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## **Invention and Intervention: The Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature**

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Is there a female tradition in modern Chinese literature?

By asking this question, I intend to bring to critical attention a number of interesting claims put forth by women critics in post-Mao--hina, particularly the generation that came to maturity in the latter half of the 1980s. To many of them, nUxing wenxue (female literature) is more or less a *fait accompli*, something that preexists the critical effort to name it as such.<sup>1</sup> The job of a critic is thus to establish the collective identity of women writers, pinpoint their difference from male writers, rescue them from the lacunae of historical memory, and restore them to their rightful place in literary history. The whole enterprise is undertaken with a view to bringing the female tradition to light. (Something similar has also happened in the West.) For instance, critic Zhao Mei claims that women writers as a group are the first to bring about a radical break with the previous literature. "In grappling with the mysteries of existence and the nature of life and desire through the mediation of self-consciousness," says she, "women writers successfully broke down the dominant convention of broad social and political themes in fiction." Another critic, Li Ziyun, attributes a great many of the avant-garde experiments in modern literature to the initiative of women. Describing the most recent developments in Chinese literature, she boldly asserts: "We are witnessing a second upsurge in the literary output of female writers in mainland China. This is marked not only by the extraordinary number and quality of women's works but by the vanguard role some of those works have played in Chinese literature. I am referring to their disregard for existing literary conventions, their exploration of new horizons in terms of theme and experience, and their experimentation with form."<sup>3</sup>

In the meantime, the women's studies series edited by Li Xiaojiang includes a number of major historical projects devoted to recognizing a female literature that has developed over time, enjoying a homogeneous textual and Intertextual tradition and capable of legislating its own critical vocabulary. *Emerging from the Horizon of History*, coauthored by Meng Yue and Dal Jinhua, represents one of the most ambitious of such efforts.<sup>4</sup> On the basis of a rigorous analysis of women's literary texts, these authors suggest that modern literature has produced not only a good number of professional women writers but a female literature and a female literary tradition as well. They regard the May Fourth generation as the harbinger of that tradition: "Having rejected the status quo, May Fourth women writers were able to initiate their own tradition in the cracks and fissures of their culture."<sup>5</sup>

What strikes me as important here is less the truth of various claims for a female literary tradition (which women critics have no vested interest in calling into question) than the peculiar historical circumstances that seem to compel those critics to identify, legitimate, and, perhaps, invent a homogeneous tradition on behalf of women writers from the May Fourth period down to the present.<sup>6</sup> To the extent that the female tradition did not come to its own until after women scholars began to make significant interventions in literary criticism and historiography (a field heretofore dominated by men) in the second half of the 1980s, their endeavor deserves our undivided attention. Indeed, what is a literary tradition, be it major or minor, male or female, but a product of the collaborative efforts of writers and critics engaged in the specific historical issues of their own time? In undertaking this study, I will neither assume or contest the *raison d'être* of the so-called female tradition but try to understand it as an ongoing historical project that involves the agency of both women writers and women critics in post-Mao China.

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## Official Feminism and Chinese Women

The category of women, like that of class, has long been exploited by the hegemonic discourse of the state of China, one that posits the equality between men and women by depriving the latter of their difference (and not the other way around). In the emancipatory discourse of the state, which always subsumes woman under the nationalist agenda, women's liberation means little more than equal opportunity to participate in public labor.' The image of the liberated daughter and the figure of the strong female Party leader celebrated in the literature of socialist realism are invented for the purpose of abolishing the patriarchal discriminatory construction of gender, but they end up denying difference to women.<sup>8</sup> During the Cultural Revolution, political correctness consisted largely in women wearing the same dark colors as men, keeping their hair short, and using no makeup. I am not suggesting that women ought to be feminine. But the fact that the state did not require men to wear colorful clothes, grow long hair, or use makeup, which would have produced an equally iconoclastic effect, indicates that it was woman's symbolic difference that had been specifically targeted and suppressed on top of all other forms of political repression. Post-Mao Chinese women are therefore dealing with an order of reality vastly different from that which feminists in the West face within their own patriarchal society, where the female gender is exploited more on the grounds of her difference than the lack thereof. Being named as the "other" and marginalized, feminists in the West can speak more or less from a politically enabling position against the centered capitalist ideology. By contrast, contemporary Chinese women find their political identity so completely inscribed within official discourse on gender and institutionalized by Fulian (the All-China Women's Federation) that they cannot even claim feminism for themselves. As Tani E. Barlow points out, "The importance of Fulian lay in its power to subordinate and dominate all inscriptions of womanhood in official discourse. It is not that Fulian actually represented the 'interests' of women, but rather that one could not until recently be 'represented' as a woman without the agency and mediation of Fulian."<sup>9</sup>

There are currently two translations of the word "feminism" in Chinese. The old *niiquan zhuyi* denotes militant demands for women's political rights reminiscent of the earlier women's suffrage movements in China and in the West. The new term *nilxing zhuyi*, emphasizing gender difference, has been in circulation for the past decade in Taiwan and only recently in China. The former is downright negative and the latter sounds rather ambivalent. Contemporary women writers refuse to have their names associated with either term. When one scrutinizes their reluctance, one is furthermore struck by the fact that there is more at stake than the legitimacy of Western feminist discourse as applied to another culture. It appears that the very notion of *ni zuojia* (woman writer), a Chinese category, has been thrown into question by women writers like Zhang Re, Wang Anyi, and Zhang Kangkang. To them, once someone is designated (or stigmatized) as a woman writer, she is relegated to a subcategory in the mainstream (male) literature. Zhang Kangkang voices this fear in her article "We Need Two Worlds" using the analogy of the handicapped athlete to illustrate her point. In games held specially for the handicapped, many people applaud the athletes because they think that the handicapped cannot run in the first place. The same holds true for female writers, who are often classified as a subcategory separate from mainstream male authors "as if it were a universally accepted truth that only men could be writers and as if they were born writers."<sup>10</sup> Women writers sharing the concerns of Zhang Kangkang feel that they must constantly fight against the condescension of their male colleagues and their own trivialization. The apparent contradiction between their objection to the term "woman writer" on the one hand and a strong

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female consciousness informing their works on the other must be understood in this light."

To contemporary Chinese critics, it is not the term "woman writer" but "feminism" that must be kept at bay at all times. Most women scholars take care to stay away from the word even as they publish sophisticated views on the politics of gender and even though those views may very well be regarded as feminist by scholars from the West. This is what critic Yu Qing does, for example, in her theorizing of the female tradition in Chinese literature. In her view, women's marginal position need not trivialize them:

In coming to maturity, female consciousness does not seek to submerge its gender in order to arrive at some abstractly conceived and genderless human condition. It aims to enter the overall human conception of the objective world from the special angle of the female subject and to view and participate in universal human activities from the particular viewpoint of the female gender that is uniquely constructed as such. As we noted in the opening section, the female gender is formulated in societal terms. And as long as the social factors constitutive of the female gender remain, gendered consciousness and gendered literature will not go away. The so-called ultimate (transcendental) consciousness and ultimate literature, therefore, do not and will not exist.<sup>12</sup>

Like most other scholars in women's studies, Yu rejects the word "feminism" in her writing, although she has no scruples about quoting the works of Euro-American feminists in support of what she calls her "female" position.<sup>13</sup> In order to grasp this complex situation, one must take into account Chinese women's relationship with the state, official feminism, and its representative, Fulian. As I mentioned in the above, the latter takes a strong position on all gender issues, claiming to represent women and protect their rights but functioning in reality very much like other hegemonic apparatuses used by the Party, even though it is the least important of all state apparatuses.<sup>14</sup> After all, the -ism part of "feminism" seems to imply the same masculine area of power and knowledge as "Marxism" and "communism."<sup>15</sup> The women's rejection of "feminism" therefore expresses a strong desire to position themselves against the state discourse on gender and its suppression of women's difference.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, terms such as *mixing yishi* (female consciousness) and *nixing wenxue* (female literature) are deployed by critics who wish to conceptualize a female tradition that will recognize women as historical subjects rather than a subcategory under the patronage of male-centered criticism. The new crop of journals in the eighties featuring women authors or female literature, such as *Nil zuojia* (Female writer) and *Niizi wenxue* (Female literature), the establishment of the first Women's Research Center in 1985 by Li Xiaojiang and her ambitious series on women's studies mentioned above, as well as the recent debates on female consciousness and female literature sponsored by critical journals such as *Wenyi pinglun* (Art and literary criticism), *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* (Studies in contemporary writers), *Dangdai wenyi sichao* (Current trends in art and literature), and *Xiaoshuo pinglun* (Fiction studies)? all this not only attests to a heightened awareness of women as historical agents but to a significant breakaway from the totalizing discourse of official feminism.

Having invented the terms in which the debate on gender issues will be conducted, contemporary female critics proceed to reevaluate women's literature and identify a female tradition for which they claim nothing less than a vanguard role in modern Chinese literature. In so doing, they are actually reappropriating the historical category of women from state discourse for the purpose of empowering the female gender. When those critics talk about "female consciousness" and "the female literary tradition," they are not so much concerned with female identity as with female subject position, or the question of who

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determines the meaning of female experience. The question "Who am I?" which is the title of a story by a contemporary writer named Zong Pu and which frequently appears in the works of Chinese women authors, indicates a desire to unfix the meanings which the state and traditional patriarchy have inscribed on the female body.<sup>18</sup>

The three women writers that I am going to discuss below-Ding Ling, Zhang Re, and Wang Anyi-figure prominently in contemporary literary criticism as architects of the female tradition.' Ding Ling represents the legacy of the early twentieth century and is seen as prefiguring contemporary women's writing in a number of ways: the foregrounding of female subjectivity; the critique of patriarchal ideology and institutions; and, most importantly, the problematization of writing and discourse through gender experience. When her "Diary of Miss Sophia" first appeared in the February number of *The Short Story Magazine* in 1928, it was immediately perceived as a major event, as one critic recalled in 1930: "It was like a bomb exploding in the midst of a silent literary scene. Everyone was stunned by the author's extraordinary talent."<sup>20</sup> Other leading critics of the time, such as Qian Qianwu and Mao Dun, reviewed the story and called its author the first Chinese woman writer who "speaks out about the dilemmas of the liberated woman in China"<sup>21</sup> and whose understanding of the "modern girl" goes deeper than that of any of her contemporaries.<sup>22</sup> Some fifty years later, Zhang Re's story "Love Must not be Forgotten" seemed to mark another turning point in Chinese literature following Mao's death, as indicated by the controversy it provoked. The Chinese reader, accustomed as s/he was to Socialist Realism, was stunned by the subjective voice of the female narrator and the story's forbidden subject. A series of debates on lover gender, and the role of the writer began to appear in the *Guangming Daily*, in the course of which a critic named Xiao Lin wrote: "As literary workers, shouldn't we be alert to and eradicate the corruptive influence of petty bourgeois ideas and sentiments? Shouldn't we stand in a higher position, command a broader vista, and think more deeply than the author of this story does?"<sup>23</sup> In rebuttal Dai Qing, a renowned writer and critic in the post-Mao period, defended Zhang Re's story on the grounds of its moral complexity and bold expose of social problems.<sup>24</sup> She argued for the legitimacy of the author's personal vision and welcomed her departure from the dominant literary orthodoxy.<sup>25</sup> Compared with Zhang Jie, the younger writer Wang Anyi was much less controversial. But her recent output has taken the reader by surprise because of its experiment with eroticism, subjectivity, and socially transgressive themes. In the three stories known collectively as the "Three Themes on Love," she explored sexuality and female subjectivity as a means of testing the limits of reality and the boundaries of human consciousness.<sup>26</sup> "Brothers," a story published in March 1989, challenged the ideology of heterosexual love by pitting female bonding against the marital tie prescribed by the dominant culture. If Zhang Re's novel *The Ark* centered on the sisterhood among divorced women, "Brothers" dramatized the conflicting claims of marriage and the emotional attachment between women and therefore emphasized the problem of desire and choice. I hope that my own reading of these three authors will help explain some of the features that contemporary women critics in post-Mao China attribute to the female tradition.

### Gender, Writing, and Authorship

Ding Ling's "Diary of Miss Sophia" contains an interesting allegory of reading in which the narrator, Sophia, casts the young man Weidi in the role of a reader by showing him her diary. Weidi fails to grasp the import of those entries, and, believing that another man, Ling Jishi, has successfully become Sophia's lover, he complains, "You love him! ... I am not good enough for you!"<sup>27</sup> The diary cannot explain Sophia to Weidi, because he insists on reading his own gendered discourse into Sophia's diary and finds in it a stereotyped triangular situation in

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which his rival gets the better of him. His reaction to the diary is highly predictable according to conventional male-centered readings. Weidi "mis"-reads despite clear evidence that Sophia is more interested in herself than in either man. In this allegorical encounter between female discourse and its male counterpart, writing and reading come across as profoundly gendered practices.

The narrator's writing and her choice of a male reader in this story introduce gender difference into the production of text and write the female gender into the authorial position. In her involvement with Ling Jishi, the narrator takes up a similar position: writing herself as a subject rather than as an object of desire. The description of her first encounter with Ling Jishi shows a devastating reversal of male literary conventions: "I raised my eyes. I looked at his soft, red, moist, deeply inset lips, and let out my breath slightly. How could I admit to anyone that I gazed at those provocative lips like a small hungry child eyeing sweets? I know very well that in this society I'm forbidden to take what I need to gratify my desires and frustrations, even when it clearly wouldn't hurt anybody" (49).

It is the narrator's female gaze that turns the man into a sex object, reversing male discourse about desire. Not only does the narrator objectify the man's "lips" as if they were pieces of candy, but she ignores the phallus and feminizes male sexuality by associating it with lips (labia). She is empowered by writing that gives full play to her subversive desires and constitutes her as a subject. If the first scene mentioned helps establish gender difference in discourse, the reversed subject/object relation pinpoints the power struggle implied in the rewriting of gender.

Zhang he's "Love Must Not Be Forgotten" also foregrounds the relation of writing, gender, and authorship. Unlike Ding Ling's story, however, this narrative takes place between the narrator, Shanshan, and her late mother, Zhong Yu, whose writing and ghostly memory she strives to decipher; that is to say, instead of writing a diary herself, the daughter tries to interpret the incoherent words contained in a diary-like notebook the mother has left behind. The self-reflexive technique of taking a phrase from the mother's notebook and using it for the title of the story calls attention to the textuality of her narrative, so that the latter comes across as a writing about writing, reading, and critical interpretation. Read in this light, the expression "love must not be forgotten" becomes ambiguous, for in the context of the notebook it sums up the extraordinary love the mother feels for another married man. But when the same appears in the title of the daughter's narrative, it sounds curiously like a warning that the tragic lesson must be remembered so that it will not be repeated by herself and others. Through writing, the daughter conducts a dialogue with the mother about desire and suffering: "At first I had thought that it contained only notes for future writing, because it didn't read like a novel, or like reading notes. Nor did it seem like letters or a diary. Only when I read it through from beginning to end did her cryptic comments join with my own scattered memories to suggest the vague outlines of something. After a great deal of reflection, it finally dawned on me that what I held in my hands was not lifeless, antiseptic writing; it was the searing expression of a heart afflicted with grief and love."<sup>28</sup>

The mother's love affair that the narrator reconstructs from the notebook also has much to do with literature and writing. A novelist herself, the mother has a lifelong fondness for Chekhov. "Is she in love with Chekhov?" The daughter recalls the mother's extraordinary obsession with Chekhov's stories. "If Chekhov had been alive, such a thing might actually have happened" (109). As the narrator infers, part of the obsession comes from the fact that one of the two sets of Chekhov that the mother owns is a gift from her lover, a gift which, shortly before her death, she asks to have cremated with her. But judging from her mother's almost religious devotion to romantic love, the narrator is not far wrong in suggesting that the mother is infatuated with Chekhov, for romantic love is the legacy of the literary tradition that Chekhov represents, a tradition that idealizes love and emphasizes internal

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drama and moral conflict. As if to reinforce her point, the narrator also situates the love tragedy in the intertextuality of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: "Juliet compared her love to riches when she said: 'I cannot sum up half of my sum of wealth.' I suppose Mother couldn't have summed up half of her wealth, either" (116).

The literariness of the mother's love finds embodiment in one of her own novels in which she casts herself as a romantic heroine and her lover as a hero. Interestingly enough, her lover is a devoted reader of her novels. Literature and criticism thus become the field across which they indirectly "talk love" (*tan lian'ai*) to each other. During one of their rare encounters to which the young narrator is a witness, the man says: "I've read your latest novel. Frankly, it's not quite right in some places. I don't think you should be so hard on the heroine ... you see, loving someone is not wrong in itself, and she hasn't really hurt anyone else. The hero might also have been in love. But for the sake of another person's happiness, they find that they must give up their love" (112).

Submitting to the lover's discourse on self-sacrifice, the mother can only use her notebook as his substitute and pour into it her yearning and unfulfilled desire until the moment of her death.

The story would not be so interesting if it were simply the love story some critics have suggested it is.<sup>29</sup> It turns out that the insistent presence of the first-person narrator blurs the transparency of its language and problematizes the discourse on romantic tragedy. After all, the mother's story is told because the daughter herself faces the dilemma of deciding whether or not she should marry her friend Qiao Lin, whom she thinks is handsome but intellectually inadequate. She recalls her mother's advice: "Shanshan, if you can't decide what you want in a man, I think staying single is much better than marrying foolishly" (105). Behind that advice, of course, lies the wreckage of the mother's life: her own marriage has been a failure, and she ends up in love with a man with whom she cannot even shake hands. The daughter refuses to repeat the mother's marriage, but that is not all. She goes further and questions the latter's romantic approach to love: "I weep every time I see that notebook with 'Love must not be forgotten' written across its front. I weep bitterly again and again, as if I were the one who had suffered through that tragic love. The whole thing was either a great tragedy or a massive joke. Beautiful or poignant as it may have been, I have no intention of reenacting it!" (121, *emphasis mine*).

The daughter's final choice is that of rebellion-rebellion against the discourse of a literary tradition (*Chekhov* and *Romeo and Juliet*) to which her mother has subscribed as novelist, heroine, and woman. By reconstructing the mother's life in writing, the narrator is able to rewrite the story of a woman's destiny so that independence rather than romantic attachment to a man will become her priority. When she declares toward the end that "living alone is not such a terrible thing" (122), her writing goes beyond the mother's wisdom and overcomes the tragic/romantic discourse for which the latter has paid with her life. By asserting her difference and exercising independent authorship, the narrator achieves autonomy.

Insofar as the female subject is concerned, writing is always a matter of rewriting (the male text) and gaining authorial control. The same is true of Wang Anyi's story, "Love in the Valley of Splendor," although, unlike the foregoing stories, it is told-playfully-in the third-person. I say "playfully" because the narrator's subjectivity demands our attention, making us aware that she is making up a story about a young heroine whose life coincides exactly with hers in time and space. The story begins: "I want to tell a story, a story about a woman. The breeze of the early autumn feels so cool and clean, and the sunlight looks so transparent. All this fills my heart with tranquility; and in tranquility I imagine my story. As I think it over, it seems the story also takes place after an autumnal shower."<sup>30</sup> The narrator intervenes again and again to remind us of the fictionality of her work. For example, when the heroine stands in front of the office window looking out at a narrow lane, the narrator

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cuts in: "So I stand facing the narrow lane and continue to imagine my story" (7). The emphasis on fictionality might be interpreted as the author's reaction to the widely held view within official criticism that fiction mirrors life itself. But this is not simply a case of modernistic subversion of realist conventions. The situation is greatly complicated by the narrator's gender. The recurrent imagery of the fallen leaves and the window, which provides the setting both for the fictional world and for the extradiegetic world of writing, pinpoints the female identity that the narrator shares with her heroine. Her closeness to the heroine in identity, gender and otherwise, is accentuated when she concludes the story thus:

She felt that nothing had really happened. It was true and absolutely true that nothing whatsoever had happened in actuality, except that the parasol outside the window had shed all of its leaves. And it's time that my story about a story that has never taken place came to a close. (43)

In echoing the view that nothing has transpired in this story, the narrator more than coincides with the heroine. The truth is that the heroine exists as an extension of the narrator, who brings an alternative self into being through writing and imagination. Within the story proper, the heroine also tries to break out of the status quo by creating an alternative self during her trip to the Valley of Splendor in Lu Shan. This intricate relationship between the narrator, the heroine, and the latter's reconstructed self results in sophisticated writing\*about female subjectivity. If the narrator focalizes exclusively on the heroine's point of view, the fixed focalization does not mean the total effacement of the narrator behind the character, as it normally does. The narrator does more here, for she claims that she knows more than the character: "I follow her on her way out.... She felt tranquil in her heart at the moment. But something was going to happen to her. Yes, something was about to happen. I am the only one to know" (5). Of course, she is not an omniscient narrator in an ordinary sense, either. The authorial control derives solely from a sense of identification. The narrator knows what is going to happen to her heroine because the heroine is her written self. In short, she wills her story and her protagonist into being. "Love in the Valley of Splendor" stands out from the rest of Wang Anyi's "Themes on Love," which focus on the human libido and its ubiquitous power. This story is not so much about indomitable sexual drive as about a woman's quest for self through the rewriting of the traditional story of adultery. The heroine yearns to break out of the old identity that her marriage has fixed upon her and to reconstruct a new self. When a total stranger, one who is about to become her lover, approaches her for the first time in Lu Shan, she takes him for granted: "He arrived as she had expected and she was not in the least surprised by it" (17). The language is highly reminiscent of the omniscient voice that the narrator has used earlier, when she knew what was going to happen to her alternative self. The heroine anticipates her own story and takes authorial control over the situation. Her self-awareness and intelligence distinguish her from Flaubert's Emma Bovary and enable her to revise the old adultery plot: "She liked this new self, the self as presented to his [the lover's] eyes. Her old self was so stale that she loathed it and wanted to cast it away. As a brand new, unfamiliar self, she was able to experience many brand new and unfamiliar feelings; or maybe the reverse was true: her brand new and unfamiliar feelings enabled her to discover and create a brand new, unfamiliar self. She was pleased to discover the boundless imaginative and creative powers this new self was capable of" (23).

Echoing Madame Bovary (one of Wang's favorite novels) in an oblique way, the story rewrites the nineteenth-century French novel by situating the heroine in an authorial position. If Emma Bovary is a reader par excellence and deceives herself in terms of patriarchal discourse, our heroine and her creator, the narrator, reject the role of a reader and engage in imaginatively reconstructing their female selfhood as "authors."

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## Constructing Female Subjectivity

Female subjectivity has occupied the center stage of women's literature since Ding Ling, although the latter eventually decided to circumvent the issue when her interest shifted from gender to class and she relegated the former to a secondary and contingent 'priority'.<sup>3</sup> Her first published story, "Meng Ke," contains a scene in which the young heroine presents herself before a film director, hoping to be hired: "She had to submit herself to a most unpleasant request: she raised her hands in silence and held back the short hair that covered her forehead and the sides, exposing her rounded forehead and delicate ears to the scrutinizing eyes of the man. She felt horrible and nearly broke down in tears. But the man was apparently pleased with what he saw. +32

The revolt against such objectivization of the female body leads to the author's next work, "The Diary of Miss Sophia," which displays female subjectivity with a vengeance. The first entry of the diary records an interesting mirror scene: "Glancing from one side you've got a face a foot long; tilt your head slightly to the side and suddenly it gets so flat you startle yourself.... It all infuriates me."<sup>33</sup> Examining her own image in the mirror seems to indicate narcissism. If so, the reflexive act of diary writing can also be seen as a mirroring of the self, for Sophia is at once the writer, the subject, and the reader of her text. In this story, both the mirror and the diary come to us as powerful metaphors for Sophia's discourse about female selfhood. Ironically, the mirror's distortion of her image, which irritates her so much, seems to foreshadow the inadequacy of narcissism just as the diary fails to resolve the enigma of selfhood. Sophia's attitude toward writing and self reflects the female dilemma of wanting to reject male-centered discourse about gender and yet finding no alternative fully satisfying within a largely male-centered language. The text, therefore, is filled with contradictory expressions of self-love and self-loathing.

To the narrator endeavoring to rewrite herself into a different text, a text which will no longer portray her as someone's daughter, sister, lover, or friend but as an autonomous subject, the task is difficult. She has no idea of what the so-called subject is, for the "I" as an autonomous female subject has hardly existed in traditional Chinese discourse. Sophia asks herself repeatedly, "Can I tell what I really want?" (51) and tries to understand what she calls her "pitiful, ludicrous self" (79). Self-interrogation, ambivalence, and uncertainty fill the pages of the diary as the narrator struggles to "evolve an intelligible and authentic image of the self."<sup>34</sup> But that comforting image is nowhere to be found in this much-convoluted writing of the self by the self. Her pains, desires, narcissism, perversity, and self-criticism form part of a work that struggles with itself and finds no solutions.

It is hardly surprising that half a century later Zhang Jie's novel *The Ark* again faced the question of female subjectivity. As it happens, the story also contains a mirror scene in which Liang Qian examines herself in a way that reminds us of Sophia:

Liang Qian stood up from her chair and saw herself reflected on the surface of the glass insulation in the studio. She was pale and shrunken, her hair disheveled. Weak and tired as she was, her eyes and brows wore a fierce look as if determined to quarrel with somebody and fight with him to death....

She had barely reached forty and yet she already had the look of an elderly woman." Facing herself, Liang faces a confused desire that renders her nonidentical with herself. She envies the twenty-one-year-old violinist in her crew, who is youthful-looking, with beautiful hair, bright eyes (for she seldom cries), and a wrinkle-free forehead (for she seldom uses her brains). She is torn by the conflicting desire to be a woman and a professional. She feels inadequate as a mother and yet cannot imagine living without a career. Her dilemma and her insecurity are shared by two other women living in the same apartment, which is jokingly referred to by the narrator as "the Widows' Club." Unlike Sophia, who is

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younger, these women must face the consequences of their divorce and separation as well as problems brought on by age and illness. Liu Quan is harassed by her boss at work and stigmatized by her colleagues; Cao Jinghua suffers from a spinal affliction that will probably lead to paralysis, and at work she is persecuted for publishing her political views. Liang Qian, a film director, is the only one who is not legally divorced from her husband, Bai Fushan (on the pretext of protecting her name, he has agreed to a separation but continues to utilize the prestige of Liang's family). He exploits and harasses her and schemes to prevent the release of her movie.

Focusing on the common plight of the three women, the narrator projects female subjectivity as a form of collective female consciousness, a consciousness that the symbolism of the title suggests. The ark is inspired by both Chinese and Western cultural traditions, for the word *fang zhou* (The ark) comes originally from the History of the Latter Han and only acquires its later biblical meaning via translation.<sup>36</sup> As critics have suggested,<sup>37</sup> the biblical symbolism of the ark implies the regeneration of mankind and the vision of an alternative world that would eventually replace the world these women inhabit, one in which "you are particularly unfortunate because you were born a woman."<sup>38</sup> The allusion to the History of the Latter Han, on the other hand, emphasizes the dynamic spirit of the women who defy tradition and brave hardships in their voyage to freedom. In fact, the symbolism is already prefigured in Zhang Re's earlier story "Zumu lii" (Emerald), in which the metaphor of the sailboat conveys the triumph and the cost of being a self-reliant woman and contrasts with the comfortable but unreliable steamboat that symbolizes married life. If the ark projects a hope, a new world evoked by its Western etymology, it also provides the means (in the Chinese context) through which the new world can be reached. In short, it is a collective female consciousness that looks toward the future but is determined to wage its struggle here and now.

In view of the women's desire to protect their dignity as female subjects, it is not difficult to see why a sense of personal space and the fear of invasion figure so strongly in their response to the outside world. The apartment in which the women live is an embodiment of the ark of female consciousness that shelters them from a hostile world, but even here they are frequently threatened by invasions from Bai Fushan and inquisitive neighbors. On one occasion, Bai pokes his head into Liu Quan's bedroom before she can grab a blanket to cover herself up. He visits without the slightest consideration for their convenience. The following is one of his surprise visits: "On an early morning like this, Liu Quan and Jinghua had just woken up from their nightmares. But before they could recover from the effects of their bad dreams, Bai intruded on them in such a rude manner and destroyed their mood. His invasion completely ruined their plans for a peaceful Sunday" (9). Bai thinks that his wife is hiding somewhere and insists on entering but meets with firm resistance from Jinghua, who shuts the door on his face. Shortly after his departure there comes another knock at the door. The visitor turns out to be the head of the neighborhood committee, Jia Zhuren, who takes it upon herself to spy on them, assuming that divorced women always try to seduce men. Overhearing Bai's knocking in the early morning, she has come to check things out. Again Jinghua guards the door and refuses to let her in:

"Has our cat by any chance gotten into your apartment?"

"No," Jinghua said clearly and firmly, "what's your cat got to do in our apartment?"

"Oh! Don't you know, Comrade Cao, that your tabby cat has turned on all six tomlcats in our compound? Ha, Ha!" Jia giggled obscenely. Jinghua laughed aloud: "Ha, ha, ha! I'm proud of my cat. She is fortunate enough to have so many admirers." (17-18)

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The animal allegory used by the chairwoman exhibits the insidious language in which people in this society relate to sex and think about single women; it reduces woman to no more than a signifier of sexuality. Although Jia is herself a woman, the fact that she is the head of the neighborhood committee, which holds itself accountable to the All-China Women's Federation, and spies for the authorities pinpoints her as an upholder of the patriarchal order. Her invasion of the private world of the women, therefore, is a political conspiracy designed to deprive them of their dignity. But the fact that neither she nor Bai succeeds in getting into the apartment that morning implies that it is possible for the women to guard their subjectivity and dignity, provided that they have a room of their own and the support of a collective female consciousness.

In "Emerald," an earlier story by Zhang Be, the protagonist Zeng Ling'er becomes a female subject not through identifying with other women but through enduring intense isolation and overcoming her romantic love. As a young girl, she was ready to sacrifice everything for the love of a man named Zuo Wei. During the Cultural Revolution she saved him several times, even confessing to his political "crimes." She was banished to the countryside, where she gave birth to his illegitimate child and suffered horrible humiliation and ostracism. In the meantime, Zuo Wei married another woman. However, the years of hardship and bereavement Zeng had to endure—her son drowns in a river—have not been able to defeat her. Instead, she is transformed from a romantic young girl into the independent, resilient, and strong-willed woman that the title of the story, her birthstone, symbolizes. Transferred back to the institute where her ex-lover works, she discovers that she is no longer in love with him: "At this moment Zeng Ling'er felt that she had scaled another peak in her life. Yes, she would cooperate with Zuo Wei in his work, but this time neither out of love nor hate, nor any sense of pity for him. She simply wanted to make her contribution to society."

If self-reliance and collective female consciousness are the responses that "Emerald" and *The Ark* make to the problematic of the female subject as first posed in Ding Ling's story, Wang Anyi takes a different approach in "Love in the Valley of Splendor." Since the story also contains a mirror scene, it is worthwhile to compare it with those from the stories discussed above:

She got back to her hotel room and shut herself up in the bathroom for a long time. She didn't know how long it was that she stood in front of the looking-glass, gazing at her own image. The image in the mirror was like another self gazing back at her as if that self had a lot to tell her but had decided to say nothing, because they were able to understand each other quite well without words. She turned her face a little to one side and studied its angles unconsciously. But all of a sudden, she felt alienated from the self in the mirror as if it had become a total stranger. She wanted to recapture the self, reexamine it, and be in touch with it again. But the self remained a blurred image and became so unfamiliar, so remote and yet also strangely familiar.<sup>40</sup>

The mirror scenes in "the Diary of Miss Sophia" and *The Ark* express a strong discontent with the self, as the women struggle with conflicting ideas about womanhood and subjectivity. In the passage above, however, the female subject appears not so much contradictory as indeterminate and elusive—something the heroine tries hard to grasp. Lu Shan, where the mirror scene occurs and which, moreover, alludes to the classical motif of revelation in Chinese poetry, serves here as a metaphoric locus for the heroine's pursuit of self. The mountain, its face shrouded in clouds, symbolizes the unfathomable depths of self, which dissolves, transforms, and consolidates along with the mist, fog, and white clouds.<sup>41</sup> This is a world of imagination, dream, and fantasy in which the self becomes

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fluid and capable of change and reconstruction. The heroine delights in the miraculous transformation of herself into someone whom she no longer recognizes: "That image was beautiful, so beautiful that she felt it utterly unfamiliar. For her own sake and for his [the lover's], she resolved to cherish the new self dearly. To damage it was to disappoint herself, him, his gaze, and his feelings" (21). Her sense of self is so positive that the male gaze is not perceived as a threat to her subjectivity, as in Ding Ling's earlier stories. Instead, the gaze, which is mutual, reinforces her desire to bring about a new sense of self and to "regain the gender she has lost" in marriage (27). Like subjectivity, gender is presented as something to be acquired and constructed through constant negotiation with other beings rather than as a fixed category of identity. The protagonist's marriage, which has fixed a sexual identity on her, only succeeds in alienating her from a fluid sense of gender, whereas her relative autonomy at the present moment enables her to rediscover it in relation to another man. She is proud of being different from man and of being reminded of the fact by the male gaze, for that difference is central to her self-consciousness as a woman. What's more important, it turns out that her love affair is more fiction than reality, in which the true object of desire is the heroine herself: "Her love for the self that grew out of her intimate relation with him surpassed by far her love for the man himself, although she did not fully realize it at the moment. She thought that she was in love with him and felt sad at the thought of departure. Many years were to go past before the truth would gradually dawn on her" (31).

Like Ding Ling and Zhang Re, Wang Anyi situates female subjectivity in a process that challenges the received idea of womanhood. But in subverting patriarchal discourse, she also tries to involve the male gender in the constructive process, a fact that opens up the writing of gender to a wide range of possibilities—to gender relations that are not predicated on the desires of either man or woman alone but on the reworking of the subjectivity of male and female each in its own terms and in terms of each other.

### Love, Marriage, and Female Bonding

Love and marriage have been almost synonymous with the female character in literature, but the responses of twentieth-century women authors to those perennial themes have shown significant departures from previous literary traditions. Their works tend to focus on the conflict between marriage and self-fulfillment and that between love and independence. Romantic love and marriage are often rejected as a result of woman's quest for selfhood, which explains why the majority of female protagonists we discuss here are single, divorced, or have troubled marriages.<sup>41</sup> In "The Diary of Miss Sophia," the narrator falls in love with the handsome Ling Jishi. But it is no ordinary case of romantic love. The equilibrium of the subject and object of desire proves fundamental in maintaining the relationship. In other words, the narrator's aggressive pursuit of Ling is also underscored by her secret fear that she will be reduced to becoming the object of his desire. So when Ling comes into her room to express his desire, Sophia recoils in fear and disgust: "The lust in his eyes scared me. I felt my self-respect revive finally as I listened to the disgusting pledges sworn out of the depths of Ling Jishi's depravity."<sup>43</sup> She revolts at the idea of becoming the object of the male gaze. As a result, her own desire is doomed by the need to overcome her lover's desire. This is how she describes their kiss: "That disgusting creature Ling Jishi kissed me! I endured it in silence! But what did my heart feel when the lips so warm and tender brushed my face? I couldn't allow myself to be like other women who faint into their lovers' arms! I screwed open my eyes wide and looked straight in his face. 'I've won!' I thought, 'I've won!' Because when he kissed me, I finally knew the taste of the thing that had so bewitched me. At the same moment I despised myself" (80-81).

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This is a revelation of the power relationship in sexual intimacy as perceived by a woman who writes, directs, plays, and observes the dangerous drama of sexual liaison. The usurpation of power by the male at the climactic moment seems to deny the possibility of heterosexual love in the patriarchal order without power struggle. Sophia wins the battle but loses a lover.

Another important reason for Sophia's revolt against Ling is his language, as the latter takes it upon himself to teach her how to be a woman while reserving the role of male superiority for himself. "Our most recent conversations have taught me a lot more about his really stupid ideas. All he wants is money. Money. A young wife to entertain his business associates in the living room, and several fat, fair-skinned, well-dressed little sons. What does love mean to him? Nothing more than spending money in a brothel, squandering it on a moment of pleasure" (65). Ling's dream of marriage, family, financial success, and even extramarital love is perceived as a typically male-centered capitalist dream. Sophia's lucid perception of the link between the capitalist system and patriarchal culture shows the firm ideological grounding of her attitude." She refuses to be written back into patriarchal discourse either as a wife or as an extramarital lover (she later learns that Ling Jishi has a wife in Singapore). She suffers from the thought that she has offered herself to him for his amusement like a prostitute (66). These traditional female roles alienate Sophia from the map she adores. The lovers' encounter becomes a contest between two radically different ideologies that ends in the estrangement of the lovers and in Sophia's despair.

By contrast, Sophia's emotional attachment to another woman, Yunjie, does not require such antagonism. Her memory of Yunjie is always pleasant. Recalling their final moments together, she writes:

What a life I was living last year at this time! To trick Yunjie into babying me unreservedly, I'd pretend to be sick and refuse to get out of bed. I'd sit and whimper about the most trivial dissatisfactions to work on her tearful anxiety and get her to fondle me.... It hurts even more to think about the nights I spent lying on the grass in French Park listening to Yunjie sing a song from Peony Pavilion. If she hadn't been tricked by God into loving that pale-faced man, she would never have died so fast and I wouldn't have wandered into Beijing alone, trying, sick as I was, to fend for myself, friendless and without family. (70)

The allusion to Peony Pavilion is important for undercutting fictions of romantic love.<sup>45</sup> In the light of her death after her husband's abuse of her, Yunjie's singing of love seems particularly ironical. Sophia's account of her life inserts what a traditional male-oriented text would leave out, that is, what would happen after the "euphoric closure" of united lovers. By evoking Peony Pavilion, Sophia in effect accuses traditional literature of enticing young people into romantic relations. Ding Ling's treatment of women's emotional bonding in this and other stories, such as "Summer Vacation," does not, however, envision female bonding as a positive alternative to romantic love and marriage. With the arrival of contemporary writers like Zhang Re and Wang Anyi, female bonding becomes a matter of choice just as important as subjectivity itself.

The Ark ends with Liang Qian proposing, "Let's drink a toast to women," at which the women pledge a sisterly bond. Each of them is disappointed in her (ex-)husband and lacks faith in a male-dominated society. Cao Jinghua was divorced by her husband because she did not share his dream of raising a family and, without his permission, she went through an abortion. Liu Quan's stingy husband exploited her sexually as if he had paid for her in cash. She dreaded each night, but he always attacked her in the same manner: "You call yourself my wife, don't you?"<sup>47</sup> Liang Qian's husband Bai Fushan, who treated marriage as a business transaction, was keen on making deals. When Cao Jinghua and Liu Quan overhear him plotting against his wife, Cao comments: "Here is what you call a

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husband ... To hell with husbands. We must rely on ourselves" (113). The three women therefore seek mutual support in their own community: The single women would often spend the night sitting together in the deep shade cast by the lamp and no one in the grimness of her mood thought of clearing the dinner table piled high with plates. While one recounted the unfair treatment she had received during the day, the others would smoke and listen in silence. Or they would smoke in silence and listen to her pounding the arms of the chair with her fists in anger" (49). If the divorced women in *The Ark* manage to create an ark of their own—an ark of female consciousness—in order to contend with a hostile, male-dominated society, the three women in Wang Anyi's story, "Brothers," are not so successful and eventually drift apart. The story goes beyond the male/female antagonism and raises questions about desire, choice, female bonding, and women's relation to men and family.

Like the self-reflexive title of "Love Must Not Be Forgotten," "Dixiongmen" ("Brothers") alludes to an art exhibition that the female protagonists talk of organizing, without success. It also refers to the relationship among the women themselves, which ends in frustration, like the art show. The opening lines of the story place the subversive relationship of the women in perspective: "At college, they [the women] were three brothers: Laoda, Lao'er, and Laosan. They called their husbands Laoda's, Lao'er's, and Laosan's, respectively. They were the only female students in the whole class and they surpassed their male classmates in everything they did. " <sup>48</sup> In choosing the word "brothers" rather than "sisters," the story calls attention to the lack of a conventional social and intellectual bond among women, particularly among married women. In the light of the time-honored cult of male bonding, the choice is highly symbolic. We are told that the "brothers," all art majors, are sloppier in their dress and behavior than the male students. They are anything but feminine. Like the three roommates in *The Ark*, they open their hearts to each other, describing their sexual involvements with men as self-destruction and their own bonding as salvation. But when the time for graduation comes, each is faced with a different choice. Laosan decides to adopt the traditional life style in order to fulfill her obligations to her husband, so she takes a job in her hometown. Lao'er becomes an art teacher at a high school in Nanjing, and Laoda teaches at a normal school in Shanghai. After their graduation, the initial bond formed at school develops into a close emotional attachment between Laoda and Lao'er, who address each other afterwards as Lao Li and Lao Wang.

In sharp contrast to Bai Fushan and most other men in *The Ark*, the husbands of both Lao Li and Lao Wang in this story are model husbands. They treat their wives with respect and understanding and perform the household duties with diligence. But Lao Wang is amazed at the way her husband divides life neatly into two orderly parts, career and family, each serving as the means and end of the other. When Lao Li visits her after many years of separation, she finds her freedom suddenly restored to her. For once she lives spontaneously: she need not get up, have meals, or go to sleep at the usual hour. From then on, the two women write long letters every few days and marvel at the fact that their attachment to each other is closer than to their own husbands:

They noted cheerfully that their correspondence gave them the illusion that they had returned to the time of their girlhood. At that time each girl had a bosom girlfriend, with whom she could talk about practically anything she wanted to. The girls knew each other intimately and spent days and nights together, until the love affair of each drove a wedge between them. They began to betray each other, learning to tell lies, thinking about their boyfriends and guarding their secrets from each other. The war of territory began. The women now felt that they had gone backward in time, that is, more than ten years ago before the discord of desire had invaded their female friendship. (20)

Lao Li and Lao Wang grow so attached to each other that when the former gives birth to a son, the latter buys a longevity pendant for the child and is moved to tears at the thought

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that they finally have a child of their own. In her mind, the child has a mother and a godmother; the father is excluded from the picture. She offers to take care of the mother during her confinement. Lao Li's husband is grateful for her service but at the same time feels slightly resentful. Her presence seems to disrupt his normal relations with his wife and banish him from his own family. Lao Wang's husband is also puzzled by his wife's strange behavior. When the two families gather around the dinner table on the eve of the Spring Festival, he tries to understand what makes his wife so unlike her usual self when at home: "At first, he thought it was Lao Li's husband. But after a while he concluded it couldn't have been he, because underneath that man's politeness lay indifference to his wife. He then began to observe Lao Li. It was not long before he saw that it was Lao Li who indulged her whimsical behavior. Whenever his wife went to extremes, Lao Li would give her a loving, encouraging look" (26).

The climax of the relationship arrives with two juxtaposed events: the two women's attempt to articulate their love for each other and the accidental fall of Lao Li's child. They are taking a walk in the park when Lao Wang suddenly asks Lao Li, "What would happen if we both fell desperately in love with one man?" Lao Li says she would let Lao Wang have the man. But Lao Wang presses her further: "What if we were so much in love that neither could surrender him to the other?" "Then I'd kill him" (27), upon which Lao Wang's eyes fill with tears of gratitude. The two women talk about their emotional attachment in a roundabout manner and their narrative cannot but be completed at the male's expense. To articulate love for the same sex is almost an impossibility, so that they must invent a fictional plot about triangular love in order to arrive at it. What makes the story so interesting is that there is something more than male discourse that stands in the women's way. The event that follows the conversation puts their love to the test, a test that finally estranges the two women. During their conversation Lao Li's son falls off the cart and hits his forehead on the curb. The mother is suddenly transformed into a different person. She forbids Lao Wang to go near the injured child, as if she were to blame for the accident, and Lao Li's husband openly declares his hatred for her and orders her to leave. Ironically, it is not until love is damaged beyond repair that Lao Li is able to express it. As the two take leave of each other at the train station, Lao Li says, "I love you. I truly love you!" and the story ends on a pessimistic note: "They had never said the word 'love' between themselves, t a word that had become so contaminated by male/female copulation. But she said it now. Tears gushed from Lao Wang's eyes as she wept: 'Too late. It's too late!'" (30).

Motherhood need not have stood in the way of their love, because before the accident they had both tended the child with motherly care. Lao Li's overreaction to the accident reveals a mind torn by ambivalent feelings toward desire and motherhood. Feeling guilty for indulging her illicit desire, she opposes motherhood to female bonding so that the crisis of the self can be resolved through self-sacrifice and self-punishment. The fragility and rupture of the female bond testify to the difficulty a woman encounters in sorting out her desire in a society that privileges patriarchal heterosexuality.

To return to the question I raised at the beginning of this essay: do then the works of the women writers discussed in the above suggest a female tradition in modern Chinese literature? Contemporary Chinese critics share the view that female writers tend to grapple with the problem of gendered subjectivity and to explore the relationship of the female subject to power, meaning, and the dominant ideology in which her gender is inscribed. Inasmuch as gender does make a difference in reading, writing, and other literary practices, as my analysis of the three authors demonstrated, it is not difficult to conceptualize women writers as a separate group. After all, official criticism has always relegated women writers to such a place. The question I would like to raise is not whether women writers constitute a unique

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category, but rather what it is that has enabled contemporary critics to make an epistemic jump from the concept of woman writer-heretofore a subcategory in the mainstream criticism-to that of female literature and female literary tradition. In other words, what happens when a radically different conceptual approach and historical imagination are brought to bear on the study of women's works? In this regard, it might be of particular interest to recall that women critics in the eighties and nineties almost unanimously evoke the early Ding Ling, that is, the author of "The Diary of Miss Sophia," as the pioneer of the female tradition, while rejecting the later Ding Ling for being a chief collaborator in Socialist Realism. That seems to suggest that the idea of the female tradition is no less a potent form of historical intervention than it is an invention. Linking up women's writing of the post-Mao era with that of the May Fourth generation across several decades, the female tradition opens up the possibility for women critics to envision a departure from the practice of male-centered literary criticism in the past decades which they think patronizes women writers but refuses to grant them a subject-position. Perhaps what we are witnessing here is a profound moment of history making in which a different narrative is being instituted by women critics for the purpose of contesting the claims of the state, Fulian, and official feminism as the sole representative of Chinese women. In that sense, the female literary tradition is surely in the making and with more and more writers and critics joining in, it will be taken as prophesying a bright future for female literature. While my fascination with this new literary tradition remains strong, the foregoing discussion is also intended as a reminder of the historical contingency of our own academic practice (myself included): To what extent are we (as scholars and critics) also implicated in the making of particular histories even at moments when those histories seem most neutral and transparent? What does the making of the female literary tradition in post-Mao China tell us about the general practice of historiography and literary scholarship? Finally, in what ways does such an understanding transform one's knowledge about the object of study?