和视野 [The Connotation and Horizon of “Women’s Literature”]. *Wenxue pinglun* 文学评论 6 (1998): 90.

<sup>41</sup> Chen Bing 陈冰. “Dangdai zhongguo nüxing wenxue de shenmei tedian” 当代中国女性文学的审美特点 [Aesthetic Features of Contemporary Chinese Women’s Literature]. *Dangdai wentan* 当代文坛 2 (1996): 25. Zhang Zhizhong 张志忠. “Banbian fengjing: nüxing wenxue de sandian saomiao” 半边风景：女性文学的散点扫描 [Half of the Scene: Scattered Scans of women’s literature]. *Wenyi pinglun* 文艺评论 1 (1997): 42.

feminist stance.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, another scholar, Liu Siqian, considers “feminist literature from the 1990s” as the third and most recent stage in the history of Chinese “women’s literature.”<sup>43</sup>

What is also worth noting about the concept of “feminist literature” is the issue of translation. When the term “feminism” was translated into Chinese, the notion was separated into two concepts: *nüxing zhuyi* (女性主义), which preserves the general meaning of “feminism,” and *nüquan zhuyi* (女权主义), which refers more to the idea of women’s striving for power. In the context of 1990s China, when the notion of *nüquan zhuyi wenxue* (女权主义文学, feminist-power literature) was mentioned, in many cases it was considered to bear a negative meaning referring to feminist “over-radicalization,” including what scholars considered to be the deep hostility of some women writers toward men. As a result, some critics also differentiated the notions of *nüxing xiaoshuo* (女性小说, women’s fiction) from *nüquan xiaoshuo* (女权小说, feminist-power fiction). For example, in a conversation among three Chinese scholars, while referring to *nüxing xiaoshuo* as fiction written from women’s perspective, they also criticized *nüquan xiaoshuo* for being a sort of women’s

<sup>42</sup> According to Yang and Guo’s classification, the first two stages of “women’s literature” are “the stage of imitating the tradition,” which means the stage when women writers have developed their own styles but not the gender consciousness, and “the stage of self-discovery,” which means the stage when women’s gender consciousness is starting to come into being. While providing this historical classification, Yang and Guo do not indicate the reference of these first two stages. Yang Shaojun 杨绍军, and Guo Jianbin 郭建斌. “Lun 90 niandai de nüxing zhuyi wenxue” 论 90 年代的女性主义文学 [Commenting on the Feminist Literature in the 1990s]. *Huadong ligong daxue xuebao (sheke ban)* 华东理工大学学报 (社科版) 4 (1999): 69-71.

<sup>43</sup> Liu Siqian 刘思谦. “Zhongguo nüxing wenxue de xiandaixing” 中国女性文学的现代性 [The Modernity of Chinese Women’s Literature]. *Wenyi yanjiu* 文艺研究 1 (1998): 93-94.



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radicalized writing for the sake of constructing a female-dominated power and order.<sup>44</sup>

Interestingly, however, what is referred to by *nüquan xiaoshuo* in their conversation is exactly the works by the same women writers, such as Chen Ran and Lin Bai, that are most often incorporated into the realm of “women’s fiction” and “women’s literature.” In other words, no matter how these scholars used the notion, they added layers of confusion to the conceptual discourse regarding women writers’ composition. The way they used the notion manifested their suspicion toward women’s practices of seeking their own discourse. Therefore, while intercultural translation is a complex issue in examining the terms in a particular context, what complicates the matter even more is the patriarchal discourse in criticism that underwrites many scholars’ negative understanding of *nüquan xiaoshuo*.

In addition, what is more fundamental than the issue of translation regarding “feminist literature” is the fact that the terms “feminist” and “feminism” are not native to Chinese but rather refer to theories and concepts that were introduced from abroad through post-socialist cultural communication, especially from “the West,” including European and North American academia. For example, one of the most well-known anthologies of feminist theories and criticism published in China’s reform era is *Contemporary Feminist Literary Criticism*, edited by Zhang Jingyuan. In this 1992 anthology, more than half of the translated

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<sup>44</sup> Ding Fan 丁帆, et al. “‘Nüquan’ xiezuo zhong de wenhua beilun” “女权”写作中的文化悖论 [The Cultural Paradox in “Feminist” Writing]. *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣 5 (1997): 12, 14.

articles are by American theorists, and all the remaining authors are from France and Britain.<sup>45</sup>

The introduction of Western theories, on one hand, was widely embraced by Chinese scholars and, on the other hand, raised the following issue in academic discussion: in what way could Chinese criticism, belonging to a third-world culture, seek its own agency in the post-colonial world order? Some scholars, in addition to the already mentioned Li Jiefei, believed the literary writing by Lin Bai, Chen Ran, and other so-called “feminist writers” were deeply influenced by Western feminist theories.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, while there was wide adoption of Western feminist theories and Chinese “feminist literature,” which was believed to be influenced by the theories in many cases, some Chinese critics also questioned the adaptability of western theories to the Chinese cultural background. Thus, they advocated for the construction of native “feminist literature” and native feminist theories, such as “third world feminism,” as Wang Kan called it.<sup>47</sup>

### “Body Writing”

<sup>45</sup> Zhang Jingyuan 张京媛, editor. *Dangdai nüxing zhuyi wenxue piping* 当代女性主义文学批评 [Contemporary Feminism Literary Criticism]. Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1995.

<sup>46</sup> For example, a scholar, Cai Ting believes Chen Ran’s writing about the individual self is “to be of complicity” with western feminism. Cai Ting 蔡婷. “Nüxing shenti jingxiang de beilun” 女性身体镜像的悖论 [The Paradox in the Mirror Image of Women’s Body]. *Dongnan xueshu* 东南学术 4 (1994): 97.

<sup>47</sup> Wang, “Neihan he shiye,” 93. Also, a scholar named Fang Ling indicates that Chen Ran should pay more attention to “the more profound real life of local women, including their degree of emancipation.” Fang Ling 方铃. “Chen Ran xiaoshuo: nüxing wenben shiyan” 陈染小说：女性文本实验 [Chen Ran’s Fiction: Women’s Textual Experiment]. *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论 1 (1995): 85.

Another concept that is intimately related to the notion of “feminist literature” is “body writing,” the second synonym of “women’s literature.” “Body writing,” sometimes also referred to as “libidinal writing” (欲望化写作), was used from the 1990s onward to signify women writers’ works that chose female bodily experience as one of the central motifs, including erotic desire, rape, abortion, childbirth, masturbation, and so on. The reason why the two notions of “body writing” and “feminist literature” have a close relation is that Chinese criticism in the 1990s was profoundly influenced by French feminism. In particular, Cixous’s argument, which brings women’s bodies and feminism together, became one of the most frequently mentioned feminist theories.<sup>48</sup>

In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous argues that under the dominant masculine order, both women’s desire for sexuality and their desire for writing are either eliminated or completed in secret. Therefore, she believes the commensurability of both repressed desires would result in their convergence, which meant women’s composition not only originates from her sexuality and erotic desires but should also convey her feeling about these desires. This convergence is articulated by Cixous as “[t]ext: my body,”<sup>49</sup> or “sext.”<sup>50</sup> She also believes that women’s writing about their own repressed history, including their repressed

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<sup>48</sup> Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa.” In *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001). Hélène Cixous 埃莱娜·西苏. “Meidusha de xiaosheng” 美杜莎的笑声 [The Laugh of the Medusa], trans. Huang Xiaohong 黄晓红. In *Dangdai nüxing zhuyi wenxue piping* 当代女性主义文学批评, edited by Zhang Jingyuan 张京媛, 188-211. Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1995.

<sup>49</sup> Cixous, “The Laugh,” 2045.

<sup>50</sup> Cixous, “The Laugh,” 2048.

sexuality, would have profound social effects: “In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history.”<sup>51</sup>

It is no surprise that, in Chinese criticism of the 1990s, Cixous and “The Laugh of the Medusa” were frequently cited in analyzing the idea of “body writing.” Chinese critics discovered a great similarity between Cixous’s arguments and several women writers’ portrayal of the female body and sexuality: in both Cixous’s theory and some Chinese women’s composition, the approach of revealing the repressed body functions as a way of breaking away from patriarchy and therefore as an important methodology of feminism. Thus, feminist theories and the generation of the concept of “body writing” are deeply intertwined; or, to put it in another way, the way in which Chinese critics in the 1990s invented, utilized, and interpreted the notion of “body writing” was to a large extent shaped by their different reception of Western feminist theories. Though “body writing” was hailed by many as one of the most avant-garde ways of paraphrasing “women’s literature,” other critics also took a disapproving attitude toward both the theory and the genre.<sup>52</sup>

Despite the controversy in the reception of “body writing” as a derivation of Western feminism, most scholars reached a consensus regarding the equation of “women’s literature” with “body writing.” In his paper “Women’s Writing: From Body to Experience,” Hu Yan gives his interpretation about “women’s writing”: “Genuine women’s writing does not mean

<sup>51</sup> Cixous, “The Laugh,” 2046.

<sup>52</sup> For example, in a paper titled “The Trap of Libido—Some Words on Women’s Literature,” the author, Ding Yafang, while criticizing “libidinal writing/women’s fiction” as “eradicating moral principles and humanistic values,” also attributes its emergence to the impact of the western theories of *nüquan zhuyi* by quoting from “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Ding Yafang 丁亚芳. “Yuwang de xianjing—nüxing xiaoshuo tanpian” 欲望的陷阱——女性小说谈片 [The Trap of Libido—Some Words on Women’s Literature]. *Yuhua* 雨花 8 (1998): 38.

the cultural position against men in the ideological realm...But it still belongs to women, and it is a kind of expression that originates from women's bodies and experience and ends at women's bodies and experience."<sup>53</sup>

Hu's comprehension of "women's writing" is indicative in several dimensions. First, corresponding to his arguments that women are objectified in the history of patriarchy, Hu's idea that the body exists as women's source of literary creation is seemingly in accordance with feminist thought. In both Hu's and Cixous's opinions, the notion of women's bodies is endowed with a somewhat ontological meaning, namely, the body becomes the only origin of woman's self-identification. However, what separates Hu from Cixous's theory is his claim that women's writing "ends at women's bodies." In other words, in Cixous's theory, "women's writing" is considered as a mediating process from the internal bodily experience to external social effects, which will lead women to break the boundaries of the gender binary. In comparison, Hu restricts not only "women's writing" but also the notion of "women" to the scope of the individual female body, and the so-called women's poetics and aesthetics.

In this respect, the narrowing of the scope and meaning of "women's writing" to "body writing" is also related to the narrowing of women writers' narratives and styles. Scholar Ge Hongbing claims that the writing strategy of Lin Bai, Chen Ran, and Xu Kun is "to indulge

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<sup>53</sup> “一种真正的女性写作并不意味着在意识形态领域和男性相对抗的文化姿态...但它是女性的，这是一种源于女性的身体与经验并终结于女性的身体与经验的表达。” The underline is made by the author in his article. Hu Yan 胡彦. “Nüxing xiezu: cong shenti dao jingyan” 女性写作：从身体到经验 [Women's Writing: From the Body to the Experience]. *Dangdai wentan* 当代文坛 3 (1996): 33.

in sensation' and wield the power of the senses."<sup>54</sup> Similarly, in his article regarding "body writing" mentioned above, Hu Yan believes that, unlike men's composition, which is driven by rationality, women's writing is driven by bodily experience and emotion.<sup>55</sup> These two scholars' ideas are representative of the notions that sense, bodily sensation, and emotional sentiment converge to define the mainstream interpretation of "women's literature." It was also commonly believed in 1990s criticism that women writers are more skillful and more inclined to use literary techniques such as writing about reminiscences and dreams as well as using lyrical narration, which are all driven by the senses and the flow of sentiment.<sup>56</sup>

Chinese literary criticism in the 1990s justified the concept of "women's literature" by confining it to women's individual bodies and sentiments. Hence, this also gave rise to the fact that in academic discourse, the concept of "private writing," the third synonym of "women's literature," oftentimes appeared along with scholarly analysis about "body writing," since both notions are concerned with women's individual experience.

### *"Private Writing"*

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<sup>54</sup> "她们的写作策略是充分地'放纵官能',让感性发挥力量..." Ge Hongbing 葛红兵. "Ziti yanshuo de kenengxing—dui dangqian xiaoshuo chuanguo de yige guancha biji" 自体言说的可能性——对当前小说创作的一个观察笔记 [The Possibility of Individual Narrative—An Observation Note about the Current Fiction Composition]. *Shiji lunping* 世纪论评 3 (1998): 76.

<sup>55</sup> Hu, "Nüxing xiezu," 33-35.

<sup>56</sup> For example, Li Jiefei says that "[i]n the forms such as 'reminiscence' and 'dream,' feminist writing discovers the perfect way of opposing patriarchal reality" because of their ability to negate and reconstruct reality. "在'回忆'和'梦境'这类形式里,女性主义写作找到了与男权现实对立的极好方式。" Li, "Tamen," 81.

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“Private writing,” also known as “individual writing” (个人写作/个人化写作), is a term that signifies literary writing about one’s life from a personal perspective. This term, unlike “feminist literature” or “body writing,” was not just used as a term that was related to “women’s literature” but sometimes also functioned as an independent genre itself. The group of writers included in the category of “individual writing” includes not only women writers such as Lin Bai and Chen Ran but also male authors such as Zhu Wen and Han Dong. Scholar Tao Dongfeng summarizes the features of this concept in his article “Private Writing: Signification and Misconception.” He states that “private writing” is the expression of personal experience rather than social or collective consciousness; it mostly adopts the narrative of autobiography or memoir; it is written from the perspective of an individual “me” rather than the communal “us”; and it is motivated by personal need, the unconscious, and secret desires.<sup>57</sup>

In the analysis of “women’s literature” in the academic context of 1990s China, “private writing” became a key concept that was almost unavoidable. This was partly because of the term’s association with Chen Ran’s well-known novel *A Private Life*. Not only is the term “private” appearing in the title interpreted as indicating that it is self-revelational writing, but Chen’s composition is also oftentimes read as a diversion from sociopolitical narrative and a move into the private realm and individual soliloquies. While this may seem to be a neutral observation about Chen’s literary piece, the concept of “private” becomes more complicated when interwoven with the idea of “women’s literature” and the author’s gender identity.

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<sup>57</sup> Tao Dongfeng 陶东风. “Sirenhua xiezu: yiyi yu wuqu” 私人化写作：意义与误区 [Private Writing: Signification and Misconception]. *Huacheng* 花城 1 (1997): 195-96.

Being transformed from a simple genre to a specific feature of female authors' writing in some scholars' interpretations, "private writing" in some cases returns to function as the proof of the division of literary space and the characteristics of the two genders. For example, in the same article that equates "body writing" with the writing style of women, Hu Yan also classifies man and woman into the categories of "person outside the domestic space" (屋外人) and "person inside the domestic space" (屋内人).<sup>58</sup> Since he believes no space in the social field is left for women, the only way they can forge their own discourse is to return to the enclosed room and concentrate on narrating their personal lives. He further justifies this by saying that woman's discovery of her own space, body, and private writing is an advantage for her to escape from the masculine order and to become a "pure woman writer."<sup>59</sup>

Such an approach stabilizes the gender binary and narrows women's focus in writing; it also leads to the convergence of "body writing" and "private writing."<sup>60</sup> Scholars tended to regard both terms as tantamount to women writers' communal interest in the motif of "the personal," including the personal body, feelings, and lives: "'The private discourse' is a sort of female's 'body writing' in which women writers indulge, and thus, it becomes a sort of distinct gender discourse."<sup>61</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Hu, "Nüxing xiezu," 35.

<sup>59</sup> Hu, "Nüxing xiezu," 36.

<sup>60</sup> The interpretation about "the body" in 1990s China was related to individual and individuality instead of falling under the post-structuralist theories about the mechanics of the State and power, and the notion of "private" in literary analysis was also mostly concerned with the idea of "the individual" as an opposition to the collective and the political, instead of being relevant to other concepts, such as law and property.

<sup>61</sup> "... '私人话语' 是一种女性作家所醉心追求的女性 '身体的写作', 从而成为一种独特的性别话语。" Yi Guang, 易光. "Shixing xiezu: xushi de jiongpō he dui chuantong de beili" 诗性写作: 叙事的窘迫和对传统的背离 [Poetic Writing: The



Because it was perceived as an attitude of refusing social participation, the notion of “private writing” was also heavily critiqued for its neglect of class issues. Some scholars argued that women writers composed from their own perspective as intellectuals, and thus paid far more attention to their own private lives than the lives of the female masses. For example, scholar Huang Baigang says, “The self-pity and self-loving of the female intellectual in Chen Ran’s and Lin Bai’s works are too heavy, which make their works...difficult to reflect the complex cultural identity of Chinese women.”<sup>62</sup> Such critique is elaborated in Ding Yafang’s argument that “‘isolation’ pushes *tamen* to continuously write about themselves, and writing about themselves makes *tamen* even more internalized and sends them back to the small world deep in their hearts.”<sup>63</sup> In other words, the scholars’ understanding of “private writing” is not only built upon their recognition of the gender binary but also their ideas of class: a gap between the female intellectuals and the masses. Underlying such literary critique are historical and ideological factors, especially the literary criticism derived from the Yan’an and socialist period, which will be further elaborated in the next chapter.

In brief, the three denotations of “feminist literature,” “body writing,” and “private writing” indicate unstable connotations for “women’s literature.” Yet they are also

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Awkwardness of Narratives and the Separation from Tradition]. *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣 2 (1999): 75.

<sup>62</sup> “陈染、林白的作品中女性知识分子自怜自爱的色彩太浓，使其...很难反映中国女性复杂的文化地位...” Huang Baigang 黄柏刚. “Dui jiushi niandai woguo nüquan zhuyi piping de lilun fansi” 对九十年代我国女权主义批评的理论反思 [Theoretical Reflections about the Feminist Criticism of Our Country in the 1990s]. *Hubei minzu xueyuan xuebao (zhexue shehui kexue ban)* 湖北民族学院学报(哲学社会科学版) 3 (1999): 66.

<sup>63</sup> “‘封闭’促使她们一时地书写自己，写自己又使她们更加内视，走向自己的内心深处的狭窄天地。” Ding, “Yuwang de xianjing,” 38.

interconnected in the scholarly discourse. While “body writing” is oftentimes seen as an essential aspect or even the equivalent of “private writing,” both concepts are also considered as the main approaches of “feminist literature,” since they are considered to reflect the radicality of feminism. Therefore, “women’s literature” is constructed by the 1990s critics as a term that contains not only ambiguities but also boundaries and limitations. If, when used by critics, “women’s literature” hardly has a stable referent because of the confusion of the three denotations and their different signifying directions, then the intertwining of “feminist literature,” “body writing,” and “private writing” forms a rhetorical framework around the central concept of “women’s literature” and even the concepts of “women” and “women writers.” They collaborate to justify a literary space that is gendered, antipatriarchy, self-centered, erotic, socially marginalized, and isolated, a literary space that only belongs to women.

Therefore, based on their interpretations or, in some cases, invention of these concepts, many Chinese scholars in the 1990s showed different attitudes toward “women’s literature.” While some scholars, especially some female critics like Xu Kun and Huang Lin,<sup>64</sup> acknowledged women’s writing about their bodies and interiority, many others took a conservative perspective in viewing women’s writing against the patriarchy and about their

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<sup>64</sup> Xu Kun 徐坤. “Chongchong lianmu mi zhe deng: jiushi niandai de zhongguo nüxing wenxue xiezu” 重重帘幕密遮灯：九十年代的中国女性文学写作 [Layers of Curtains Veil the Lamp: The Writing of Chinese Women’s Literature in the 1990s]. *Zuojia* 作家 8 (1997): 22. Huang Lin 荒林. “Lin Bai xiaoshuo: nüxing yuwang de xushi” 林白小说：女性欲望的叙事 [The Fiction of Lin Bai: Narratives of Women’s Desire]. *Xiaoshuo pinglun* 小说评论 4 (1997): 11-15.

sexuality as “degeneration.”<sup>65</sup> A more popular approach, the one adopted by Li Jiefei and many other scholars, was to combine the appraisal of and opposition to “women’s literature.” They considered this central notion as avant-garde and yet limited, worthy of celebration and yet demanding rectification. That is, while recognizing women’s gendered, sexed, and personalized positions in writing, scholars also believed these positions tended to deviate from the social norm and go so far as to become “degeneration.” For example, while affirming the literary passion and individuality shown in women’s “private writing” in his analysis, Wang Xiaoming criticizes what he calls the avoidance of civil responsibility and addiction to the body.<sup>66</sup> Other scholars such as Sheng Ying, Wang Guangming, Ge Hongbing, and Zhu Yuying shared similar views.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Dong Jin 董瑾. “Tong yu kuai—xiandai xing yu nüxing xiezuo—jian lun Chen Ran de xiaoshuo” 痛与快——现代性与女性写作——兼论陈染的小说 [Pain and Pleasure—Modernity and Women’s Writing—A Review of Chen Ran’s Fiction]. *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论 2 (1999): 83.

<sup>66</sup> Wang Xiaoming 王小明. “Zai chuangshangxing jiyi de huanbao zhong” 在创伤性记忆的环抱中 [In the Embrace of Traumatic Memories]. *Wenxue pinglun* 文学评论 5 (1999): 49-50. Wang’s article belongs to a forum named “Women in the 1990s—Individual Writing” (九十年代的女性——个人写作), in which five reviews about “women’s literature,” especially Chen Ran’s composition were published. All of these papers took an overall negative attitude towards Chen’s individual writing.

<sup>67</sup> Sheng Ying 盛英. “Jiushi niandai nüzuojia bixia de nüxing xingxiang” 九十年代女作家笔下的女性形象 [Female Characters Written by Female Authors in the 1990s]. *Shandong wenxue* 山东文学 3 (1999): 65-68. Wang Guangming 王光明. “Nüxing wenxue: gaobie 1995—zhongguo di san jieduan de nüxing zhuyi wenxue” 女性文学: 告别 1995——中国第三阶段的女性主义文学 [Women’s Literature: Farewell 1995—Feminist Literature in the Third Stage in China]. *Tianjin shehui kexue* 天津社会科学 6 (1996): 69-90. Ge Hongbing 葛红兵. “Xinshengdai xiaoshuo lungang” 新生代小说论纲 [Outlining Thoughts on Fiction by The New Generation]. *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣 5 (1999): 34-41. Zhu Yuying 朱育颖. “Wei ren wei nü wei wen—xin shiqi nüxing wenxue de liubian” 为人·为女·为文——新时期女性文学的流变 [To Be a Person, To Be a Woman, and To Write Literature—The Change of Women’s Literature in The New Era]. *Zhongguo wenhua yanjiu* 中国文化研究 3 (1999): 113-18.

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Scholars' seemingly scattered interpretation of and attitude toward "women's literature" can be traced roughly to two general mainstream origins: the patriarchal viewpoint in the literary realm, as well as the socialist compositional standard that is mass-oriented and politically driven. For the former, its influence is presented not only in some critics' opposition to and attempted modification of "feminist literature" and women writers' gendered position, but also in other voices that praised "body writing" and "private writing" only to limit the women's composition to the scope of the body, interiority, and the domestic. While for the ideological criteria, it is reflected in the criticism that is centered on "body writing" and "private writing." Scholars who are under its influence tend to persuade women to stop writing about females' bodies and individual lives and start focusing on society and the people. In the next chapter, I will further investigate the appearance of these two literary views and how they became universal criteria.

Driven by these perceptions, many 1990s scholars aimed to seek "a way out" for the future development of "women's literature." Some of the most popular solutions included the appeal to women writers to "avoid the stance of gender extremism,"<sup>68</sup> to take on social responsibility, to be cautious about Western feminist theories, and to shift the literary focus from women's bodies and private lives to social issues and a more all-encompassing "humanity." What is worth excavating about these solutions lies less in their contents and more in the guiding position of criticism itself. In terms of the discursive web around the central concept of "women's literature," the function of criticism in guiding "women's

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<sup>68</sup> "真正具有女性意识的文学...避免性别极端主义的立场。" Huang, "Dui jiushi niandai," 66.

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literature” is deeply implicated in the latter’s identity as a somewhat marginalized genre as opposed to mainstream socialist realism in both literature and criticism. In other words, whether it is the use of terms that both confuses and limits the meaning of “women’s literature” or the widely adopted approach of finding solutions for “women’s literature,” these methodologies of the scholars of 1990s China functioned as strategies to incorporate women writers’ compositions in the mainstream discourse. As a result, while the mainstream scholarly discourse remained to some extent patriarchal and ideological, these individual authors’ works could nevertheless be brought together under the umbrella of “women’s literature,” which could be recognized as a groundbreaking literary phenomenon of the 1990s, as well as a newly emergent genre about which there were misconceptions that needed rectification by the mainstream discourse.

It is also worth examining the point in time of the reemergence of “women’s literature” as a frequently used concept, since most essays that mention or comment on “women’s literature” and its synonyms appeared after 1995. In other words, in mainland Chinese literature and criticism of the 1990s, the way in which “women’s literature” became an avant-garde concept that was frequently cited by critics was to a large extent propelled by the Beijing FWCW. Another relevant piece of supporting evidence is the reconceptualization of the position of Chen Ran by academia. Unlike Lin Bai, who started to be known to the literary realm around the mid-1990s, Chen Ran had begun her literary career in the mid-1980s. Yet what is interesting about Chen Ran’s identity is that although many of her early publications before the mid-1990s also centered on gender issues and the individual life

stories of a female protagonist, she was deemed by critics as an avant-garde writer who was difficult to classify at that time. For instance, Zhang Yiwu commented in his 1993 paper that “she was neither incorporated into the discourse about ‘experimental fiction’ or ‘neo-realism,’ nor into the various classifications and categorizations of women writers.”<sup>69</sup> Moreover, before the mid-1990s, apart from a single essay that interprets Chen Ran’s writing from the perspective of gender,<sup>70</sup> her works were mostly read as the portrayal and discovery of the motifs of individuality and human solitude. As a comparison, after 1996, when *A Private Life* came out and the FWCW had started to have an impact on literary criticism, Chen’s position as a “woman writer” seemed to have been solidified suddenly, and the critiques she received also mostly centered on her gendered and sexed position. Therefore, in examining the criticism about “women’s literature” in the 1990s, it is clear to see the influence of the Beijing FWCW on literary criticism and the production of “women’s literature” in 1990s China.

Another problematic issue regarding the relationship between the context of 1990s China and “women’s literature” as a concept is the oftentimes neglected matter of genre. Other than works of fiction by women that show a lucid self-reflexivity in post-socialist China, the genre of poetry also became a field for many women writers to express their

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<sup>69</sup> “她既未被归入‘实验小说’或‘新写实’的话语中，也未被归入各种对女作家的分类和归纳之中...” Zhang Yiwu 张颐武. “Huayu bianzheng zhong de ‘hou langman’—Chen Ran de xiaoshuo” 话语辩证中的“后浪漫”——陈染的小说 [The “Post-Romanticism” in the Discursive Dialectics—The Fiction by Chen Ran]. *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣 3 (1993): 50.

<sup>70</sup> Cai Ting 蔡婷. “Nüxing shenti,” 97-100.

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gender consciousness.<sup>71</sup> The idea of “women’s poetry” (女性诗歌) was generally thought to have emerged in 1986, with Zhai Yongming’s publication of her poem sequence “Woman” (女人).<sup>72</sup> Also, in the 1980s and 1990s, many women poets were concerned with themes and images in poetry that included gender issues and women’s bodies.

However, compared with fiction by female writers, which was oftentimes generalized to be included within the broad genre of “women’s literature,” the criticism of poems by women writers was mostly conducted under the genre of “women’s poetry” rather than “women’s literature.” Simultaneously, in the same way as Li Jiefei confuses the notion of “feminist literature” with “feminist fiction,” many other critics also concentrated, consciously or unconsciously, on female novelists while neglecting the dimension of poetry when discussing the broad genre of “women’s literature.” The scholarly restriction of the concept of “women’s literature” to fiction alone was largely prompted by the social background of the 1990s, when marketization penetrated cultural production and transformed literary writing from what had been seen as pure cultural activity into a form of business. As a result, compared with poetry, which is more obscure and more difficult for mass readers to understand and accept, the genre of fiction can be much more easily incorporated into the realm of popular cultural production, especially with the erotic contents in many female authors’ writing.

On some level, the comparison between poetry and fiction in the reform era also became the equivalent of the opposition between the ideas of “pure literature” and “popular literature,” between elitism and massification. This is why, in the 1990s scholarly discourse, critics such

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<sup>71</sup> I use the term “women writers” instead of “women poets” because many female authors wrote both fiction and poetry. For example, Hai Nan is both a poet and a novelist.

<sup>72</sup> Zhai Yongming 翟永明. “Nüren” 女人 [Woman]. *Shikan* 诗刊 9 (1986): 13-16.

as Ding Fan, Ding Yafang, and Jiang Hongyan would all mention the inclusion of “kitsch” (俗, 媚俗) in 1990s women’s writing. They were referring to popular contents such as depictions of women’s bodies and sexualities and took a highly skeptical stance against it.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, the trend among 1990s critics of defining “women’s literature” as merely fictional texts did not emerge groundlessly but reveals academia’s tendency to take some women’s fiction as a starting point to comment on the general influential wave of popular culture and marketization. The contribution of the post-socialist Chinese cultural context to the production of “women’s literature” will be further discussed in the next chapter.

### **The Separation between Poetics and Politics**

While it is important to investigate how these concepts are shaped by the sociohistorical context of socialist and post-socialist China, which will be more closely examined in the next chapter, my study suggests that there remains a rupture between the scholarly discourse around the central concept of “women’s literature” and these women writers’ own accounts. Authors such as Lin Bai and Chen Ran have not only admitted their unfamiliarity with the feminist approach, as mentioned above, but they were also concerned more with taking an “individual stance” in writing than with other concepts that were used to define their works. However, unlike the 1990s literary criticism that deemed “individual writing” as a genre that

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<sup>73</sup> Ding Fan 丁帆, Wang Binbin 王彬彬, and Fei Zhenzhong 费振钟. “‘Nüquan’ xiezuozhong de wenhua beilun” “女权”写作中的文化悖论 [The Cultural Paradox in “Feminist” Writing]. *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣 5 (1997): 17. Ding, “Yuwang de xianjing,” 38. Jiang Hongyan 绛红燕. “Guanyu ‘chao xingbie yishi’ de sikao” 关于“超性别意识”的思考 [Thoughts about “the Beyond-Gender Consciousness”]. *Wenyi zhengming* 文艺争鸣 5 (1997): 30.



could generally incorporate these women writers' composition as a collective action, the "personal stance" that these authors took accentuated differences rather than similarities in their composition. In her article, Lin Bai made it clear that "the individual difference is larger than gender difference, and is more worthy of becoming literature."<sup>74</sup> Chen Ran also laid stress on the large difference between her and Lin Bai's writing.<sup>75</sup> In other words, these two authors resisted being incorporated into a generalized genre but instead saw their works as "experiencing and grasping the world that only belongs to an individual human from a tiny perspective" and as "releasing the individual experience that was once viewed by the collective narrative as a taboo from the repressed memory."<sup>76</sup>

The difference between the scholarly comments and Lin Bai's and Chen Ran's own compositional intention can be interpreted as "a separation between poetics and politics," (诗学和政治学的分离) as suggested by scholar He Guimei.<sup>77</sup> This is further explained in her 2003 article, in which she argues that "despite the fact that women are able to manifest female experience repressed and obliterated by the patriarchal culture, such writing about women's experience still has to circulate in the social/cultural market that is structured by

<sup>74</sup> "而个体差异比性别差异更大,更值得变成文学。" Lin, "Shengming reqing," 62.

<sup>75</sup> Chen and Wang, "Guanyu xiezu," 79.

<sup>76</sup> "我只愿意一个人站在角落里,在一个很小的位置上去体会和把握只属于人类个体化的世界。" Chen Ran 陈染. "Zitai yu lichang" 姿态与立场 [Attitude and Position]. *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论 3 (2001): 83. "...将那些曾经被集体叙事视为禁忌的个人性经历从受到压抑的记忆中释放出来..." Lin, "Jiyi," 125.

<sup>77</sup> He Guimei 贺桂梅. "You xingbie de wenxue—90 niandai de nüxing huayu de shixue shijian" 有性别的文学——90年代的女性话语的诗学实践 [The Literature with Gender—The Poetic Practice of Women's Discourse in the 1990s]. *Beijing wenxue* 北京文学 11 (1996): 47.

patriarchy/masculine power.”<sup>78</sup> What He is pointing out here is that although the “poetics” represented by these individual women writers’ composition could experiment with expressing an individual female’s experience in a literary way, the “politics” revealed in 1990s literary criticism nevertheless formed an overall patriarchal context. Moreover, this separation between poetics and politics can be viewed from the perspective of gender and female discourse and be expanded to the relationship between the individual and the social collective, between the personal body and the “body” as a political idea incorporated into party-state policies, such as labor and birth control.

In all these dimensions, while the “poetics” lacks its own “politics” to justify and solidify its status among various mainstream discourses, the dominant “politics,” meanwhile, will either attempt to redefine the “poetics” to incorporate it into its own trajectory or to push this sort of marginalized writing further to the margins and exclude it from its discursive realm. However, for the women writers of the 1990s whose literary goal was to “keep thinking from the point where the gender of men terminates,”<sup>79</sup> it is also their intention to initiate a separation from the “politics,” or in other words, to use literary poetics as a way of defending their individuality against assimilation by any sort of grand narratives.

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<sup>78</sup> “...尽管女性可以呈现被父权制文化所压抑、擦抹的女性经验，但这种关于女性经验的书写仍旧必须在以父权/男权为等级结构的社会/文化市场上流通。” He Guimei 贺桂梅. “Dangdai nüxing wenxue piping de sanzong ziyuan” 当代女性文学批评的三种资源 [Three Resources of Criticism on Contemporary Women’s Literature]. *Wenyi yanjiu* 文艺研究 6 (2003): 17.

<sup>79</sup> “我们在男人的性别停止的地方，继续思考。” Chen Ran explains that “men” in this idea not merely refers to the sex of male, but also refers to the concept of “men” that represents all humanity as an entirety. Chen Ran 陈染 and Xiao Gang 萧钢. “Ling yishan kaiqi de men” 另一扇开启的门 [Another Opened Door]. *Huacheng* 花城 2 (1996): 91.

Therefore, the poetics and politics in the case of “women’s literature” reveal not only a separation but also a complex cultural ecology within 1990s China. It exposes the hierarchical power structure between women and the patriarchal order, between the individual and the collective, between the marginal and the mainstream, as well as the intricate ways in which these parties seek and compete over discursive power. It is between the tension of poetics and politics that the hierarchy between literature and criticism is formed, and “women’s literature” as a signifying concept is produced and problematized.

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## Chapter Two

### From Socialism to Post-Socialism: The Context of “Women’s Literature”

“It is without doubt that one of the most prominent literary phenomena in the realm of Chinese literature in the 1990s is the emergence of the naming of ‘women’s writing.’”<sup>80</sup> What is pointed out by Xu Kun here is that the concept of “women’s writing,” or “women’s literature,” is a literary notion that is strategically imagined to bear symbolic stability by some particular social forces of the era. Following Xu’s argument, the examination of the concept would enable its interpretation within the linguistic and narrative system as a cultural phenomenon that is derived from a particular historical, political, and social context.

The cultural ecology of 1990s mainland China, in which the naming of “women’s literature” is rooted, is complex and multidimensional. Various social forces were at play, including the reform of post-socialist Chinese politics, cultural censorship, the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen protests, economic development, and the rise of popular culture and the markets for it, as well as China’s efforts to accelerate the process of opening-up and the country’s evolution within globalization. As a result, the 1990s cultural realm unfolded not only as a space with diversified cultural production but also as a discursive field, where different values and discourses co-existed, collided, and revealed their adaptability or incommensurability with the era.

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<sup>80</sup> “毋庸讳言，九十年代的中国文坛上最突出的文学现象之一，就是‘女性写作’命名的凸起。” Xu Kun 徐坤. *Shuangdiao yexingchuan—jiushi niandai de nüxing xiezu* 双调夜行船——九十年代的女性写作 [The night boat in double tunes]. Taiyuan: Shanxi jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999, 1.

In this regard, although much attention can be paid to how the diverse cultural background enabled the concept of “women’s literature” to gain popularity in 1990s Chinese academia, it is equally important to notice the context’s impact on the emergence of the confusion of this frequently used concept. While the academic discourses generated a discursive field around the concept of “women’s literature” by engaging and interacting with the ever-shifting cultural and social background of the era, the post-socialist market economy also actively participated in the construction of this genre for maximizing commercial profit.

Therefore, in this chapter, I will turn from the conceptual and academic framework examined in Chapter One to the cultural and social background. I will map the notion of “women’s literature” in the cultural environment of 1990s China and examine how the critical discourses around “women’s literature” intertwined with socialist and post-socialist cultural politics. As mentioned at the end of Chapter One, there exists the difference between Lin Bai, Chen Ran, and other women writers’ compositional objectives and academic discourse and interpretation of the 1990s. Thus, in examining the cultural context of the 1990s, this chapter will also investigate how the hierarchy between literature and criticism in contemporary China was generated, as well as how the genre of “women’s literature” was produced by the dual elements of the politically aligned criticism and the thriving market forces, both of which operated under the national scheme of China’s post-socialist development.

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## The Construction of a New Criticism

In 1990s mainland China, academia's naming of and commentary on the concept of "women's literature," though playing a dynamic role in China's post-socialist cultural environment, were nevertheless impacted by historical burdens and influences. To examine the construction of the concept "women's literature" in literary criticism, we must trace the trajectory of the broader critical discourses regarding literature and art, for which Maoist literary theory and criteria provided an irreducible basis.

The literary and historical category of "contemporary Chinese literature" (1949- ), especially "socialist literature" (1949-78), is grounded on a leftist tradition established in Yan'an.<sup>81</sup> In the establishment of the leftist mainstream and the standard of proletarian realism, "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art" (在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话) took a crucial role. The talks were delivered by Mao Zedong in Yan'an in 1942, when China was involved in the Second Sino-Japanese war. Containing a prelude and a conclusion given in, respectively, early and late May, 1942, "Talks" not only provided theoretical guidance for what Mao expected to be the development of "revolutionary literature and art" (革命文艺) but also functioned as the cultural policy that was later widely implemented.<sup>82</sup>

One of the most important theories put forward by Mao in "Talks" is his specification of the function of both literature and the author. According to his vision, literature and art should be transformed into "a component part of the whole revolutionary machinery, so they

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<sup>81</sup> Yan'an is a "revolutionary base area" (革命根据地) of Chinese Communist Party and the foundation of the communist revolution before socialist China was founded. The Yan'an period is from 1935 to 1948. Hong, *History of Contemporary Chinese Literature*, 3-12.

<sup>82</sup> McDougall and Mao, *Mao Zedong's "Talks,"* 57.

can act as a powerful weapon in uniting and educating the people while attacking and annihilating the enemy...”<sup>83</sup> “Talks” raises the most fundamental issue for those engaging in cultural production in order to facilitate this transformation: “serving the masses and how to do this.”<sup>84</sup> The intellectual authors, referred to by “Talks” as “workers in literature and art” (文艺工作者) are asked to learn from “workers, peasants, and soldiers” (工农兵) so as to shift their focus to the proletarian masses and to construct a revolutionary literature and art for them.<sup>85</sup>

While many detailed instructions are elaborated in “Talks,” at least one issue remains central to Mao’s aims. Rather than “a changed political allegiance by writers and artists” or “a changed literary and artistic practice,” what Mao eagerly called for, as observed by scholar Ellen R. Judd, was “a more fundamental change in their social position.”<sup>86</sup> In other words, one of the main objectives of “Talks” is to prioritize the social and, more importantly, political function of both intellectual authors and cultural practices. What is emphasized in “Talks” is not only what literature should contain but also how writers should write it. As a result, literary texts, compositional strategies, and writing activities are no longer purely the talented creation of the writers nor merely the poetics of language and texts. They are stipulated as essential ways of serving the readership, which, to a great extent, means to mobilize the masses.<sup>87</sup> As Xiaoping Wang observes, “Talks” aims to serve as “an effort to

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<sup>83</sup> McDougall and Mao, *Mao Zedong’s “Talks,”* 58.

<sup>84</sup> McDougall and Mao, *Mao Zedong’s “Talks,”* 63.

<sup>85</sup> McDougall and Mao, *Mao Zedong’s “Talks,”* 58-60.

<sup>86</sup> Ellen Judd, “Prelude to the ‘Yan’an Talks’: Problems in Transforming a Literary Intelligentsia,” *Modern China* 11, no. 3 (1985): 399.

<sup>87</sup> The socio-political responsibility and the mobilizing function of literature, however, did not start from Mao’s literary view. Since China was fighting against colonialism from the

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solve the alienation existing between elite students and the masses,” as well as to ensure “that revolutionary art be subservient to a concrete goal of winning the military victory.”<sup>88</sup> The pragmatic nature of “Talks” as the leading cultural policy instrumentalizing literature and writers had a profound impact on the trajectory of socialist and post-socialist Chinese literature. This impact emerged as at least a dual-layered effect: “Talks” stipulated the political standard to be prioritized not only in the process of literary composition by authors but also, more palpably, in how literature should be viewed, assessed, rated, and criticized by the audiences, in which the literary critics occupied a considerable position.

Other than literary and artistic standards, what is also worth noting about “Talks” is Mao’s discussion regarding literary criticism. While he mentioned that literary and artistic criticism (文艺批评) should give equal consideration to both political and artistic criteria, Mao nevertheless emphasizes that it is the political aspect that is more of a problem in the situation of the Yan’an intellectuals. In his view, not only were some writers and artists but a certain group of critics also had yet to be transformed into a part of the proletariat collective. These critics still indulged in abstract ideas such as “humanism” and “love” without taking into account these concepts’ class basis, and thus could not take on the responsibility of serving the masses.<sup>89</sup> Significantly, Mao here clarified the relationship between culture and criticism. While both are guided by similar politically pragmatic benchmarks that lay much stress on writers’ or critics’ obligation to serve political and revolutionary purposes rather

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mid-19th to the mid-20th century, literature was already given a political and nationalist mission of enlightening and mobilizing the people in the May Fourth period and even earlier.

<sup>88</sup> Wang Xiaoping, “Re-Integration of Culture and Politics: A Re-Interpretation of Mao Zedong’s ‘Yan’an Talks,’” *Critique* 45, no. 3 (2017): 405, 407.

<sup>89</sup> McDougall and Mao, *Mao Zedong’s “Talks,”* 78-79.



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than their own individual creation, criticism is furthermore justified by “Talks” as the guidance and parameter of literature and art: “[W]e should tolerate works of literature and art that contain different kinds of political attitudes, but our criticism still takes a firm stand on principle, and we must pass strict judgment on works of literature and art that contain anti-national, anti-scientific, anti-mass, and anti-party views...”<sup>90</sup>

Mao demands “strict judgement” on these works and authors. He argues that “it is also absolutely necessary to subject them to correct criticism.”<sup>91</sup> In other words, the critical discourses regarding literature and art in the pre-socialist and socialist Chinese regime were, from the very beginning, constructed as the mediator between the political order and literature, and the function of criticism is to guide, promote, and rectify literature and art using political criteria. According to the proletarian and socialist literary and artistic standard, there is a natural hierarchy between literature and art and their criticism in terms of political status: while literature and art are required to mobilize the proletarian mass audience, criticism is stipulated to mobilize the writers and artists for the sake of producing literary and artistic works that submit to and reflect political correctness. Therefore, literary and artistic criticism must be made to align with political discourse and the ideological mainstream in order to guarantee the political correctness of cultural practices themselves.

Despite mobilizing the political function of writers and critics, the politics that “Talks” promotes nevertheless has a clear boundary. The discourse of class struggle is given top priority and overshadows other political notions, including gender. As a result, the discourse

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<sup>90</sup> McDougall and Mao, *Mao Zedong's "Talks,"* 77.

<sup>91</sup> McDougall and Mao, *Mao Zedong's "Talks,"* 78.

regarding gender and sex is absent in “Talks,” which also contributed to its overall absence in socialist Chinese literary theory, criticism, and policies. But its absence also signifies the Maoist value that the concept of gender should be incorporated into the operation of class struggle. In other words, in the case of cultural production, since both men and women function as “workers in literature and art” and serve the class revolution, discussion of gender difference, inequality, and the patriarchal order would be unnecessary except insofar as it can serve the revolutionary purpose, such as incorporating women into the group of soldiers and laborers. This is also why a critical essay written in 1942, “Thoughts on March 8” (三八节有感) by the female writer Ding Ling, was re-criticized by Mao himself in the Anti-Rightist Campaign (反右运动) in 1957. Those various problems raised by Ding Ling about women’s gender inequality outside the sociopolitical focus in Yan’an, as well as the paradox between women’s devotion to family and to proletarian revolutionary work, were deemed in the movement as “anti-party and anti-the people” (反党反人民).<sup>92</sup>

To some extent, Ding Ling’s essay was intensely criticized because it concerns the conditions of women’s lives, such as marriage, divorce, abortion, and devotion to housework.<sup>93</sup> These personal motifs, according to Mao’s cultural view, are considered not

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<sup>92</sup> Mao Zedong 毛泽东. “Dui *Wenyibao* ‘zai pipan’ teji bianzhe an de piyu he xiugai” 对《文艺报》“再批判”特辑编者按的批语和修改 [Remarks and revision of the editor’s note of the “Re-criticizing” special issue in *Wenyibao*]. In *Jianguo yilai Mao Zedong wengao diqice* 建国以来毛泽东文稿第七册 [Mao Zedong’s articles after the foundation of PRC Volume 7], 19-23. Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 1992. The Anti-Rightist Campaign is a political campaign from 1957-1959 aiming to fight against the “rightists” within the country. The reason why Ding Ling’s article was “re-criticized” by Mao in the campaign is because it had already been criticized in the Yan’an Rectification Movement (延安整风运动) from 1942-1945.

<sup>93</sup> Ding Ling. “Thoughts on March 8,” in *I Myself Am a Woman: Selected Writings of Ding Ling*, ed. Tani Barlow and Gary Bjorge (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 317-20.

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only irrelevant to the proletarian revolution but also as pointing to the author's indulging in individualistic profit and bourgeois sentiment rather than concerning themselves with the benefit of the masses. To ensure the successful construction of the proletarian revolutionary culture, some specific literary and artistic motifs, including the "feudal, bourgeois, petty bourgeois, liberalist, individualist, nihilist, art-for-art's sake, aristocratic, decadent, pessimistic, and other kinds of creativity," are defined by Mao in "Talks" as "alien to the popular masses and the proletariat" and should be completely destroyed.<sup>94</sup> Yet more importantly, Ding Ling was criticized because her discussion not only touches on the Yan'an social system, which tended to mobilize women into the war machine disregard of their own living conditions, but also involves the party cadres.<sup>95</sup> As a result, in the Yan'an period, leaders got dissatisfied and offended because she was believed to use women's gender issues to challenge the party's effort in constructing a revolutionary social framework.<sup>96</sup> In the Anti-Rightist Campaign, her article was re-criticized as an action attacking the working class and as a gesture opposing the party.<sup>97</sup> In other words, within Mao's literary and political standards, the party's leading status and the proletarian revolution take top priority; other issues, such as gender or personal conditions, if they cannot be incorporated into the

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<sup>94</sup> McDougall and Mao, *Mao Zedong's "Talks,"* 83.

<sup>95</sup> Ding, "Thoughts," 318.

<sup>96</sup> Ding Ling says in her memoir that "Thoughts on March 8" was first criticized in a meeting with high-ranking cadres. In the meeting, she received a leader's comment saying it was unjust that the commander (Mao) was condemned by Ding's article in the home front while he himself was fighting in the battlefield. Ding Ling 丁玲. "Sanba jie you gan" 三八节有感 [Thoughts on March 8]. In *Ding Ling zishu* 丁玲自述, 177. Zhengzhou: Daxiang chubanshe, 2002.

<sup>97</sup> Zhou Yang 周扬. *Wenyi zhanxian shang de yichang dabianlun* 文艺战线上的一场大辩论 [A Large Debate in the Battlefield of Literature and Art], 34. Beijing: Zuojiia chubanshe, 1960.

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machinery of the party-state, can threaten the revolution and thus should be defined as reactionary.

In contemporary Chinese literary history starting from 1949, “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art” had a highly visible influence on the development of literature and criticism in at least three dimensions. First, whether for literary writers or critics, proletarian revolutionary political criteria for evaluating their works were given top priority over artistic values. In this regard, literature and criticism were not only required to reflect and serve the masses first and foremost, but also to avoid individualistic themes and sentiment, which were considered to be harmful capitalist and bourgeois values from the socialist literary viewpoint.

Second, after the founding of socialist China, the hierarchy between literature and criticism in their political function and position remained, and criticism continued to be considered as “a powerful tool for implementing Party policies in the fields of literature and art” in both theory and practice.<sup>98</sup> Criticism, which still undertook the task of serving the masses and fighting the individualistic, capitalist, and bourgeois enemy, was not only underlined in cultural policies but also wielded by party leaders as “one of the chief methods of struggle” in initiating large political and cultural campaigns,<sup>99</sup> such as the criticism regarding *The Life of Wu Xun* (武训传) and the Anti-Rightist Campaign.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Wang Yao, and Lin Jianfa. “The Formation, Development, and Transformation of Contemporary Chinese Literary Criticism,” *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 5, no. 2 (2011): 237.

<sup>99</sup> McDougall and Mao, *Mao Zedong’s “Talks,”* 77.

<sup>100</sup> The criticism of *The Life of Wu Xun*, a film released in 1951, was the first large cultural campaign in socialist China. Since it was determined by Mao as “reactionary,” the criticism about this film expanded to the national scale. Mao Zedong 毛泽东. “Yingdang zhongshi

Finally, since class struggle was considered as the one and only pressing matter with regard to the masses, it absorbed other cultural and social motifs, including the topics of gender and sex. Although, in the social realm, gender equality was implemented in the Chinese pre-socialist and socialist regime in order to incorporate women into the groups of soldiers and laborers for the proletarian revolution and socialist construction, the policy of gender equality is nevertheless observed by many scholars as a sort of gender “nondifference” that is based on a male discursive tradition and masculine models.<sup>101</sup> Therefore, not only is the literary discourse about gender transformed into “a basic frame for representing class struggle,”<sup>102</sup> but the literary and artistic images of women are also masculinized through the deprivation of their own gender and sexual traits, thus becoming, as Meng Yue puts it, “sexes without bodies.”<sup>103</sup> In other words, what is promoted by the socialist gender discourse is that only women that become masculinized are able to enter the so-called external social field and possess genuine social values.<sup>104</sup> More importantly, while class struggle and patriarchal

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dianying *Wu Xun Zhuan* de taolun” 应当重视电影《武训传》的讨论 [The discussion about the film *Wu Xun Zhuan* should be paid attention to]. In *Mao Zedong xuanji di wu juan* 毛泽东选集第五卷 [Selections from Mao Zedong], 46-47. Shanghai: Renmin chubanshe, 1977.

<sup>101</sup> Yue Meng, “Female Images and National Myth,” in *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism*, ed. Tani Barlow (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 119. Dai Jinhua also made similar arguments regarding “the social rhetoric of gender” (性别的社会修辞) and “role playing” (扮演) related to women’s gender paradox. Dai Jinhua 戴锦华. *Xingbie zhongguo* 性别中国 [Gendering China]. Taipei: Maitian chuban, 2006, 50-92.

<sup>102</sup> Meng, “Female Images,” 122.

<sup>103</sup> Meng, “Female Images,” 139.

<sup>104</sup> The concept of “masculinized” here does not imply women truly bear an essential identity of “femininity,” and men, “masculinity.” It means, rather, that the state made such essentialist judgement at the time that the traditional image of women is physically and psychologically weak, while men, robust and strong-minded. Therefore, the gender “emancipation” in socialist China indeed offered women more opportunities to step outside the family and enter the social field, but it was still enforced by a traditional and hierarchical standard of gender division. This was also why women were far from being emancipated in terms of labor, since

discourse converged to become the social mainstream, this omnipresent perspective on gender influenced not only literature and art but also their criticism. Socialist standards stipulated women only be incorporated into the social mainstream by transforming into a man. This paved the way for the ideas of some critics of the 1990s that “socialization” is the synonym of the “masculinization” mentioned in the previous chapter.<sup>105</sup>

These broad developments of theories of literature and criticism in socialist China are vital contexts for examining the logic behind the use, and more importantly, the invention of the concept of “women’s literature” in the post-socialist era. Mao’s “Talks,” which was implemented from the Yan’an conference to the Cultural Revolution, not only stipulated what literature should write but also how literature should be perceived and evaluated. In other words, the inability of “women’s literature” to reference and connote the relevant literary texts in a clear and unbiased way is built upon the hierarchy between literary composition and critical discourses themselves, which developed from the socialist and even pre-socialist literary theories.

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they were assigned not only work outside the family but also housework and child-bearing. Also, as pointed out by Emily Honig, “Feminist critics of the Cultural Revolution have often pointed out that the Maoist slogan ‘The times have changed, men and women are the same,’ was not the plea for gender neutrality that it seems, at first glance, to be. Instead, it required women to behave like men, or at least implied that they would be measured by a male standard of success. (Men, it is often pointed out, were not encouraged to behave like women or to take on traditionally female roles and responsibilities.) To be revolutionary, critics suggest, one had to act like a man; to behave as a woman risked being labeled a ‘backward element.’” Emily Honig, “Maoist Mappings of Gender: Reassessing the Red Guards, in *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader*, ed. Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 266.

<sup>105</sup> Li, “‘*Tamen*,’” 80-81.

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## “Women’s Literature” in Post-Socialist China

In the 1980s and 1990s, China’s social structure was reorganized, and political control was readjusted. After the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese government changed its focus from political campaigns and class struggle to reconstruction and development of the social system on various levels. To resume economic development, China undertook “reform and opening-up” (改革开放) to gradually release the political control of the market, as well as to participate in the process of globalization.

As a result, the literary system in this era also experienced reconstruction and rearrangement. The emergence and legitimization of criticism regarding gender and women’s writing in the 1980s was already a sign that the governing position of the social and cultural theme of class struggle had been challenged.<sup>106</sup> Under the influence of the introduction of Western feminism in the mid and late 1980s,<sup>107</sup> as well as the theoretical research conducted by pioneering local women scholars including Li Xiaojiang, Dai Jinhua, and Meng Yue,<sup>108</sup> gender, sexuality, and the condition of women finally became one of the major topics of literary criticism and intellectual discussions, taking on various interpretations. Thus, it was in such a cultural context, in which the discourses about women and gender were revitalized, that the academic construction of the concept and genre of “women’s literature” took place.

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<sup>106</sup> In her paper, He Guimei also points out that in 1980s cultural discourse, gender was mainly used as an alternative symbol to oppose the discourse about class struggle, instead of being discussed from the level of anti-patriarchal system. He, “Dangdai nüxing wenxue piping,” 13-14.

<sup>107</sup> Some of the most famous works are *The Second Sex* translated in 1986, *The Feminine Mystique* in 1988, and *A Room of One’s Own* in 1989.

<sup>108</sup> For example, some of the foundational works are *Gap Between Sexes* (性沟) by Li Xiaojiang and *Breaking the Surface of History* (浮出历史地表) by Dai Jinhua and Meng Yue, both of which were published in 1989.

China's "reform and opening-up" indeed tremendously altered and complicated its cultural landscape. Yet, the influence of Mao's cultural policies, if diluted by the loosening of cultural censorship in the 1980s and the rapid-developing market economy in the 1990s, never truly vanished; it brought its influence on the state's proposition of constructing a post-socialist centrally governed cultural scheme.<sup>109</sup> If we look not only at the re-emergence and popularization of the concept of "women's literature" in 1990s China but also at how it was evaluated by academia, the political function of literary criticism derived from the socialist cultural discourse becomes even clearer. As was mentioned in the last chapter, while most scholars took a positive attitude towards some women writers' investigation of literary themes such as gender, sexuality, and individuality, they also tended to reach a consensus on its limitations. They argued that the genre of "women's literature" exaggerated the gender conflict and indulged in representations of bodily sensations and the private sphere. In conjunction, some critics offered what they thought was a prospective path for these women writers' work, such as focusing on the female masses and social problems external to female's personal stories.

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<sup>109</sup> Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, "Deng Xiaoping tongzhi zai zhongguo wenxue yishu gongzuozhe disici daibiao dahui shang de zhuci" 邓小平同志在中国文学艺术工作者第四次代表大会上的祝词 [Deng Xiaoping Comrade's Congratulatory Speech at the Fourth National Conference of the Representatives of Literary and Art Workers], China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, accessed November 11, 2021, [http://www.cflac.org.cn/wdh/cflac\\_wdh-4th\\_Article-01.html](http://www.cflac.org.cn/wdh/cflac_wdh-4th_Article-01.html). Jiang Zemin 江泽民, "Jiang Zemin zai diliuci wendaihui, diwuci zuodaihui shang de jianghua" 江泽民在第六次文代会、第五次作代会上的讲话 [Jiang Zemin's Speech at the Sixth National Conference of the Representatives of Literary and Art Workers and the Fifth National Conference of the Representatives of China Writers Association], China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, accessed November 11, 2021, [http://www.cflac.org.cn/wdh/cflac\\_wdh-6th\\_Article-01.html](http://www.cflac.org.cn/wdh/cflac_wdh-6th_Article-01.html).



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While it is without doubt that these issues suggested as a path forward by the critics of the 1990s are indeed of literary value, these standards nevertheless stratified different literary motifs into primary and secondary ones. When scholars encountered the literary signification of gender, sex, and the personal, they also believed these topics would possess a higher value when incorporated into the discourse and mechanisms of class, labor, the social, and possibly even the problematic idea of transforming women into “sexes without bodies.”<sup>110</sup> In other words, while the critics had no problem with promoting literary motifs like women’s social issues, their arguments tend to valorize the social over the personal, class over gender, and politics over literary and artistic standards. In short, critical positions motivated by socialist values take precedence over literary or individual creativity in post-socialist literature and critical discourses.

Therefore, despite the fact that many novel, diverse, and insightful perceptions emerged in 1990s Chinese critical discourse on “women’s literature,” it is also obvious that their definition, usage, and evaluation of this notion derived from the foundational influence of “Talks at the Yan’an Conference on Literature and Art,” the socialist literary and critical views that followed it, and even the cultural policies in the 1980s. In fact, as is pointed out in a recent study, the literary system of post-socialist China was “both continuous and reformative.”<sup>111</sup> While cultural practices were given much more freedom and became more multidimensional in the post-socialist reformation, what continued from the Mao era to the 1980s and even the 1990s was the emphasis in the mainstream discourse of literature’s social

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<sup>110</sup> Meng, “Female Images,” 139.

<sup>111</sup> Wang and Lin, “The Formation,” 238.

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responsibility and political function, as well as the guiding status of criticism for literature and art.

In the Fourth Congress for Writers and Artists (第四届文艺工作者代表大会) in 1979, one year after China's opening up and reform had started, the idea that literature, art, and criticism should better mobilize the people and serve the modernization of "the new era" were emphasized by party leaders.<sup>112</sup> Moreover, in 1983, a cultural movement named the "Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign" (清除精神污染运动) was launched by party leaders to consolidate political guidance of and control over cultural practices. During this movement, literary and artistic works with contents relating to the body and sexuality were deemed unhealthy and harmful.

Proceeding to the 1990s, although the market forces had further diversified the landscape of literature and art and also boosted the flourishing of popular culture, it was again addressed in the Sixth Congress for Writers and Artists in 1996 that "Workers in literature and art should endeavor to carry through sublime spirits of nationalism, collectivism, and socialism in their works and performances."<sup>113</sup> Also, resembling "Talks," the 1996 Congress assigned a more mainstream-aligned and mediating position to criticism, that it should "guide the mass literary and art workers to seriously consider the social effect of their works and

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<sup>112</sup> Here Goldblatt translates "文艺工作者" into "writers and artists," but as mentioned earlier (see page 47), this term literally means "literary and art workers," which is a strategy to incorporate writers and artists into the construction of socialism. Howard Goldblatt, *Chinese Literature for the 1980s: The Fourth Congress of Writers & Artists* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1982).

<sup>113</sup> Jiang, "Jianghua."

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object wrong compositional tendencies and ideological tendencies.”<sup>114</sup> What is more interesting about the 1996 Congress is that cultural practices bending to the capital were castigated, yet at the same time, the Congress called for both art and criticism to contribute to the development of China’s socialist market economy.<sup>115</sup>

If literature’s political function demanded by “Talks” truly became a policy that was implemented throughout the socialist period, then the 1996 Congress’s expectation on literature and art seemed like the authority’s response to the fading of culture’s political function due to its embrace of capital. In other words, while allowing literature to have more freedom and participate in the construction of a new cultural market, which was designed as a part of the big picture of China’s post-socialist development, the party-state still had to ensure the overall political correctness of literary composition. This was where the mediation of mainstream values, in which literary criticism played an important role in the field of academia, came into effect.

Therefore, in the case of “women’s literature,” the complex discursive field generated from this concept is less concerned with women writers and their compositions and more with the function of literary criticism itself, which has remained a guiding status over literature and aligned with the mainstream political standard from the early beginning of Mao’s “Talks.” Only by producing a concept and a genre that bear the name of “women’s

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<sup>114</sup> Gao Zhanxiang 高占祥, “Gao Zhanxiang zai diliuci wendaihui shang de gongzuo baogao” 高占祥在第六次文代会上的工作报告 [Gao Zhanxiang’s Report at the Sixth National Conference of the Representatives of Literary and Art Workers], China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, accessed October 31, 2021, [http://www.cflac.org.cn/wdh/cflac\\_wdh-6th\\_Article-02.html](http://www.cflac.org.cn/wdh/cflac_wdh-6th_Article-02.html).

<sup>115</sup> Gao, “gongzuo baogao.”

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literature” can women’s works be congregated, identified, and supervised by criticism, and therefore, by the post-socialist political standard. More importantly, only by defining the genre of “women’s literature” as individualistic, erotic, and over-radicalized can these gendered and personalized writings be pinpointed and corrected by the national and collectivized scheme of post-socialist construction, to which all cultural forms are assigned the task to contribute.

As mentioned above, unlike criticism that serves as the mediator between culture and mainstream values, literature and art are more subject to change with the shifting social conditions. In 1990s China, women writers’ rediscovery of their gender identity and their writing about women’s life stories unfolded in a diversified scene, with not only the participation of female writers born in different eras but also the emergence and creation of various literary images, motifs, and styles. Yet these phenomena did not simply arise out of nowhere but rather had their cultural basis in the literary exploration of women writers in the 1980s. In the reform era of the 1980s, when more freedom was given to the once highly centralized, politicized, and unitary cultural realm, class struggle ceased to function as the only legitimate literary and artistic topic, and more discussion and debate emerged regarding other social matters and literary motifs, including gender, love, marriage, and emotions. Fictional works such as “At Middle Age” (人到中年) by Chen Rong and “The Ark” (方舟) by Zhang Jie began to discuss multiple gender issues that had previously been overridden by the class discourse. They depict the major conflict between women’s serving as unsexed post-socialist labor in the public sphere and their identity as a gendered woman and a sexed

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female in the individual and private sphere when thrown into family, housework, motherhood, and divorce. Works such as the *Love Trilogy* (三恋) by Wang Anyi and *Rose Door* (玫瑰门) by Tie Ning also serve as the basis for women's composition of the 1990s to explore literary themes including women's bodily experience, carnal desire, coming-of-age stories, and the individual histories that are generally omitted by mainstream history and grand narratives.

While the unassailable ideas of grand narratives and socialist idealism had already been challenged by the cultural practices of 1980s China, their authoritative influence was further deconstructed to a greater extent in the 1990s. The traumatic result of the Tiananmen protests in 1989 left a profound impact on the trajectory of 1990s China. On one hand, the dominant collective and grand discourse of the state received more challenges in the intellectual and cultural realm. On the other hand, the Chinese government put much effort into shifting the focus from the political to the economic, accelerating the opening-up process and economic reform, in which the publishing market took an active part.

Under the influence of women's writing of the 1980s and the multidimensional cultural context of the 1990s, women writers such as Lin Bai, Chen Ran, Xu Kun, and Xu Xiaobin, who were commonly recognized as the representative figures of "women's literature," as far as this concept was understood by academia, had more opportunities to inscribe women's individual lives, gender issues, emotional states, and bodily experiences, motifs that are outside the focus of the dominant sociohistorical motif and realist writing style. One of the common features of these writers is that they were mainly born in the period from the late 1950s to 1960s, which is a generation that spent its childhood in the Cultural Revolution and

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its youth in the early reform era. Therefore, as is pointed out by scholar Ge Hongbing, these writers bear less traumatic historical burden than their predecessors but cannot yet fully embrace consumerism and the deconstruction of social values like the younger generation born in the mid to late 1970s.<sup>116</sup> Therefore, on one hand, the writing of the theme of “the personal” from the gendered perspective is one of the ways in which these women writers could explore the possibility of individual narratives that had been previously repressed, overlooked, and marginalized by the dominant socialist realist paradigm. On the other hand, rather than treating literature as “commodities to be mass produced, advertised, and sold for profit” like the writers of later generations, these writers sought a balance between literary values and financial success.<sup>117</sup>

Though having less intention to integrate with the market and entertainment industry and even criticizing the commercialization of literature and art from an intellectual standpoint,<sup>118</sup> these women writers were inevitably incorporated into the commercial logic of the book market, a part of the entire development of the commodity economy of the time. As Shuyu Kong observes: “the Chinese had suddenly discovered that books, even literary works, could be treated as commodities to be mass produced, advertised, and sold for profit”, and therefore, “[t]he regime’s determination to drag culture and art kicking and screaming into the marketplace had become obvious.”<sup>119</sup> Therefore, apart from literary criticism that

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<sup>116</sup> Ge, “Xinshengdai xiaoshuo,” 35.

<sup>117</sup> Shuyu Kong, *Consuming Literature: Best Sellers and the Commercialization of Literary Production in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>118</sup> Chen and Xiao, “Ling yishan,” 91.

<sup>119</sup> Kong, *Consuming Literature*, 4, 22.

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pigeonholed “women’s literature” with a politically aligned benchmark, another major social force that participated in the creation of the idea of “women’s literature” is the flow of capital, especially that in the book market. One of the most illustrative examples of this phenomenon is the launch of various book series of women’s works by publishers in the mid to late 1990s.

For instance, in 1995, the year when FWCW was held, and two years before Li Jiefei’s article “The Fiction by ‘*Tamen*’” was published, Yunnan People’s Publishing House launched a book series called the *Tamen* Literary Series (她们文学丛书). The series contains the works of six female writers: Chen Ran, Hai Nan, Hong Ying, Lin Bai, Si Yu, and Chi Zijian. There were twelve books in total, including one anthology of fiction and another of prose for each author.

In the front matter of each book, a poem titled “*Tamen*” (她们) is added as the prologue of the whole series. The poem was written by Cheng Zhifang, the editor of the book series as well as the chief editor of the publishing house. To explain the objectives of this publication, this male editor eulogizes the identity of “*tamen*” by giving this idea various historical significances. By juxtaposing another concept, “*women*” (我们, “we” or “us” in Chinese), with “*tamen*,” he implies that *women* refers to a male collective and argues in this poem that although “*women* will never be *tamen*,” *women* still cherish the group of *tamen*, since *tamen* give the path for *women* to “transcend history” and “gain the future.”<sup>120</sup> In 2000, this poem was republished in the journal *View on Publishing* as a celebration and commemoration of

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<sup>120</sup> Cheng Zhifang 程志方. “*Tamen*” 她们 [*Tamen*]. *Huilang zhi yi* 回廊之椅 [Chairs of the winding corridor], by Lin Bai 林白, 1-2. Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 1995.

the launch of the fourth edition of the *Tamen* Literary Series.<sup>121</sup> The second and third editions were consequently launched in 1996 and 1998.

While it is reasonable to reckon the influence of the publication of the *Tamen* Literary Series on Li Jiefei's writing of "The Fiction by '*Tamen*,'" the case of this 1995 book series tells us much about the dynamics of gender in this multidimensional cultural context, or perhaps more precisely, of the cultural market's construction of the identity of "women writers" and the idea of "women's literature," both of which were thrown into the circulation of the book market.

In a broader scope, it has also been observed by scholars that in this seemingly prosperous "women's carnival," the patriarchal order and masculine discourse still permeated in more detailed and subtle operations. For example, many other book series of women's literary works were launched in the 1990s, but resembling "*Tamen*," most of them were planned and launched by male editors.<sup>122</sup> Moreover, similar to the way that Cheng defined the gender of women as an otherness and "the second sex" in both his poem and the title of the series, some other book series, such as the Red Poppy Series (红罂粟丛书) and the Red

<sup>121</sup> Cheng Zhifang 程志方. "Tamen—'Tamen wenxue congshu' xu" 她们——“她们文学丛书”序 [Tamen—Prologue of "*Tamen* Literary Series"]. *Chuban guangjiao* 出版广角 10 (2000): 65.

<sup>122</sup> Zhou Genhong 周根红. "'Hongyingsu congshu' yu 20 shiji 90 niandai nüxing wenxue de shengchan" "红罂粟丛书"与20世纪90年代女性文学的生产 ["Red Poppy Series" and the production of women's literature in the 1990s]. *Dangdai wentan* 当代文坛 4 (2017): 50. Xu Kun 徐坤. "Congci yuelai yue mingliang." 从此越来越明亮 [To become brighter and bright ever since]. *Beijing wenxue* 北京文学 11 (1995): 13.



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Pepper Women's Series (红辣椒女性文丛), portrayed women as a beautiful yet dangerous and tricky other.<sup>123</sup>

More fundamentally, as is pointed out by Shuyu Kong, the publishing houses used various strategies in their creation and promotion of the publications, such as adding women writers' photographs in the books to put a spotlight on the writers themselves, as well as tailoring the text to deliberately create "the sensation of a 'sexual novel.'"<sup>124</sup> As a result, the publishing business enabled literary themes such as the personal and the private, the body, and sexuality to become consumable, and even the images and private lives of these women writers themselves to become consumable, which was dominated by the masculine gaze of the market and the objective of maximizing commercial profit.

Therefore, in 1990s China, "women's literature" emerged quickly as a popularized genre through the mediation and linguistic manipulation of double-layered forces. On one hand, literary criticism that inherited many of the socialist doctrines coloured the concept of "women's literature" as being limited and over-radicalized in portraying gender, the female body, and personal lives. While on the other hand, these biased denotations of "women's literature" were exploited by the book market to dress up as an alluring product to satisfy consumer appetite.

Although the mainstream political values and the flow of capital operated in different ways in producing the notion of "women's literature," their parallel mechanisms converged

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<sup>123</sup> Interestingly, the name of "Red Poppy Series" was given by women writers themselves. Xu Kun herself experienced the entire process of naming the book series, and raised reflection about its irony in her article "To Become Brighter and Brighter Ever Since" (从此越来越明亮). Xu, "Congci," 6-8.

<sup>124</sup> Kong, *Consuming Literature*, 99, 106.

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under the same big picture of post-socialist national development. For example, as mentioned above, the Beijing FWCW in 1995 was one of the major momentums that boosted the production and distribution of the discourse on “women’s literature.” Many of the most well-known book series regarding women’s writings were launched in 1995 and beyond. However, although the publishers’ tactics seemed to entirely comply with the commercial logic, the publication activities in general were in fact under a bigger scheme of the state. China’s deepened reform in the 1990s placed the cultural industry on “the front lines of economic restructuring.”<sup>125</sup> The production and sales of women’s book series, obviously, took an active part in the nationwide marketization. Moreover, the hosting of international events always has political and diplomatic objectives, and FWCW was a momentous occasion for the government to display China’s progress in women’s liberation and thus ameliorate China’s position in international relations after the 1989 Tiananmen protests.<sup>126</sup> In other words, the hosting of FWCW became a political task that the social collective had to collaboratively fulfill. Therefore, in the cultural realm, Chinese academia, publishing houses, and many women writers themselves made the same gesture in producing an increasing amount of discourses regarding “women’s literature,” as “presents offered” (献礼) to the conference.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>126</sup> Wang Zheng, “A Historic Turning Point for the Women’s Movement in China,” *Signs* 22, no. 1 (1996): 193.

<sup>127</sup> Chu Yi 楚毅. “Woguo chubanjie wei 95 shifuhui xian houli tuichu yipi yi nüxing wei ticaide gaocengci tushu” 我国出版界为 95 世妇会献厚礼推出一批以女性为题材的高层次图书 [Our country’s publishers offer great presents to the 95 FWCW and launch a series

Therefore, while it is true that the 1990s multi-layered cultural context increased gender awareness and provided more opportunities for women writers, it is also important to note how individual practices and discourses can be co-opted by state mechanisms. In the case of women's writings in the 1990s, they were taken from the literary realm to a larger and more complicated circuit, since being endowed with the title "women's literature" means to be incorporated into the language and strategies of the mainstream values and commercial apparatus.

### The Collaborative Construction of "Women's Literature"

Standing between the early reform era and the new millennium, 1990s China was a time when "the development of literature no longer operated according to a mechanism buttressed by politics and sociology but rather unfolded in a multidimensional cultural time and space."<sup>128</sup> It was a time when marketization and globalization entered the historical context as new powers along with the existing centralized political force, and when patriarchy was challenged by some pioneering women writers and scholars while still being the dominant order. Because of the diversification of social forces and structures, social phenomena in the 1990s also became much more complicated. For example, while the 1995 Beijing FWCW

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of books of high quality on the topic of women], *Chuban cankao* 出版参考 September 23, 1995.

<sup>128</sup> “文学的发展已不再仅仅按政治学社会学规定的路数运作，而是在多维的文化时空展开。” Yang Kuanghan 杨匡汉. “Duo zhong tujing he xuanze de kenengxing—jiushi niandai wenxue guan cha congshu zongxu” 多种途径和选择的可能性—《九十年代文学观察丛书》总序 [Various paths and possibilities of selection—main prologue of *Observation of 1990s Literature Book Series*]. *Shuangdiao yexingchuan—jiushi niandai de nüxing xiezu* 双调夜行船——九十年代的女性写作 [The night boat in double tunes], by Xu Kun. Taiyuan: Shanxi jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999, 2.

was envisioned by the Chinese government as a political and international event, at the same time it created a new selling point for the publishing business.

Moreover, investigating the social and cultural context of 1990s China reveals how the idea of “women’s literature” was collaboratively imagined, constructed, and consumed by various social forces. In literary criticism of the 1990s, “women’s literature” was considered to be both an avant-garde exploration and a limited and self-constrained practice that, in the view of critics, should be corrected from the deviant path of being erotic, individualistic, and over-radical with respect to gender issues. While these perceptions were greatly influenced by Maoist and post-Maoist Chinese literary views and policies, the market’s participation in the creation of the genre of “women’s literature” in the 1990s is considerably different.

Making efforts to promote popular culture and best sellers in order to maximize commercial profits, the publishing business transformed “women’s literature” and even women writers themselves into self-revealing and eroticized products, which served the masculine appetite of the market. Therefore, what is unraveled by the term of “women’s literature” is not only conceptual confusions but also the complications of the cultural context and social structure of 1990s China, as well as the cultural politics shown by the difference in the positions between criticism and literature, between the concept and its referent.

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### Chapter Three

#### Self-Closure through Self-Disclosure: Rereading “Women’s Literature”

In 1990s mainland China, “women’s literature” rose as a literary trend that attracted attention from various social and cultural spheres. More than a mere static concept, this notion was deeply intertwined with the complicated, ever-shifting post-socialist context, in which “women’s literature” unfolded not only as a “name” but also as a dramatic cultural phenomenon of “naming.” As a result, the literary practices of some Chinese women writers in the 1990s were not only incorporated into a simplified yet ambiguous categorical notion but also into multiple social forces including literary criticism, globalization, and post-socialist Chinese politics and economics. On both the linguistic and social levels, “women’s literature” reveals the logic and politics of “being named” by the legitimized language of a civilization, which operates its power through the process of identification, definition, classification, and consumption.

Notably, however, the collective effort of “naming” as well as its social effect are exactly some of the aspects on which some individual women writers’ literary practices tend to reflect, and the intention of incorporating individual narrative into the mainstream language is indeed what is both represented and refused by their literary texts. As Chen Ran writes in *A Private Life*, “I know that the attribution of names to the fantastic variety of people and things is said to be one of the significant elements of civilization. But a name is nothing more than a name.”<sup>129</sup> Such a literary expression of turning away from the meanings

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<sup>129</sup> Chen, *A Private Life*, 3.

of names and the logic of naming, which frequently intertwine with power relations, displays a radical gesture of self-closure, refusal, and turning away from institutionalization, in which the mainstream political, economic, and cultural discourses oftentimes play an active role.

In order to show this, this chapter will go beyond the previous analysis of the production and sociohistorical context of the generalized and ambiguous concept of “women’s literature” to offer readings of two literary texts, *A Private Life* and *A War of One’s Own*. Following the discussion in Chapter Two of the difference in the positions between literature and the social discourse that tends to define literature, this chapter will take a step further and examine how the literary practices of individual authors such as Lin Bai and Chen Ran retain a certain distance between their works and the grand narratives. In adopting the idea of “personal history” as a starting point, this chapter proposes an alternative way of reading these two novels. While the two works are commonly interpreted as revitalizing the motif of “the personal,” this chapter will also emphasize how they utilize certain literary image and writing techniques to create an individual, idiosyncratic, and gendered way of uttering the personal story and to negotiate between reality and fictionality, between self-closure and self-disclosure.

### **Synopsis of *A Private Life* and *A War of One’s Own***

Written by two women writers of the younger generation and published in the 1990s, both *A Private Life* and *A War of One’s Own* focus on a female protagonist’s coming-of-age story from their childhood during the Cultural Revolution and their youth in the early reform

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era. First published in *Huacheng* in 1994, *A War of One's Own* by Lin Bai represents the journey of the main character, Lin Duomi (林多米), from the rural area to the city, and from adventures and pain to self realization. Lacking the company of parents during her childhood, she becomes highly independent, self-directed, and imaginative as she learned how to spend the time being alone. As a result, in the process of growing up, she tends to consider each experience as her own adventure in her life journey, whether it be her early sexual awakening in childhood or her solo travel after graduating from university. Therefore, on one hand, she constantly bears the ambition to distinguish herself in order to achieve self-confirmation, and on the other hand, many of her imaginations about the excitement of adventures are shattered by the hostility of the outside world, especially in her interaction with men. When suffering from not only being raped but also a failed relationship, in which she is forced to have an abortion, she gradually realizes that the adventure of life is “a war of one’s own,” especially for a woman like her who tends to preserve her individuality.

Published in *Huacheng* two years after Lin Bai’s work, Chen Ran’s *A Private Life* depicts the growing up of the female protagonist, Ni Niuniu (倪拗拗), as a gradual realization of her relationship with her family, school, and other social institutions. During her childhood, she suffered not only from the tyranny of her father but also the open marginalization and secret sexual assault of her teacher. Since there is no shelter or protection for the young child in either her family or her school, she develops a silent, lonely, and contemplative character. At the same time, she receives comfort from her friendship and bonding with her neighbour, a widow named He (禾), during the years from adolescence to womanhood. However, when

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Niuniu finally starts to find a little peace in college, she is again confronted with more painful traumas. Both He's and her mother's lives are taken away, one in a fire, and the other by cancer. Then, she herself is further wounded, psychologically and physically, during the Tiananmen incident; her boyfriend has to flee the country because of his participation in the protest, while Niuniu herself is injured by a bullet when passing by Tiananmen square. Though now diagnosed with mental disorder and social phobia, Niuniu insists on living an isolated life, in which she can maintain her own individuality and refuse reconciliation with any form of social discourse.

### **A Textual History**

Showing the female protagonists' life trajectory from childhood to young adulthood, both *A Private Life* and *A War of Its Own* are composed as coming-of-age stories and the writing of personal history. Yet "history" itself is another tricky term, which will reveal its ambiguity through layers of connotations and denotations if not otherwise expounded. As an analytical framework for the analysis in this chapter, I will adopt the new historicist theory of Louis Montrose to investigate the interpenetration between historicity and textuality.

In his article "The Poetics and Politics of Culture," Louis Montrose raises the theory of "the historicity of text and the textuality of history."<sup>130</sup> Within Montrose's new historicist perspective, texts, especially literary texts, are no longer isolated in the linguistic structure of the signifier and the signified, and history, in turn, no longer exists as an established "fact" as

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<sup>130</sup> Louise Montrose, "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture," in *The New Historicism* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 20.



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it was previously conceived. While acknowledging “the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing,” which is the meaning of “the historicity of text,” he also argues, in explaining “the textuality of history,” that it is impossible for one to access a lived past and an authentic history except through texts and documents that are mediated by linguistic construction.<sup>131</sup> The approach of exploring the interaction and interpenetration between historicity and textuality not only reconnects a literary text with its context and relocates history in certain rhetoric and discourses, but also draws a clearer picture of the inseparable relation between language, texts, history, and culture.

The reason why this thesis introduces the notions of “textuality and historicity” in the analysis of these two coming-of-age stories is that such a framework can help to place Lin’s and Chen’s writing not as isolated texts but in a particular position in contemporary Chinese literary history. In the Mao era, literary compositions were produced under the doctrines of socialist realism, among which an important aspect is the theory that “the objective determines the subjective.”<sup>132</sup> However, this principle was paraphrased by Mao as “the objective reality of class struggle and national struggle determines our thoughts and feelings,”<sup>133</sup> which narrows the “objective reality” to a limited scope and obliterates the representations of social dimensions other than class and national struggle. Therefore, the socialist ideological framework also promotes the materialist conception of history. Historical materialism demands the idea of “history” to be, on one hand, conceptualized as stable incidents and objective facts, and on the other hand, presented after filtration and sublimation

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<sup>131</sup> Montrose, “Professing the Renaissance,” 20.

<sup>132</sup> McDougall and Mao, *Mao Zedong’s “Talks,”* 62.

<sup>133</sup> McDougall and Mao, *Mao Zedong’s “Talks,”* 62.

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of political and revolutionary principles. For example, in his 1942 “Talks,” Mao underlines that

Studying Marxism-Leninism only requires us to observe the world, society, literature, and art from the point of view of dialectical materialism and historical materialism... [I]t [Marxism-Leninism] will definitely destroy feudal, bourgeois, petty bourgeois, liberalist, individualist, nihilist, art-for-art’s sake, aristocratic, decadent, pessimistic, and other kinds of creativity that are alien to the popular masses and the proletariat.<sup>134</sup>

Therefore, what socialist historical materialism produces in literature and art is far from bearing an “objective” viewpoint but, rather, is party-state determined and narrated to become what I call the socialist “mainstream history,” which is mass-oriented, unidimensional, and authoritative. In other words, socialist mainstream history is a means of historical narration that is produced for the pragmatic purpose of mobilizing the masses in the revolution, class struggle, and the continuous progression of socialism. More importantly, as shown by Mao’s words, producing socialist mainstream history means that writers and artists should align their discourse with the unitary political standard, which guarantees the authority of the mainstream through the approach of excluding alterities. As a result, the Maoist imperative of writing mainstream history not only obliterates the existence of individual stories unless they completely coalesced with the mass revolution, it also refuses different historical viewpoints and narrations, such as a history that is non-linear, non-progressive or non-teleological.

It is easy to observe that Lin and Chen tend to take some specific literary approaches that are opposed to narratives of socialist mainstream history in their delineation of a female protagonist’s life story, such as conducting textual experiments, focusing on the motif of “the personal,” revealing the linguistically constructed feature of the seemingly objective

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<sup>134</sup> McDougall and Mao, *Mao Zedong’s “Talks,”* 82-83.

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mainstream history, and to legitimize the existence of the personalized life history. Yet, in Lin's and Chen's writings, these literary approaches are not entirely individual inspirations. As mentioned above, they took approaches similar to writers in the 1980s whose works were identified as "avant-garde literature" (先锋文学).<sup>135</sup> During the 1980s, when political control over cultural production decreased, authors began to take up bold experiments with language in representation. When socialist mainstream history was discovered to have been textually constructed through ideological coding of language, it can be destabilized not only by writers' reorganization of language but also personalized through one's own literary creation. The 1980s writers, especially avant-garde writers, used experimental writing styles to revise the unidimensional literary language of the Mao era, including the representation of "history." Therefore, in the literary experiments of the 1980s, the literary notion of "history" was deconstructed as established fact to become ways of narration, and as unidimensional socialist mainstream history to become various "personal histories," including those of the marginalized.

It is hard to identify the direct influence of any particular writer on Lin and Chen. Yet, both authors' writing can be seen as following the trajectory of, for example, Can Xue's usage of metaphors in depicting one's solitariness and trauma, Ma Yuan's focus on the narration of stories and the fictionality of texts, and Ge Fei's effort in reinterpreting and

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<sup>135</sup> Can Xue (残雪), Ma Yuan (马原), Hong Feng (洪峰), Yu Hua (余华), and Sun Ganlu (孙甘露) are some representative figures of "avant-garde literature." These writers tend to experiment with style and narration in their texts.

reflecting on the notion of “history.”<sup>136</sup> Also, as pointed out by Hong Zicheng, for the avant-garde writers, “their deconstruction of ‘content’ and ‘meaning,’ and their attention to topics such as sex, death, and violence, could not help but touch upon the discourse field of contemporary China and memories of the violence and spiritual scars of the ‘Cultural Revolution’”<sup>137</sup> While for Lin and Chen, their construction of a personalized history, fragmented narration, and an isolated selfhood, which will be analysed below, is obviously the continuation of this literary approach. The difference in the context lies in that the 1989 Tiananmen incident, as well as the explosive development of the 1990s Chinese market and urban space added on the violence that their works touch on, especially in *A Private Life*.

In echoing the 1980s literary styles, themes, and techniques into their 1990s writings, Lin and Chen’s works, nevertheless, are not replication of the previous works. What is significant about *A War of One’s Own* and *A Private Life* is their merging of the personal history and gender issues with experimental writing, which enables the authors’ depiction of the selfhood and coming-of-age of a female protagonist. On one hand, unlike some of their predecessors’ strong interest in avant-garde writing skills, Lin and Chen tend to balance the story and techniques. Where they lay more emphasis in their works is the subjective

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<sup>136</sup> In terms of reinterpreting the idea of history in literary writing, Ge Fei tends to delineate how the course of grand historical incidents are changed by a nobody’s incidental actions or sentiments and become a total mystery. He also tends to encode his text by using literary techniques that make the story itself hard to be entirely decoded. This contradicts the socialist realist principle and the belief that history is pushed forward by the mass revolution and historical inevitability. See “A Hut on the Mountain” (山上的小屋) by Can Xue, “The Spell of the Gangdisê Mountains” (冈底斯的诱惑) by Ma Yuan, and “The Enigmatic Boat” (迷舟) and “Green Yellow” (青黄) by Ge Fei.

<sup>137</sup> Hong, *A History*, 387.

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standpoint of the first person “I,”<sup>138</sup> around which both the plots and writing techniques in these two works are woven. On the other hand, while constructing a personal history, a coming-of-age story for all readers to resonate with, these two works are also written from a gendered perspective, including the female narrators’ emotional conditions, sexual experiences, metaphysical thinking, and their growing up in the gradual realization of the oppression of patriarchy. Therefore, if Lin’s and Chen’s 1980s precursors discovered the textuality of historical representations and extracted the theme of “the personal” from mass-oriented writings, then Lin and Chen took a step further in presenting a completely individualized history that reveals itself not only as textualized and fictional but also from a gendered and sexed perspective. In other words, whether the avant-garde writers’ rethinking of the idea of “history” or Lin’s and Chen’s more radical construction of a gendered personal history, these writers are not turning away from history as incidents. They are, in fact, revising or rejecting a way of historical narration dominated by socialist realism, which is mass oriented and devalues women’s writing of gendered and sexed experience as useless individual sentiments.

In the delineation of a personal history in these two novels, the literary representations that are normally categorized into socialist mainstream history do not make up a substantial portion of the text but only exist at the sidelines of the narration. More significantly, among these already scattered portrayals of mainstream history, some of them are also rendered by the authors with discursive and rhetorical techniques. For example, in *A War of Its Own*, the

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<sup>138</sup> Even the separation of “I” and “she” in these two novels, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs, is rendered as a self-gaze and self-reflection of the first-person narrator.

Cultural Revolution, in which the protagonist, Lin Duomi, spent her adolescence, is revealed through the mention of two historical symbols, *Quotations from Chairman Mao* (毛主席语录) and a radio editorial, both of which were essential means of propaganda of the era. The quotations, however, do not appear in any political context but in the letters from Duomi's elementary school friends expressing how they miss her when she is forced to drop out:

They didn't know how to encourage me, so they copied: "You should pay attention to national affairs and carry the proletarian Cultural Revolution to the end!" "The force at the core leading our cause forward is the Chinese Communist Party. The theoretical basis guiding our thinking is Marxism-Leninism." Below these serious quotations are each of their letters with just a few words...<sup>139</sup>

These letters are described by her as "filled with emptiness and monotony, but I hold them like a treasure, as if I am holding the most brilliant novels."<sup>140</sup> Moreover, while the editorial entitled "Agriculture Should Learn from Dazhai" (农业学大寨) is composed by Duomi through the method of copying passages from *People's Daily*, she does so for the

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<sup>139</sup> “她们不知道要给我怎样的鼓励才好，她们便抄道：‘你们要关心国家大事，要把无产阶级文化大革命进行到底！’ ‘领导我们事业的核心力量是中国共产党，指导我们思想的理论基础是马克思列宁主义。’写了庄严的语录，才是她们各自寥寥数语的信...” Lin, “Yigeren,” 52. The first quotation is from “A Talk in of the People’s Reception Center of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China” (在中共中央群众接待站的讲话), and the second from *Quotations from Chairman Mao* (毛主席语录). Although the first quotation was not included in *Quotations*, it came out when the Cultural Revolution had just started and was therefore popularized as one of the national slogans. Mao Zedong 毛泽东. “Zai zhonggong zhongyang qunzhong jiedaishi de jianghua” 在中共中央群众接待站的讲话 [A Talk in of the People’s Reception Center of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China]. In *Mao Zedong sixiang wansui* (1961-1968) 毛泽东思想万岁 (1961-1968) [Long Live Mao Zedong Thought (1961-1968)]. Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1968, 267. Mao Zedong 毛泽东. *Mao zhuxi yulu* 毛主席语录 [Quotations from Chairman Mao]. Beijing: Zhongguo renmin jiefangjun zongzhengzhibu 中国人民解放军总政治部, 1966, 1.

<sup>140</sup> “她们的信空洞无物，甚至千篇一律，但我如获至宝地捧着它们，就像捧着最精彩的小说。” Lin, “Yigeren,” 52.

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purpose of fulfilling her own ambitions of being recognized as a talented writer, rather than out of a genuine desire to participate in political activities.<sup>141</sup>

Notably, not only are these sporadic pieces relevant to socialist mainstream history displayed through some of the most prominent symbols of the era, but they are also represented through symbols that are in a textual form, whether *Quotations from Chairman Mao* or the editorial from the official media. Texts are shaped through linguistic construction, whose meaning, symbolization, and even representation for power relations can be reshaped when language itself is reorganized. Therefore, when these textual marks are woven into Duomi's personal recounting, they start to lose the authoritative symbolic function of propagating the victory of the revolution and the achievements of China's socialist history, as well as its prominent status of being studied, recited, and propagated by the social collective. Instead, whether it is the great leader's speech or the editorial in the official media, the authoritative historical texts are recounted as, and thus remolded into, personal reminiscence, sentiment, the sensorial, and narrative. In other words, through inserting the authoritative texts into a fictional text and personal narratives, the significance and credibility of the text of grand socialist history and revolution, which are precisely delineated by such authoritative discourses as the radio editorial, are also destabilized. What is also transformed here is the relation between the individual subject and grand history. While originally aimed at

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<sup>141</sup> "Learning from Dazhai" is a political campaign initiated by Mao in mid-1960s. Dazhai had been an impoverished village in Shanxi province with poor natural resources. With the leadership of Chen Yonggui, the secretary of the Party's branch committee of Dazhai, the village experienced huge transformation in agriculture, including the building of roads, fields, and reservoirs and the increase in productivity. Dazhai was therefore set up as a model of diligence and conquering nature for Chinese agricultural development. Lin, "Yigeren," 30.

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mobilizing the subject to enter the field of the social, these official narratives are now transformed by the individual subject and incorporated into her multidimensional and personalized reformulation. Similarly, in *A Private Life*, instead of being represented by historical incidents, the larger Chinese socialist history and its imprint are transformed into the discontinuous grumblings of the frustrated life experiences of the elementary school teacher, Mr. T, which are re-narrated by Ni Niuniu as a latent factor of her victimization by Mr. T's pedophilia and sexual assault.

Other than the textuality of mainstream history reflected in both novels, what carries a stronger signifying potential in *A War of One's Own* and *A Private Life* is their mutual features as both textualized personal histories and historicized personal texts in and of themselves. Under the literary tradition established by the Yan'an "Talks," individual and coming-of-age motifs, such as those portrayed in *Song of Youth* (青春之歌), *The White-Haired Girl* (白毛女), and "Red Beans" (红豆),<sup>142</sup> would only be recognized as literature with respect to the topic of history when they are incorporated as a component of the collective mainstream history. Yet, for authors like Lin Bai and Chen Ran, who can be said to belong to the generation that "refus[ed] meanings and the traditional social

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<sup>142</sup> *Song of Youth* is a novel written by Yang Mo, published in 1958. *The White-Haired Girl* is a collectively composed opera, which later became one of the Model Operas (样板戏) during the Cultural Revolution after being adapted into a ballet. "Red Beans" is a short story by Zong Pu published in 1957. All three works are concerned with the coming-of-age of a young female protagonist, who gains her growth psychologically and socially in engaging in the revolution. But even with the adoption of such motifs, both *Song of Youth* and "Red Beans" were criticized in being petit-bourgeois and revisionist in political movements. In both works the female protagonists are caught in various struggles between "personal interests" and social dedication, and the writing of such struggles were defined by the authority as the hesitation in genuine involvement in class struggle.



responsibility of writers,”<sup>143</sup> the desire to revitalize the diversity and complexity of the personal underlies their conscious integration of the literary writing of personal life and the idea of history:

...I should write down my personal history, that with my individual peculiarities I could take my place as one of the many unique entities that make up the multiplicity of humankind, my uniqueness determined by all those other unique natures with whom I coexist. Though every person is alone, a single isolated entity, with a history that is different from everyone else's, she cannot live without connection to her fellow human beings.<sup>144</sup>

This internal contemplation by Ni Niuniu in *A Private Life* echoes the author's compositional objectives of exploring her “special interest in the richness and complexity of human interiority.”<sup>145</sup> In other words, the above excerpt as well as both authors' writing about their female protagonists' discovery of their bodily and spiritual selves are the manifestation of the specificity and concreteness of each human being's life history, which creates the possibility for the individual subject to build her personal values by a means other than through being recognized and institutionalized by society and its disciplines. The approach of refusing institutionalization also enables the authors to place their female protagonists in relation and opposition to patriarchy. In both stories, the gendered individual narratives of the protagonists' coming-of-age emerge from a gradual realization of their position in the masculine order, which collude with collectivism in constructing social

<sup>143</sup> “... 对于六十年代生长的一代人说来，他（她）们在拒绝意义与传统的写作者的社会使命的同时，写作成了写作行为的目的和动因。” Dai Jinhua 戴锦华. “Chen Ran: Geren he nüxing de shuxie” 陈染：个人和女性的书写 [Chen Ran: The Writing of the Individual and Women]. *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论 3 (1996): 48.

<sup>144</sup> Chen uses both the first person and third person in the text. Chen, *A Private Life*, 196.

<sup>145</sup> “因为我对于人的内在的丰富性和复杂性有着特殊的兴趣...” Chen Ran 陈染. “Chen Ran zishu” 陈染自述 [Self-narratives of Chen Ran]. *Xiaoshuo pinglun* 小说评论 5 (2005): 35.

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hierarchies. Since the writings from the 1980s had started to legitimize the idea that a personal recounting of one's life, including a literary one, can also bear historicity and be named as "history," which is no longer necessarily bounded by the collective discourse, Lin's and Chen's composition pushed this consciousness even further by experimenting with the first-person "I" and giving this first-person subject a gender. What is worth noting is that in their writing of the protagonists' radical retreat from the social realm even to the point of self-isolation, the understanding of the idea of "the collective" is a rather general one; it is symbolic not only on the macro level of the party-state and the "socialist grand history" produced by official language, but also along micro dimensions, including spaces like the classroom in primary school, where unitary values might obliterate individuality and normalize the marginal, and where these unitary values are established by an authoritarian male teacher. Such an understanding also paves the way for Chen Ran and her main character's cognition of the notion of "humankind" as not merely a single entity but rather the gathering of individual subjects, who are each capable of carrying with them their idiosyncratic features and of finding commonality among each other's life histories.

### **Narratives of a Personal Reality**

In reorganizing the relation between subject and history, as well as establishing a textual history, both authors adopt several writing techniques to transform individual life stories into not only alternative personal histories but also unique narrations of them. For example, in *A Private Life*, while most of the personal stories are composed as monologues from the

vantage point of the first-person “I,” the protagonist’s first sexual experience with Mr. T nevertheless is recounted through the third-person “she”: “She had become another person, controlled totally by her body’s need for sexual gratification.”<sup>146</sup> In Lin Bai’s *A War of One’s Own*, this rhetorical construction is even more obvious in the constant shifting between the first-person “I” and the third-person “Duomi” that runs through the entire novel.

The usage of two persons and two viewpoints in telling the same story reflects the sometimes contradictory features and unreliability of narration when producing the personal history, which, as pointed out by scholar Jin Siyan, “constitutes a particular space where the narrating *I* defies narration, subtracts it, denies it, excludes or contradicts it.”<sup>147</sup> Moreover, the writing technique of switching persons creates the effects of distancing and defamiliarization. When Lin Bai’s and Chen Ran’s protagonists are enabled by their own narratives to tell their own histories as if telling someone else’s, they also consciously create a distance from themselves. “My memories of that day are very sharp. It was like a new birth”—the self-reflection of “I” returns after the narration of “she.”<sup>148</sup> The ever-changing viewpoints in these two texts indicate not only distance but also recurrence, which provides a specific space for reflection and repetitive self-gazing.

Parallel with the adoption of double persons is a nonlinear timeline, another writing technique adopted by these two authors. Portrayed as coming-of-age stories, *A Private Life* and *A War of One’s Own* do not deliver their plots and narration according to a

<sup>146</sup> Chen, *A Private Life*, 116.

<sup>147</sup> Siyan Jin, “Fragmentary Women’s Writing: Lin Bai and Can Xue,” in *Subjective Writing in Contemporary Chinese Literature*, trans. Isabelle Lee (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2020), 175.

<sup>148</sup> Chen, *A Private Life*, 116.

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unidimensional progressive time. While personal history and previous experience are rendered by the narrators as pieces of memories, time in both texts is also fragmented into random permutations and combinations of the past and the present. Therefore, the writing of both novels is constituted not only by a general timeline from childhood to adulthood but also a large quantity of interposed narrations, many of which include reminiscence of the past and even the remolding of it through language. As a result, even the overarching timeline of both stories also loses its linearity but is transformed into a collection of memories that can be recollected, fragmented, shuffled, and fabricated. In such a use of the technique of stream-of-consciousness, the textuality of the personal history is manifested in a palpable way. When it is shown that history can only be recollected in the form of memory and retold in the form of storytelling, it is transformed from a seemingly solid occurrence to a narrated story and a woven text, which, due to the ever-shifting features of language and recollection, also become verbal, fragmented, unreliable, and even reconstructed by the current imagination. This is why Ni Niuniu would claim that “[t]ime is created from the movement of my mind” and why Lin Duomi admits that the memory about certain things and people “have vanished so completely that I wasn’t able to grasp the feelings I had had at that time when I was writing these words. I had to refer to my previous works and diaries to piece together this section. This is all I want to clarify.”<sup>149</sup> The flow of time and the concept of personal history

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<sup>149</sup> “时间是由我思绪的流动而构成。” Chen, “Siren,” 2. “（它们消失得是如此彻底，当我在写作时我已无法抓住当时的心情，以至于只好借助旧作和日记，拼合了这个篇章。这是我要说明的。）” Lin, “Yigeren,” 79.

are no longer something substantial and external to the human, but converge with one's feelings, experiences, and discourse.

In this regard, the function of a fragmented timeline also overlaps with the usage of both the first and the third person. The division between "I" and "she" not only provides a retrospective space for the subject's self-gaze to go back and forth but also reflects the inseparable relation between the coming-of-age of Ni Niuniu or Lin Duomi and their going through time and reflecting on past experiences. In other words, in Lin Bai's and Chen Ran's writings, the self is generative rather than definitive, cumulative of depth in time rather than invariant. Those fragmented pieces from the past "are not dead pages from history; they are living links that connect me to my ever-unfolding present..."<sup>150</sup> Therefore, the subject is not only able to look back at and introspect on her former self in her recounting of memory but also to grow up and reshape her present self through this ruminating process.

While Chris Berry has written that the motif of time under the established tradition of socialist realism functions as a mechanical component of socialist development in being "forward-looking, linear, and progressive,"<sup>151</sup> what is juxtaposed with such progressive time is oftentimes a progressive historical subject, who seldom keeps a reflective distance from the self but only puts effort into developing self-progression by examining the distance between his or her social identity with the masses and the social ideal.<sup>152</sup> Therefore, the writing

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<sup>150</sup> Chen, *A Private Life*, 73.

<sup>151</sup> Chris Berry, "Xiao Wu: Watching Time Go By," in *Chinese Films in Focus II*. 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 254.

<sup>152</sup> For example, one of the most common motifs in Chinese socialist and even post-socialist realist fiction is the tension between love and revolution, or, more generally, the tension between one's preservation of one's own life and one's devotion and dedication to the social realm. Works such as *Song of Youth*, "Red Beans," and "At Middle Age" (人到中年) all

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techniques adopted by both authors not only become fundamental methods that they use to construct a personal history but also reveal their intention to further investigate this deviant trajectory from the established authoritative historical narrative, which had been explored by Lin's and Chen's predecessors in the 1980s as shown above. What can be observed from Lin's and Chen's methods is their structuring of their texts by analogy with montage. This is not only enabled by the unstable viewpoints in constant alternation but also by what Berry describes as "differential time," which "insists that diverse understandings of time can exist alongside each other, intersecting but also operating according to their own logics" to produce a history containing multiple layers and different voices rather than being unitary and onefold.<sup>153</sup> Therefore, both the personalized historical time and the historical viewpoint function as the authors' searching for alternatives outside socialist realism and even post-socialist realism, which serve not only as literary styles but also as the representations of the logic of collectivist narratives and power relations.

As a result, what is juxtaposed with the redefinition and textualization of the idea of history in Lin's and Chen's writings is also the reconfiguration of reality. In other words, utilizing both literary content and style to build personal narratives and to reject the grand narratives of history, *A War of One's Own* and *A Private Life* seek to create a realm of personal reality. By "personal reality," I mean a literary and textual reality constructed in

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follow this pattern. But one of the differences between socialist and post-socialist works in adopting this theme is that while it symbolizes the growth and movement to political correctness for the protagonist if he/she finally abandons the "individual interest" and engage in the social revolution, then post-socialist works, such as "At Middle Age" starts to uncover the side effects of the total abandonment of individual life.

<sup>153</sup> Berry, "Xiao Wu," 255.

these two novels that is driven by individual thoughts, free-flowing timeline, the combination of the real and the imagined, as well as one's own narrative tendency. In other words, it is a reality that displays in a personalized way rather than being governed by unitary criteria.

Under the formulaic standards of socialist and post-socialist realism, the representation of "reality" is stipulated to be politically and historically "objective," which means the delineation of reality in literature is subjected to the order of the party-state, while subjective personal reality would evidently be classified as bourgeois, reactionary, against the masses, and against sociohistorical standards.<sup>154</sup> This is why, at the end of *A Private Life*, the narrator creates two opposing realities for herself, each with different aims. She writes a letter to the doctors that diagnose her as having social phobia and mental disease, saying how she has eliminated her distance with the collectivity and describing in great detail how she loves to serve the people. Yet, on the same day, she spends most of the time decorating her bathroom and lying in the bathtub, enjoying her contemplation when being alone.<sup>155</sup> Therefore, if she aims to show her sarcastic attitude by inventing a scenario of progressing into social reality, it is in the second scenario that she genuinely finds peace and self-confirmation by immersing in her own personal reality.

Therefore, to return to the starting point of the problem of naming, it is necessary to recall how the significance of civilization is interpreted in *A Private Life* as "the attribution of

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<sup>154</sup> Haiyan Lee analyzes the governmental standard for socialist art as "formulaic truth," which produces formulas "through simplicity, monotony, and repetition" that reduce "styles, subject matter, and psychological complexity," and works as a "truth" or established criteria controlled by the authority. Haiyan Lee, "When Nothing Is True, Everything Is Possible: On Truth and Power by Way of Socialist Realism," *PMLA* 134, no. 5 (2019), 1157–64.

<sup>155</sup> Chen, *A Private Life*, 209-13.

names to the fantastic variety of people and things.”<sup>156</sup> This already reveals Chen Ran’s perception of the discursive and thus fictional character of reality. Lin Bai also claims that “writing is the process of seeking reality through one’s own utterance.”<sup>157</sup> Since the stability of the established order and the validity of “mainstream history” and “social reality” are disassembled, the approach to entering the textual field can be interpreted as a way of searching for and building one’s own reality on the ruins of the suspended grand narratives, through dreams, imagination, and their literary compositions. In the personal history and reality, the real is personal, subjective, and generated from fictionality and fabrication, from the authors’ distinct use of narrative structures and the weaving of language, memory, and contemplation; for these alternative subjects, the subjective reality is more real than what is claimed to be the objective social reality. Therefore, it is from the tension between and interpenetration of historicity and textuality, reality and fictionality, that the meaning of a textual personal history and a personal reality emerges in Chen Ran’s and Lin Bai’s compositions.

### **An Alternative Self**

Discovering the motifs of fictionality and textuality of a personal history, the two authors’ writing style of deliberately displaying the texture of literature as fabrication not only functions as an avant-garde writing technique but also reveals their distinct perspective

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<sup>156</sup> Chen, *A Private Life*, 3.

<sup>157</sup> “写作就是用自己的语词来寻找现实。” Lin Bai 林白. “‘Juedui tingjue’ duanxiang” “绝对听觉” 断想 [Thoughts about “Absolute Hearing”]. *Wenxue ziyou tan* 文学自由谈 3 (1996): 34.



on the human, especially women, and the world. “[I]t is only before and after the occurrence of the real and fleeting phenomena of life that we experience them. The actual events that we think we perceive are only dreamlike fabrications invented by ourselves.”<sup>158</sup> If this excerpt from Ni Niuniu’s monologue signifies her metaphysical understanding of the fictional quality of one’s history and reality, then in *A War of One’s Own*, the first-person narrator’s query for the third-person Lin Duomi points more directly to the issue of the interpretation of selfhood: “Duomi, who indeed are we?...Is it possible that we are a fictionalized person?”<sup>159</sup> Thus, parallel to both the history and reality that bear fictionality, there is also a fictional subject, or a subject that starts to realize she is fictional. In other words, this is a subject that starts to realize that the seemingly solid and objective history and reality are created by certain discursive strategies, and that it is possible for the subject herself to use language to narrate her own life history, personal reality, and even alternative selfhood.

Taking a step further from Duomi’s connotative query of herself, other fundamental questions emerge: If the female protagonist in either social reality or personal reality realizes her fictionality, how can she use her own language to fictionalize and create her self-image, and what does this self-image look like? While these are important questions for the interpretation of both *A Private Life* and *A War of One’s Own*, they also serve as a starting point for discussing some of the differences between Lin Bai’s and Chen Ran’s writings.

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<sup>158</sup> In Chen Ran’s original text, the second sentence is written as “它们只是梦一般的只限制在我们身上的虚构的东西。” While referring to Howard-Gibbon’s translation of “我们身上” as “our own bodies,” this paper changes the term to “ourselves,” since the concept of “身” not only means “the body” but also indicates “the person him/herself,” which is more general than the idea of the physical body and serves as a more adequate interpretation according to the context. Chen, *A Private Life*, 73.

<sup>159</sup> “多米，我们到底是谁？... 我们会是一个被虚构的人吗？” Lin, “Yigeren,” 47.

The two protagonists, Duomi and Niuniu, parallel each other in being portrayed as imaginative, literary, and self-conscious, as well as having an instinct to avoid the crowd. Yet the reason behind the formation of their characters is different. In *A War of One's Own*, Duomi grows up as a lonely child from the very beginning. With a mother who works as a doctor and devotes most of her time to service trips to the countryside (下乡) and a father who died when she was young, she gets used to a life of being alone and relying on herself, as well as to having a less intimate relationship with her mother:

Those nights when mother was not home have become familiar to me. An everlasting barrier was built from that time on. I feel uncomfortable whenever she is at home... The living child sleeps by herself in the long night, with her body floating in darkness. Skins without the touch of parents are solitary and hungry skins; they are left stranded emptily on the bed, with nothing to do.<sup>160</sup>

Expressing multilayered feelings of herself, Duomi manifests both her seemingly natural habit of being alone and a high level of self-awareness and reflection on the whole sequence of the absence of the notion of family in her life. Other than giving her “hungry skin,” she is also aware that she herself “is...not fond of collectivity, is nonchalant about others and forever immersed in interiority, as well as independent and steadfast—she is so independent to the degree that other people could not reach...”<sup>161</sup> Therefore, the impact of Duomi’s childhood on her is more than a less intimate relation with her mother. She also develops a living pattern that is not only self-conscious but also highly self-oriented, whether bodily or spiritually. She not only rejects the world with her social phobia and self-closure, but also

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<sup>160</sup> “没有母亲在家的夜晚已经形成了习惯，从此便有了永远的隔膜...活着的孩子在漫长的夜晚独自一人睡觉，肉体悬浮在黑暗中，没有亲人抚摸的皮肤是孤独而饥饿的皮肤，它们空虚地搁浅在床上，无所事事。” Lin, “Yigeren,” 12.

<sup>161</sup> “不喜欢群体，对别人视而不见，永远沉浸在内心，独立而坚定，独立到别人无法孤立的程度...” Lin, “Yigeren,” 15.

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realizes, at an early age, that she can gaze at her own body and desires through her own eyes rather than through the mediation of a heterosexual relationship. Therefore, whether it is the ups and downs of her adolescent experience of publishing poems or her long trip to southwestern China in early adulthood, many of her personal stories are narrated and spectated by her current self as adventures of her own rather than a gradual engagement with the external world. These narrations are filled with fantasies and heroism, which are exactly what enables her coming-of-age to be “a war of one’s own.”

If the status of Duomi’s selfhood is, from the very beginning, oriented toward the self, then in *A Private Life*, what Niuniu possesses is a relational self gradually generated by contact with others. Unlike Duomi’s experience of the absence of her father and mother in her childhood, Niuniu grows up in a typical Chinese nuclear family. Yet family becomes the first space where she undergoes conflict with the external world. Rather than embraced by a loving and normal family, Niuniu lives with a tyrannical father who is not only rough, ill-tempered, and dictatorial but also banishes the old nanny and the pet dog from her family. Niuniu, from an early age, is caught between the desire to resist her father’s control and the fear of his autocracy. Outside the space of the household, she also experiences oppression at school, where her uncommon honesty, silence, and unwillingness to flatter the teacher like the other students make her the target of his criticism and isolation in public, and the object of his sexual desire in secret.

Therefore, though overlapping to a large extent in their personalities that deviate from the social norm, the sources of the formation of Duomi’s and Niuniu’s characters are quite

different. While Duomi generates her selfhood, to some extent, on the basis of lack—the lack of a substantial family in early childhood that might serve as a pathway for her to enter the social field—then what shapes Niuniu’s selfhood is mostly conflict. As Chen Ran puts it, “the reaction and expression of one’s interiority are undoubtedly the result of one’s collision with the exterior world.”<sup>162</sup> As a result, if Duomi’s immersion in imagination, fantasies, and daydreams is her inheritance of the childhood habit of hardly having anything and anyone else to engage with, then the similar habit of Niuniu signifies a conscious or unconscious strategy of building an internal shelter for herself to counter the violence she experiences in the external world.

However, whether gaining selfhood through lack of or conflict with parent(s), the idea of “the family” also brings Niuniu and Duomi’s character together. Unlike many socialist literary figures that break off with their families to transform themselves into recognized revolutionaries,<sup>163</sup> what Lin’s and Chen’s stories display is something excluded by the socialist narrative routine. The alienation from the family does not necessarily lead to one’s entrance to the larger social realm but might cause one’s deeper fear or refusal of the outside world.

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<sup>162</sup> “人内心世界的反应或描述，肯定是人与外部世界碰撞的结果。” Chen Ran 陈染. “Bai ‘niao’ zhengming hao fengjing” 百 “鸟” 争鸣好风景 [Hundreds of “Birds” Competing Singing Forms A Good Scene]. *Wenxue ziyou tan* 文学自由谈 4 (2000): 118.

<sup>163</sup> Revolutionary characters in socialist works have various ways to break off with the family. For example, the protagonist of *Song of Youth* (青春之歌), Lin Daojing, first loses her mother because of the violence of her father, who is a landlord. This gives her the latent reason to participate in revolution. After that, her character’s development is marked by breaking off with her feudalist family and then her counterrevolutionary partner.

The generation of selfhood through either lack or conflict are also both deeply intertwined with the gendered and sexed writing of the two female writers. As mentioned above, Lin and Chen inherited the language experiments of the 1980s avant-garde while also took a step further in placing gender consciousness in their writing. Unlike many 1990s critics' interpretation that women's composition is facilitated by women's "innate" stream-of-consciousness and fragmented narration, the gendered writing in *A War of One's Own* and *A Private Life* is, rather, built upon the developing of the female characters through two elements that are indeed innate to their gender and sex identities, namely, the protagonists' relation with patriarchy as women and the discovery of their body as females.

Duomi acknowledges at the very beginning of the story that she discovers the bodily pleasure at an extremely early age. Because of the parents' absence, Duomi develops a habit of seeking adventures in the banal life. Her secret masturbation in the siesta time of kindergarten becomes her own way of compensating for "the hunger of skin."<sup>164</sup> Moreover, an attempted rape that she almost falls victim to in college is described by her as a novel experience "so valuable and incredibly beautiful, like a rainbow in the sky."<sup>165</sup> However, although Duomi has for long enjoyed her own bodily pleasure, she starts to realize the hostility of the masculine world when her body is truly brought into heterosexual relationships. Whether in her victimization in a genuine rape or her pregnancy and abortion in a failed relationship, she experiences nothing but pain and suffering. Therefore, her coming-of-age as a woman and a female reinforce her belief that she is offered by the

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<sup>164</sup> Lin, "Yigeren," 5-6.

<sup>165</sup> "这点奇遇是多么弥足珍贵，绚丽难得，就像天上的彩虹。" Lin, "Yigeren," 13.

masculine world a “nonplace” to reside in except for returning to her own selfhood and body.<sup>166</sup>

In Xu Kun’s commentary on these two authors, she notes that Lin Bai, “is genuinely able to break through barriers and constrains” by composing female characters that are not only oriented towards their own bodies but also break away from their bodies by tearing them apart, while Chen Ran is more concentrated on incessant and painful metaphysical thinking, which underwrites the fact that “her body is imprisoned by her mind...It is difficult to find the boldness of the body and release of the mind in her books.”<sup>167</sup> Therefore, in *A Private Life*, the motif of the body and sexuality is oftentimes more symbolic than physical, and the protagonist’s realization of her gender identity emerges from a realization of her position in the repressive patriarchy. Other than the tyranny of her father at home, another of her earliest childhood traumas comes from her teacher’s sexual assault. Niuniu’s understanding and construction of her own selfhood progressively develops through her frustration in interacting with people and society, until finally she comes to the realization that “[w]e say ‘yes’ to our fathers and ‘yes’ to our lives. There is nothing more profoundly negative than such an answer.”<sup>168</sup> Unlike Duomi’s bodily desire that is mapped back onto herself, sexuality in *A*

<sup>166</sup> Yi Zheng, “‘Personalized Writing’ and Its Enthusiastic Critic: Women and Writing of the Chinese ‘Post-New Era,’” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 23, no. 1 (2004), 50.

<sup>167</sup> “究其根本，陈染是一位用头脑写作而非用形体描画书写世界的作家...她只是在思考，用语言和行动在孜孜不倦又很是执拗的思考。要想在她的书中找到一些肉体的恣肆和灵魂的奔放是很难的...真正能够冲破藩篱和桎梏的是林白...女人无以寄托，没有对手，只能是自己家给自己，转向自身内部诉求...女人总是将身体撕裂了以后才能够最后冲脱出来。” Xu Kun 徐坤. “Chongchong lianmu,” 22.

<sup>168</sup> This translation is based Howard-Gibbon’s translation: “Our most profound self-denial comes when we say yes to our fathers and yes to our lives.” Chen, *A Private Life*, 14. The

*Private Life* has a more mediative meaning of achieving self-confirmation through the connection with others. When Niuniu believes she has finally found shelter in the relationship with her boyfriend, Yin Nan, and in the female bonding with her neighbor, He, her sexual experiences regarding both of whom are more symbolic than carnal. Niuniu's sexual relation with Yin Nan becomes their farewell before Yin flees the country after the Tiananmen protest, while He dies in an incident after Niuniu dreams about her body. Therefore, if Duomi's bodily experiences in the real world disappoint her of the heterosexual relationship, then the sexuality of Niuniu symbolizes her attempt to build connection with people and receive comfort that counters the harm of collectivism and patriarchy, only that the connection and comfort are suspended and create even more devastating results for her in the mental state.

Therefore, to return to the issue of fictionalized selfhoods, the way in which these two protagonists' life trajectories are portrayed in the text also paves the way for the difference in their self-images. In *A War of One's Own*, one of the most important literary symbols regarding the perception of selfhood is the mirror. The mirror is not only related to Duomi's self-gazing at her body when she claims that "[m]irrors are my favorite. With a mirror in hand, I particularly like to look at my private parts."<sup>169</sup> Images of mirrors also show up in a more figurative way in two far more surrealist scenarios in the text, where two reclusive and mythical women named Mei Ju and Zhu Liang appear, both of whom serve as enlightening mentors for Duomi. These two women characters both live in enclosed rooms full of mirrors,

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original Chinese text is “我们对父亲说‘是’，我们对生活说‘是’，再也没有比这个回答更为深刻的否定。” Chen, “Siren,” 10.

<sup>169</sup> “最喜欢镜子，一镜在握，专看隐秘的地方。” Lin, “Yigeren,” 6

which endow them with the magical power of summoning memories, telling prophecies, and blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction, the past and the present. In other words, in meeting these two allegorical women, and more significantly, their allegorical mirrors, the symbolic meaning of Duomi's mythical encounter echoes what is mentioned above as the division of the narrator into two persons, "I" and "she." The selfhood generated and fictionalized by the protagonist herself is a twofold selfhood bearing mirror images, "I" and "she," oscillating between and blurring the present and the past, the real and the imagined. Moreover, functioning as a mediator that not only "opens up potentially beyond its surface" but also "has a kind of come-back effect on the place that I occupy,"<sup>170</sup> the literary image of the mirror enables not only the fictionalization of the self-image but also the return of this self-image to her own gazing, in which the selfhood fundamentally becomes self-directed and distorted. When mirrors infinitely open up the possibility of one's own fictionalization of selfhood, they only belong to the subject herself and thus, reject the intruding of other discourses, especially patriarchy. Therefore, Lin Bai writes, "A war of one's own means a woman married to herself," and "[a]ny woman married to herself...is like a double-headed monster."<sup>171</sup>

If, in *A War of One's Own*, the protagonist's fictionalized selfhood unfolds as self-gaze and self-reflection in her mirroring images, then in *A Private Life*, what is revealed in Ni Niuniu's selfhood is rather a cancellation. While Niuniu's naming of her arms and legs as

<sup>170</sup> Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," in *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 332

<sup>171</sup> "任何一个自己嫁给自己的女人...就像一匹双头的怪兽。" Lin, "Yigeren," 4.



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“Miss Don’t” (不小姐) and “Miss Do” (是小姐) at an early age reveals her establishing certain relationships with herself,<sup>172</sup> it manifests the more radical development of her cognition at the end of the story, where she renames herself “Lady Zero” (零女士).<sup>173</sup> After being shot by a bullet when passing by the Tiananmen protests, as well as the forced departure and sudden deaths of all her loved ones, Niuniu is finally diagnosed and treated as a patient with a mental disorder. All these traumas and cruelties, whether originating at the personal level, the level of the party-state and patriarchy, or more philosophically, from the state of living in the irrational and absurd, all lead to Niuniu’s violent rejection of all social values and rules and thus any possible form of socialization. Such a way of denying socialization through the cancellation of the self is not only political and gendered in the sense that it refuses any engagement, but also philosophical and linguistic. In a certain period, Niuniu develops a habit of ceaseless writing that breaks the syntagmatic logic of words: “What’s your name? My name’s Ni; I look like I’m one person, but actually I’m several. Familiar place. One foot running off in different directions. An ear in a flower garden listening, a knocking sound. My one true love. Psychosomatic amnesia. Everywhere...”<sup>174</sup>

However, Ni Niuniu’s cancellation of the self does not signify an elimination of the self, just as naming herself as “Zero” does not signify an absence of numbers, but rather a number that is impossible to multiply. Since the life trajectory of Niuniu emerges more from her conflict with the world, the gesture of claiming “I have disappeared” functions as a radical

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<sup>172</sup> In the text, Ni Niuniu says that she believes her arms represent her mind, and her legs represent her body. Chen, *A Private Life*, 8.

<sup>173</sup> Chen, “Siren,” 68.

<sup>174</sup> Chen, *A Private Life*, 188.

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tactic of cutting off her relationship with the world, which means a suspension of her social identity and institutional imprint.<sup>175</sup> Therefore, what parallels this self-cancellation is the intensification of her personal reality and the fictional self, which are generated through memories, imagination, and the fragmentation of time and are much more genuine and concrete for her even though they take a fictionalized form.

Such a state of cancellation of selfhood resonates with Jameson's analysis of the term "schizophrenia," which denotes a postmodern experience of "isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence."<sup>176</sup> A schizophrenic person, as is pointed out by Jameson, "is not only 'no one' in the sense of having no personal identity" but also someone who "does nothing, since to have a project means to be able to commit oneself to a certain continuity over time."<sup>177</sup> To address the importance of the Chinese context in seeing the "schizophrenia" in Chen Ran's writing, if what is implied by Jameson in raising this concept is one of the evident effects of Western postmodernism and the development of the consumer society, which lead to "the disappearance of a sense of history,"<sup>178</sup> then the "schizophrenia" of Ni Niuniu's character is rather the destruction of the previously solid value system of a female intellectual in the post-socialist Chinese cultural background. The early 1990s was, after all, a period in which the aftermath of the 1989 protests and intellectuals' doubts about China's social system had yet to recede, as well as when the post-socialist Chinese market economy boosted the

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<sup>175</sup> Chen, *A Private Life*, 191.

<sup>176</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 119.

<sup>177</sup> Jameson, "Postmodernism," 119-20.

<sup>178</sup> Jameson, "Postmodernism," 125.

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development of the increasingly modernized metropolis. A city in which “[e]ndless rounds of information keep bursting like shells all around you” and “row upon row of new buildings crowd together cheek by jowl” not only elicits new understandings of urban space but also induces the psychological effect of shock and fear. In the case of Ni Niuniu, her conflict with and estrangement from the external world is reinforced by the urban space in which she dwells.<sup>179</sup>

Therefore, the generation of personal reality in both *A War of One's Own* and *A Private Life* constructs not only an alternative selfhood that devolves into either double images or self-cancellation. Being solitary, self-oriented, and deprived of sense of belonging, the mental states of the two protagonists correspond with the endings of both stories, in which Niuniu and Duomi return to the space of home. At the end of her story, Ni Niuniu finally finds security in the space of her bathtub after she is diagnosed by the hospital as having agoraphobia and a mental disorder. In a similar way, Duomi, at the end of her narratives, seeks a reclusive life by marrying an old man and entering the family space.

The protagonists' returning to the private and domestic space is indicative in two dimensions. On one hand, these actions are hardly the recognition of women's gender role or their self-transformation into the “person inside the domestic space,”<sup>180</sup> but more as a continuation of their rejection of the social norm. While Ni Niuniu's choice of staying alone in the bathtub seems to be one of the symptoms of her “mental disorder,” Lin Duomi's marrying an elderly man, as a refusal of the eugenic function of marriage and family, incurs

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<sup>179</sup> Chen, *A Private Life*, 209.

<sup>180</sup> Hu, “Nüxing xiezuo,” 35.

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the rumors and sneers of her acquaintances. These seemingly absurd actions nevertheless reveal their self-consciousness and lucidity, which also bring about the protagonists' solitary states, both internally and as a way of living, where one is not understood or accepted by the social mainstream. These actions, named by Duomi/Lin Bai in the text as "escapism," are less forced reactions than "a willful, self-imposed exile...to part from the all-penetrating patriarchal hegemony,"<sup>181</sup> a self-chosen and self-conscious gesture of turning away and refusing reconciliation with the established order, which makes constant effort to put the deviant back on the "correct" trajectory.<sup>182</sup>

On the other hand, the endings of these two novels also induce a question: is it necessary, or more importantly, destined for women to build self-closure in order to retain her individuality? While Duomi's and Niuniu's "escapism" aims to be a radical refusal of being institutionalized, the radicality of self-closure and returning to the private space will be dissolved when placed in the social system. Because, ironically, the domestic space, where they close themselves from patriarchy, is exactly where patriarchy expect them to return to as women. Thus, just as Ni Niuniu still ponders whether she should leave her private space and enter the outside world when she is in the state of self-closure,<sup>183</sup> the significance of these two texts lies more in their presenting a self-disclosure of women's dilemma. Even though what is written by Lin and Chen can hardly escape gender prejudice, especially when being labelled as works of "women's literature," the act of their literary writing itself is, after all, an effort of speaking out what is seen as taboos and seeking possibilities.

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<sup>181</sup> Zheng, "Personalized Writing," 51.

<sup>182</sup> Lin, "Yigeren," 79.

<sup>183</sup> Chen, "Siren," 80.

### Self-Closure through Self-Disclosure

In Lin Bai's and Chen Ran's two novels, the two female protagonists both construct and return to their enclosed selfhood for their personal reality to exist, their alternative self to reside, and their fictionalized and gendered personal history to develop. However, to return to the idea of "the historicity of text," all texts, including literary ones, bear cultural and social significations. Though adopting a narrow perspective and concentrating largely on the "private life" of individual characters instead of the grand sociohistorical realm, it is nevertheless impossible to isolate *A Private Life* and *A War of One's Own* from social and historical meanings, since it is through the rejection of socialization that they gain their literary and social specificity.

Given the importance placed on discovering the use of language, narrative, and fictionalization in the creation of these two texts, the significance of *A War of One's Own* and *A Private Life* writing lies not only in narrating a gendered personal history but also in the act of literary writing. While Duomi is used to locking herself in her room to start to write in half nudity, Niuniu reveals that scribbling is a habit of hers and that "[i]t doesn't matter whether these fragments are diary entries or letters that will never be sent or that have no address; they are a record of my musings, a product of the confrontation between my inner consciousness and the outside world. They are the breath of my life."<sup>184</sup> Therefore, for Duomi and Niuniu, it is in such an act of displaying one's solitariness, idiosyncrasies, and struggle with oneself

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<sup>184</sup> Chen, *A Private Life*, 5.

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and the external world through individual narratives and literary self-disclosure that a meaningful and expressive self-closure is established. For the writers Lin Bai and Chen Ran, on the other hand, their action of writing creates similar tensions and dynamics with the cultural context in which they find themselves. Just as Lin Bai uses satire in the text when her narrator says that “it is said that this [the narration of the novel] is typical women’s writing, with shifting viewpoints and flow of the mind,”<sup>185</sup> to compose alternative characters like Duomi and Niuniu signifies not only legitimizing the motif of “the personal” but also the initiative of self-naming. The authors’ creation of these two female protagonists, who are solitary, self-conscious, and unwillingly to converge with the collectivity, is, in itself, a contradiction to the seemingly all-inclusive yet politically and economically oriented category of “women’s literature” constructed in 1990s literary criticism. As individual writers, Lin and Chen lack the power to resist the naming of their works by social and marketing mechanisms, yet the meaning of their writing lies exactly in speaking out such gendered powerlessness and discovering what is overshadowed, left out, and marginalized by the mainstream discourse.

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<sup>185</sup> “据说这是典型的女性写作，视点散漫，随遇而安...” Lin, “Yigeren,” 52.

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## Conclusion

In *A Private Life*, Ni Niuniu confesses in one of her many soliloquies that “the pleasure of blending in a collectivity is forever something in which I am deficient.”<sup>186</sup> Portraying characters that tend to turn away from the crowd and abandon their public identities, both Lin Bai’s and Chen Ran’s idiosyncratic writing is the expression and verification of the compositional idea that “at the level of humanity, it is exactly the sort of public person that is the one whose individuality is repressed, and therefore, who is deficient, incomplete, and limited.”<sup>187</sup> In this regard, this thesis also explores the tension between individual discourse and public discourse. Aiming at examining the different positions between literary works by two female writers and the various social discourses that centered around these two texts, I present in this thesis a multilayered cultural studies. Sequentially, I examine the academic discourse regarding the notion of “women’s literature” in 1990s China, analyse the historical and social background that underwrite the upsurge of “women’s literature,” and finally, revisit Lin Bai and Chen Ran’s writings from my own perspective.

For *A Private Life* and *A War of One’s Own* on which I focus in this thesis, I see them as fundamentally dealing with the motif of “deficiency” and its multiple dimensions. While the female protagonists in these two texts show deficiencies such as social phobia, mental disorder, and acute self-orientation in disregard of social acceptance, they also carry with them a lucid self-awareness in statements such as, “I am a deficient person in a deficient

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<sup>186</sup> “与群体融为一体的快乐，是我永久的一种残缺。” Chen, “Siren,” 23.

<sup>187</sup> “在人性的层面，恰恰是这种公共的人才是被抑制了个人特性的人，因而她才是残缺的、不完整的、局限的。” Chen and Xiao, “Ling yishan,” 82.

era.”<sup>188</sup> In other words, whether it is Niuniu’s and Duomi’s own monologues at the textual level or Chen’s and Lin’s writing in reality, to construct such a radical narrative almost completely centered on the personal, which is destined to be deemed by the social discourse as deficient, is also a way for them to not only reflect on but also fill in the deficiencies of the cultural context in which they reside. This is why Lin Bai would argue that her job is to release the personal experiences that were once considered as taboos by the collective narratives from repressed memories,<sup>189</sup> and also why I consider Lin’s and Chen’s construction of a personalized history and a self-enclosed selfhood as their gesture of turning away from and reflecting on the ideas of sociality and collectivity.

*A Private Life* and *A War of One’s Own* never existed alone as isolated literary texts but are rooted in and intertwine with the social and cultural background of 1990s China. To examine how the texts are redefined by various social forces, I also analyse in this thesis how Lin’s and Chen’s writing were incorporated into the complex discursive field surrounding the notion and genre of “women’s literature.” If, in the novels, both Niuniu and Duomi tend to create their own logic of using personal utterance as opposed to the social discourse, then such a tension between individual narratives and collective narratives, between the alterity and the mainstream, also presents itself in the literary world’s acceptance of both authors’ works. Besides the post-socialist Chinese market with its constant effort to transform women’s writings into circulating and profitable commodities, I investigate another important social realm that participated extensively in the conversion of literature by women into a

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<sup>188</sup> “我的问题在别处—一个残缺的时代里的残缺的人。” Chen, “Siren,” 8.

<sup>189</sup> Lin, “Jiyi,” 125.



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prominent cultural phenomenon: the literary critique by Chinese scholars. In the 1990s, although topics such as women's gender and sexuality had been normalized and welcomed in mainland Chinese academia based on the efforts of domestic feminist scholars and the introduction of foreign feminist theories, it was still a developing stage for Chinese feminism and theories of gender. Moreover, based on the critical traditions established by contemporary Chinese literary and artistic mainstreams and policies, including Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art" and various cultural movements that followed, the criteria that stipulate the prioritized status of the political standard over the artistic standard, criticism over literature, and class issues over gender issues also had a large influence on literary critique of the 1990s, not only in terms of its oftentimes biased view on individual works by women like *A Private Life* but also on its invention and use of the term of "women's literature."

Therefore, I demonstrate in my analysis that while adopting this generalized concept to describe a specific genre, Chinese critics in the 1990s were also uncertain, or sometimes unaware, of the fluidity and ambiguity of its meaning, and created a common confusion between "women's literature" and its conceptual denotations, including "feminist literature," "body writing," and "private writing." I view the 1990s critics' detailed analysis regarding these three notions as group activities in creating a discursive web. Some women writers' works they focused on, such as these by Lin Bai and Chen Ran, were criticized by some critics as being resentful of men, erotic, and individualistic. Meanwhile they were praised by others as being able to gain their literary distinctiveness as women writers by concentrating

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on personal themes, interiority, and domesticity, that is, on ideas about women's gender role in the logic of patriarchy. The analyses of the denotations of "feminist literature," "body writing," and "private writing" by these critics were mapped back onto the signification of the term "women's literature," thus specifying in a limited and oftentimes negative way not only this general and ambiguous concept but also the gender of women.

Therefore, at the end of my analysis of "the separation between poetics and politics" behind the signifying process of "women's literature," I will conclude with a discussion on the anxiety about discursive power, the tension between naming and being named, which run through the entire discursive field. While it can be said that women's minority position in the hierarchical structure of patriarchy is, at least for now, an essential aspect of the gender of women, there are hardly any other essentialist features in the identities of both women and women writers. Whether the claims regarding women's belonging to the domestic realm or that regarding women writers' achievements being merely in stream-of-consciousness, fragmented language, and sentimental themes, they are all discourses that tend to condescend to offer a name and a space for women's writing in the realm of patriarchy. Therefore, the literary writings of Lin Bai and Chen Ran are ways for them to refuse being named by the social discourse and to seek their own self-naming. Their writing practices are representative of many women's striving for their own discourse when placed in the unbalanced and hierarchical social structure during the 1990s and beyond. Juxtaposed with such an individual effort is precisely the mainstream language, either in the form of literary critique or the selling strategies of the market, with its incessant mechanisms for placing the marginal

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discourse into the mainstream semantic system by endowing individual texts with a seemingly neutral name and general category, “women’s literature.”

As a result, what also emerges from the tension between naming and being named in the literary, cultural, and social phenomenon of “women’s literature” is the title of these women writers. In her article “An Author or a Female Author,” Lin Bai expresses her uncertainty and concern over choosing between these two titles for herself, which, as she mentions, is not simply a personal question for herself but has been a paradox for modern and contemporary Chinese women writers for decades.<sup>190</sup> Just as “women’s literature” is entangled with discursive power, social relations, and various gender and sexual biases, the titles “an author” and “a female author,” although seemingly justified and impartial, are also trapped in the complex web of language and context. While calling a woman writer “an author” does not show her gendered position and distinct perspective, the title of “a female author,” similar to the genre of “women’s literature,” not only results in a limited perspective for interpreting the multidimensionality of texts by women but also suggests that female authors with a gendered position are unfamiliar, abnormal, and other, that the scope of female authors is subordinate to (male) authors, and that they are therefore the second sex.

The core of this paradox of titles lies not in the selection of the more legitimate name among the two but rather in its revealing the inferior position of women in the social structure of gender. Even if a woman author tends to seek her own approaches to self-naming, the situation of lacking enough language and discursive power for her to seek or create a proper

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<sup>190</sup> Lin Bai 林白. “Zuojia haishi nüzuojia” 作家还是女作家 [An Author or A Female Author]. *Changjiang wenyi* 长江文艺 7 (1996): 7.

name for herself is already determined by her position as a gendered minority. Lacking efficient language to achieve an ideal self-naming, this dilemma also lies in the scenario where the personal narrative gets overshadowed and eliminated by the mainstream interpretation of it, just as in the 1990s Lin Bai's and Chen Ran's self-justification about the position from which they were writing as being both "about and beyond gender" was largely ignored by the critics.<sup>191</sup>

In her deconstructing the operation of language, Spivak has pointed out that "knowledge of the other subject is theoretically impossible."<sup>192</sup> The intellectual work intending to build knowledge of the Other is "complicit in the persistent constitution of the Other as the Self's shadow,"<sup>193</sup> which means "[i]t is a transformation from a first-second person performance to the constation in the third person" and "a gesture of control and an acknowledgement of limits."<sup>194</sup> Therefore, while Spivak refuses the possibility of filling the gap between Western knowledge regarding the third world subaltern and the authentic referent in her studies of postcolonialism and gender, her question "Can the subaltern speak?"<sup>195</sup> transferred into the context of 1990s China can be turned into the question "Can women speak?" and even "Can

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<sup>191</sup> For example, similar to Lin Bai's claiming that her writing emerges from the excavation of her "personal memory," Chen Ran also clarifies: "My works come from the position of my original mind (本心) and are determined by my gender position. I will not particularly write for feminism, and till now, I have been unwilling to be restricted by the concept of feminism. I believe an author is abundant and cannot be defined by any simplified isms. These isms are tools of some critics, which is something I understand, but they are basically unrelated to me." Lin, "Jiyi," 124-25. Chen and Wang, "Guanyu xiezuo," 80. These self-clarifications were hardly quoted by the literary critiques about their works during and after the 1990s.

<sup>192</sup> Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 283

<sup>193</sup> Spivak, *A Critique*, 266.

<sup>194</sup> Spivak, *A Critique*, 283.

<sup>195</sup> Spivak, *A Critique*, 284.

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individuals speak?” In other words, what is implied by the incommensurability between the widely adopted term of “women’s literature” and its referent is the difficulty for intellectual knowledge and critical discourses based on ideologies to gain “true” understanding of and effectively communicate about the narratives of a certain minority, especially a dissenting one, which, in the case of “women’s literature in 1990s China,” is the literary compositions of individual female writers as a marginalized group in gender, in politics, and in their literary focus on “the personal.”

In “An Author or a Female Author,” Lin Bai mentions Ding Ling as her predecessor who had already encountered this question of titles. In the Yan’an period, Ding says in the postscript of her “Thoughts on March 8” that “...I also feel there are some things that, if said by a leader before a big audience, would probably evoke satisfaction. But when they are written by a woman, they are more than likely to be demolished. But since I have written it, I offer it as I always intended, for the perusal of those people who have similar views.”<sup>196</sup>

This understanding regarding the marginalized position and speechless situation of not only a woman but also an individual writer without much power reappeared fifty years later in post-socialist China. Yet what brings Ding Ling, Lin Bai, Chen Ran, and many other women writers together is their desire to speak and write in spite of their position in various social hierarchies. It is thus the desire to create and maintain the separation between poetics and politics in a self-conscious way, to spectate, reflect on, and deny compromising with the loss of individuality and the limitation of deficiency resulting from the engulfing by both

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<sup>196</sup> Ding, “Thoughts,” 321.

collective narratives and masculine narratives as an outsider,<sup>197</sup> to build a self-closure through self-disclosure, that the significance of their literature arises as an expression of alterities and alternative voices.

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<sup>197</sup> Lin, "Jiyi," 125.

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