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NOTE DE L'ÉDITEUR

Translated from the French original by Philip Liddell

- 1 Women's writing, a literary genre closely linked to the building of identity, cannot be isolated from the question of gender. Immediately we speak of women's writing, a whole series of questions arises. How should we define it? Does it really exist? Are we thinking of literature written by women or of literature written by men *about* women? Are we thinking of the nature of the female sex perceived as inferior or, on the contrary, of gender (*xingbie*) without the risk of reducing human beings to the animal state), a concept developed and demanded by feminists at the social and cultural level? It is not always easy to distinguish the female "I" from the wider sense of "I". Defining literature by establishing the boundaries between the two sexes has been contributing for several years now to some significant research. The search for identity comes close to reducing literature to a sort of parcelling up process, in which the various elements of the human body are all so divided up, exposed and classified that the breath of life is eventually snuffed out; and, to that extent, women's books represent the peculiarities of women's writing. Women's writing also represents a bisexuality that Flaubert referred to as "the third sex", in which the limitations of gender are either transcended or neutralised. Women's writing, in its diversity and its peculiarities, constitutes a different approach to and into the human state. It does not merely narrate experiences or give an autobiographical account. No longer does the feminine voice shut in the "I". It is a view of the "I" that stamps a particular mark upon subjective writing.
- 2 What is the female viewpoint? From the female viewpoint how does the world look? How does the one woman see the other? How does she express it? How does she depict it and how does she comment upon it? What is the definition of women's writing? What

do Chinese women writers think of women's writing? These are just a few of the questions frequently repeated in Chinese literary circles.

- 3 These questions show that masculine models unquestioningly interpreted as universal have now come under suspicion. That does not mean women's writing is more fluctuating in its approach than men's writing; it is neither more complex nor more problematic. Rather, the viewpoint is different. While Cheng Naishan, the writer of *Girl's Classic* (*Nüerjing*), and Zhang Xinxin, who wrote *Sharing the Roles* (*Zheci ni yan na yiban*), are unsure how far they belong in the women's category, Zhai Yongming scorns the definition of women's writing as falling within the hierarchical concept of distinction according to gender:

I am not a feminist, and so I am speaking about the possibility of "women's" writing. Yet the embarrassing situation of women's writing arises from the fact that there exists a hierarchical concept of distinction according to gender. Criticism of "women's poetry" does not go beyond the same distinction in the political sense of the term. Judging from my own experiences, as an American woman writer used to say, "Only books dealing clearly with the problems of the female sex have been analysed ¹."

- 4 Women's writing took shape thanks to the "new literature" movement (1917) under the influence of *The Doll's House* by Ibsen (1828-1906). Its precursor in *Baihua* (vernacular Chinese) was the novel by Bing Xin (1900-2000), *Two Families* (*Liangge jiating*). Four periods may be distinguished, as well as three themes: women's rights (*funüquan*), women and revolution, women and men. These three themes apply to all four periods.
- 5 **First period** (1917-1927): women's rights. A woman is a human being; she is not an object. It is the flowering of the "I", and of romantic subjectivity. Writers are concerned with social problems. Adopting Henrik Ibsen's *The Doll's House* as a model, this writing was to be called "problem literature" (*wentixiaoshuo*). The writers of this period are Bing Xin, Lu Yin, Chen Hengzhe, Feng Huanjun, Shi Pingmei, Su Xuelin, Ling Shuhua and Bai Hui. They employ a style that is delicate, sentimental, poetic, with a predilection for private diaries and letters written in the first person. The female characters wish to live differently.
- 6 **Second period** (late 1920s-1940s): women and revolution. The subject here, in fact, is the conflict between love and revolution. A choice had to be made. It was impossible to have both at the same time, as Ding Ling clearly pointed out in her novel *Spring 1930 in Shanghai* (1930 *nianchun Shanghai*). The woman must choose. Either she sacrifices love to the revolution or else she sacrifices the revolution to love. In this regard, she is no different from her male counterpart, who is also obliged to choose. Xie Bingying writes: "Living in these historic times, I forget that I am a woman; I never think of personal matters; I hope only to devote my existence to the revolution ²." Literary commitment ironed out all subtleties in writing that was dominated by ideology.
- 7 On the level of narrative technique, progress is clearly evident by the late 1920s. The romantic style is succeeded by narrative that is realistic, objective and usually devoid of lyricism. The outside world is substituted for the interior world; the subjectivity of the "I" gives way to the plurality of the "we", and to historical events. Political and ideological consciousness prevails over literary consciousness. Men and women are alike in their revolutionary commitment. And what counts in writing is to "mirror" the image of this earthly utopia. *The Sun Shines on the River of Sanggan* (*Taiyang zhaozai Sangganheshang*) by Ding Ling and *Original Strength* (*Yuandongli*) by Cao Ming are

examples of this endeavour. The “I” directed towards the revolutionary exterior ends in an alliance with the “we”.

- 8 But as the 1920s drew to a close, women writers were not all working to make utopia a reality. During the 1940s, in the big cities controlled by the Japanese, some women, such as Zhang Ailing and Su Qing in Shanghai, still took a passionate interest in the problems faced by men and women living together. Su Qing published in 1944 her autobiographical novel *Ten Years of Marriage* (*Jiehun shinian*). As in *The Doll's House*, her heroine leaves her husband to live by herself. The book was reprinted 11 times in a few months. One small detail is revealing: despite the revolution, problems between women and men are still the main subject for the Chinese reader. Moreover, that is the main subject of Yu Ru's novel, *Distant Love* (*Yaoyuan de ai*), which was very successful in cities controlled by the Nationalist Party. This is the story of an intellectual in revolt against the monotony of her life and the world of the “little I”. She is constantly in flight, searching for a more ambitious life, for an ideal associated with the masses.
- 9 A little later, from the 1950s until the end of the 1970s, committed literature condemned to silence even the faintest hankering among women to write. This was the [third period](#). It was an empty period, or almost.
- 10 Zong Pu with *Mungo Bean* (*Hongdou*), Yang Mo with her *Song of Youth* (*Qingchun zhi ge*) and Ru Zhijuan with *Lily* (*Baihehua*), were among the few writers of note. The immense choir of the revolutionary “we” had swallowed up the voices of women.
- 11 The [fourth period](#), (from 1978 until the present day): it has been qualified as a “new time” (*xinshiqi*), and has seen the rebirth of the subjectivity of the “I”. Once again, people speak of women's writing. Zhang Jie, for example, defends the idea that women are not a sex, but human beings. And such writing raises a strong echo. Alongside Zhang Jie we should mention Dai Houying with *Oh, Man, Man*, (*Ren a ren*), Xiang Bin with *Sacrifice of the Heart*, Lu Xing'er with *Oh, the Blue Bird* (*O, Qingniao*) and Cheng Naishan with *Girl's Classic* (*Nüerjing*).
- 12 Women's writing of the “new time” does not really distance itself from romantic subjectivity or from committed realism. But the subjectivity that it expresses is not limited to the romantic circle of the “I”. The world of the “I” is more complicated, fractured, secret. The “I” is not merely faced with the classical problems—marriage, family, social position, women's rights—it also takes on society's taboos, in particular homosexual love. This development is accompanied at the same time by the appearance of the “woman hero”—of “superwoman” (*nüqiangren*). Writing adopts a strongly masculine (*xiongxinghua*) tone. Such women no longer live for the revolution, and they do not any longer commit themselves to ideological battles in the name of their homeland; if they commit themselves, it is to make their voices heard, to win their place in society. And the society they want is an egalitarian one.
- 13 Successive movements carried this writing to the front of the stage. First, as early as 1979, the novel by Zhang Jie ³ *Love is Not Something You Forget* (*Ai shi buneng wangji de*) had to face criticism that has still not died away. This novel addresses a sensitive question: after a long period during which love and marriage were politicised, how can one again live “normally” with love? Paradoxically, in a country like China where divorce is traditionally frowned upon, divorce is seen to be on the increase. How does a Chinese woman view this change? How does she adjust to social conventions? In her other two books, *The Emerald* (*Zumiülü*) and *The Arch* (*Fangzhou*), the writer describes the constraints that a celibate woman must suffer, and how her love obliges her to live

through a painful memory of the past. The same theme is treated in depth by Zhang Kangkang⁴ in *Aurora Borealis* (*Beijiguang*).

- 14 These two authors have attacked the basic problem of contemporary Chinese women: the right to love and the right to divorce, that is to say, the independence of women. That is the main concern of women's writing in present-day China. It is true that this theme was also massively present in the literary output of the first half of the twentieth century. But a new dimension has been added. No longer is this the young couple whose love is corroded by daily life, as in Lu Xun's *Disappearance of Sadness* (*Shangshi*, 1925), or the young woman tortured by love and yearning for love, as in *Miss Sophie's Diary* (*Shafenshi de riji*, 1928) by Jing Ling (1904-1986), the novel which marked the end of the first period in women's writing, or the woman in love with the revolutionary flower, as in the novel *Manli* (*Manli*) by Lu Yin (1898-1934). The young woman portrayed in *Fields of Life and Death* (*Shengsi chang*, 1935), by Xiao Hong (1911 to 1942) is no longer a model. In this "new time", Chinese women are confronted as much by their own selves as by society. They claim not only the right to love but also the right to divorce as well as an equal place with men in society. This claim to an equal place strongly marks the writing of the past twenty years.
- 15 Zhang Xinxin (1953-) was the first to throw down the gauntlet with her novel *On the Same Horizon* (*Zai tongyi dipingxian shang*, 1981). The traditional place reserved for women was to be a "wise and helpful hand inside" the house (*Xianneizhu*). But today, as women enter professional life, how can these duties to family, marriage and profession be combined? Do they not depend on an attitude of mind? The novel describes this conflict, which eventually breaks up the relationship. This is the second aspect of women's writing in this period: claiming the right within society to the same place as men. In the fictional world of Zhang Jie, women's struggle comes to a lucid conclusion. The reader is reassured by the female character's triumph in her arduous life. In Zhang's other books, *A Craving for Orchids* (*Fengkuang de junzilan*), *Along the Grand Canal* (*Zai lushang*), *Sharing Roles* (*Zheici ni yan na yiban* 1989), women's problem in society remains acute.
- 16 The subject is treated in a different way by Chen Rong (1936-) in *When we Arrive in Middle Age* (*Ren dao zhongnian*). The intellectual woman is crushed in the end by social and family restrictions. She can no longer breathe freely. The figure of this female intellectual represents an irony that reappears in her most recent novel, *Weary of Divorce* (*Lande lihun*): the heroine is still an intellectual, but is unable to feel. She is impervious to emotion. We are far from a happy ending, and the reader cannot see what solution there could be.
- 17 The novels of Wang Anyi⁵ (1954-) arrive at the same conclusion. The woman's consciousness claiming independence does not necessarily win through to success. On the contrary, she is crushed by the need to maintain the other two roles, those of mother and daughter, as in *Hunt the Stag in the Middle of the Street* (*Zhulu zhongjie*).
- 18 According to some critics, such female characters spring from a traditional model, the woman heroine *Huamulan*. This was a heroine who, as a girl, enlisted in the army in her father's place and distinguished herself in battle before returning home. The story is told in *Notes of poems for singing, yesterday and today* (*Gujin yuelu*), a work from the fifth century Nanchao Dynasty: a heroic woman full of common sense, loyalty and family honour. Women's novels of the 1980s still take their inspiration from this model, portraying "a woman who disguises herself as an asexual being"⁶. In the above-

mentioned novels, and in many others from that period, the female character is in effect a “superwoman”: she is intelligent, and aware of sharing the same social space as men and of speaking the same language as they do. The writing expresses this wish for equality: it is neutral, or rather male. It is no longer the traditional image of the half-veiled face, or the face hidden in the sleeve.

- 19 Added to the voice of the woman who is intellectualised and neutralised, another is heard, that of the woman refusing to be considered a subject. No longer will she measure herself by men, or dispute with them her social position. Here, the most extreme solution is likely to be sought. When a woman is humiliated to the last degree, experiences an attempt to rob her of humanity, to reduce her to a thoughtless existence, has she the right to end her life, rather than fight the attempts to degrade her? Has she the right to decide her own destiny? The problem is addressed in the novel by Zong Pu (1928-), *Who Am I? (Wo shi shei?)*. We are at the start of the Cultural Revolution. The female character Wei Mi and her husband Meng Wen are dreadfully beaten by the revolutionaries. They are forbidden to let their hair grow. Their heads are half shaved. Meng Wen cannot stand these humiliations any longer and kills himself. His wife, Wei Mi, is on the edge of madness. A painful doubt haunts her: “Who am I?” She sees skeletons, snakes, insects, and scorpions nibbling at human bodies, gnawing at that which defines the character of mankind . . . She too ends up committing suicide.
- 20 Dai Houying, in her book *Oh Man, Man (Ren a ren, 1980)*, rails at the fact that, claiming to seek what is good, ideology crushes the human soul. At the start of the 1980s, in Chinese literary circles, the protest expressed by the novel led to a debate on humanism.
- 21 Tie Ning, born in 1957 in Peking, is the youngest of the writers of the first generation after the Cultural Revolution. She is exclusively interested in the women of her own time. Employing a style both cold and keen, she paints conflicts that set tradition in opposition to the modern spirit, the civilised world to the animal world, the desire for independence to the dependent existence. Like Rousseau, she is sensitive to the process of civilisation: in her view, this is the source of the suffering endured by women. The only female characters likely to find peace and satisfaction are those not yet contaminated by civilisation, among them Xiangxue in *Oh, Xiangxue (A Xiangxue)*, Dazhiniang in *Heaps of Straw (Maijieduo)*, *The Pregnant Woman and the Cow (Yunfu yu niu)* and the *Daughters of the River (He zhi nü)*. A similar case is examined in *Roses Round the Door (Meiquimen)*. The female character, Si Qiwen, is ready to fit in with the family and society, cost what it may, but in the end her efforts only make her cruel.
- 22 That is the main characteristic of the women’s writing of this period. The subjectivity of the “I” rests upon history, memory and events.
- 23 Another distinguishing feature is realism, or what critics call “the new realism” or “zero writing” (*lingdu xiezuo*). Frequently quoted on this subject are Fang Fang, Chi Li and Bi Shumin.
- 24 Xu Xiaobin (1951-) published in 1989 *Enquiry into a Case of Madness (Dui yige jingshenbing huanzhe de diaocha)*. The depiction of a young girl’s delusions rocked the critical establishment. In her subsequent novels, *Drunken Garden (Mihuan huayuan)* and *Pisces—The Ancient Story of One Woman with Three Men (Shuangyu xingzuo-yige nüren he sange nanren de gulao gushi)*, her mysterious and meditative writing goes much further. Her

apparent desire is to emphasise that which is unknown and unknowable in the human heart, in the character's destiny and in the civilisation he or she inhabits.

- 25 Chi Zijian was born in 1964, in Mohe, in the province of Heilongjiang. This region in the north of China offers an immense territory for her fiction. Her novels are set for the most part in that wintry expanse, empty, but full of peasants' stories, customs, scenes of everyday life flowing like a long river, slow, unremarkable but oppressively quiet. Her best known books are *At the Foot of the Tree* (*Shuxia*), *The Striking of the Morning Bell Resounding at Daybreak* (*Chenzhong xiangche huanghun*), *Tales of the Village at the North Pole* (*Beijicun tonghua*, a collection of short stories), *Journey Towards the Daylight* (*Xiangzhe baitian luxing*) and *The Tomb of White Snow* (*Baixue de muyuan*). Her novels recall the writing of Xiao Hong, a woman writer in the 1930s.
- 26 Xu Kun (1965-) draws upon the same sources, but in a different vein. She uses the oral and popular style, full of humour and irony. Perhaps it allows the narrator to keep her distance. This detachment reminds us of Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) who sought to maintain an empty space between the actor and the spectators. Above all, that can be seen in *Vanguard* (*Xianfeng*), *White Speech* (*Baihua*) and *Demonstrations* (*Youxing*).
- 27 Another group of women novelists write mainly in colloquial language (*sirenhuayu*). The writing style is fragmented, "postponed" (in Derrida's sense) about the most intimate personal experiences, a monologue of the "I" enclosing itself within its private world.
- 28 While the writing of Can Xue is considered as "semi-private", that of Chen Ran (1962-) ⁷ is a completely private world. In her novel *World-Weariness* (*Shijibing*), she tells of the lives of present-day students and explores their states of mind. In 1990, with her novel *Bottoms Up to the Past* (*Yu wangshi ganbei*), she turns her attention to the experience of women living in a great city. In a direct and detailed style she describes the interior lives of women intellectuals, living without men. The "I" in the novel tells us of her feelings as a lonely woman, of the wounds caused by her broken marriage and of her discomfort in society. With this novel, Chen Ran has succeeded in creating a "private narrative" (*sirenxing xiezu*). The style is autobiographical; the communication becomes very intimate, a shared intimacy between the narrator and the writer. One of her other novels, *Private Life* (*Siren shenghuo*), is a subtle monologue, the "I" rebelling against herself and the outside world. The main character is Ni Aoao, a single girl, headstrong and over-sensitive, living only within her own mind. She flatly denies the outside world; she is hostile to any collective consciousness, to any sense of "we". She describes herself as a "disabled human being living in a disabled time". The narration, precise and extravagant by turns, of the girl's homosexual experiences makes the writing very "private" and particularly irritating in the view of her critics. The narrator is immersed in her world of senses and desires, refusing the lies and concealments in her private life.
- 29 This "private" literature takes a more personal, more exhibitionist, turn in the work of Lin Bai ⁸. Her novel *A War of a Girl with Herself* (*Yigeren de zhanzheng*) relates the emotional life of Duomi, a girl who, having suffered terribly in a world regulated by men, turns in upon herself. She is in love with herself. This unusual kind of love, and the naturalist descriptions of her sexual experiences and of her psychological torments, came in for severe criticism. Yet, the writer says at the start of her novel:

A war of a girl by herself means that one hand fights with oneself, that oneself has only a wall to shelter against, that a flower destroys itself by itself. A war of a girl by herself means that a girl marries herself.

- 30 Lin Bai's characters are young fighters, in constant conflict with the men who occupy the central position in society, in conflict with daily life which, in their eyes, is too commonplace. In *One Cannot Separate from One's Love* (*Tong xinaizhe buneng fenshou*), *Tell, oh Room* (*Shuoba, fangjian*) and *The Bullet Through the Apple* (*Zidan chuanguo pingguo*), these conflicts unfold within the personal world of young girls, with unbearable interior violence. This is the tragedy of today's women, a tragedy of the "I" face to face with itself, and confronted by its sensual experiences. This tragedy is grasped in all its immediacy and developed over the course of the narrative.
- 31 The novels of Chen Ran and Lin Bai are a world of personal experiences. It is a world of the "I" face to face with itself. The narrator's perspective is interiorised, the exterior world is just a pretext for the narrative. The timescale is set within this interior space: this is a time outside time. Memory becomes extremely subjective, which leads to a fragmented, dispersed style. Is this world not also the utopia constructed by the female "I"?
- 32 This narrative dispersal is characteristic of the writings of Hai Nan ⁹. In her novel *My Lovers* (*Wode qingrenmen*), the narrative is punctuated by dialogue, memories of the dead, visions of a wild "I". In her work, there are no more women driven to the tomb by the suffering caused by an unfaithful lover, the traditional ending of novels. The characters' deaths are no longer the consequences of their amorous relationships. This romantic aspect of the classical Chinese novels and those of the 1920s, in line with the model of classical Western fiction (Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Théophile Gautier's *La Morte Amoureuse* or Mérimé's *La Dame aux Camélias*), has vanished among the young women writers of present-day China. A woman no longer believes in tears or promises: she lives for herself. She follows her feelings without allowing herself to be overwhelmed. All beauty is an encounter. Amorous relationships invigorate her mind. She is as she wishes to appear.
- 33 Zhai Yongming published in 1984 a long poem *The Woman* (*Nüren*). In it we see a woman who is sufficient for herself. She has an inexhaustible hinterland of the mind: as Saint-John Perse says in *Exile*, "There is no history but that of the soul—there is no ease but that of the soul". In 1985 she published her second long poem, *Village of Jingan* (*Jinganzhuang*), in which the anguish of youth is rooted in the ancient soil and in recurrent time. In *Woman, the Design of Death* (*Siwang de tuan*, 1987), *What One Calls Everything* (*Chengzhiwei yiqie*, 1988) and *Colours in the Colours* (*Yansezhong de yanse*, 1989), one symbol reappears insistently: night. Night is a reservoir of signs for representing the frenzies of a woman's soul; the interiorisation of the world passes through the incantation of woman's discourse; it is the transfiguration of the imagination, transmuted memory. In this transfiguration, sensation and interior reality are reflected in a tirelessly fragmented discourse. Night is the material for the incarnation and manifestation of the female "I". At the same time, it represents the distance between the "I" and the "self" (the unconscious mind), which only the incantation of poetic speech can put in communication with each other. The "I" never penetrates so deeply as when it writes. Exterior images are then but the shadow of its interior images.

- 34 There are two other women poets who share this perception: Tang Yaping in *Desert of Black Sand* (*Heise shamo*) and Yi Lei in *Bedroom of a Celibate Woman* (*Dushen nüren de woshi*).
- 35 Both are strongly aware of being women of today, which sets them apart from Zhang Jie and from their generation. The model of Huamulan (the heroic woman disguised as a man, independent or claiming independence) becomes that of a woman living in her interior world, the world of love and sensual experiences. She is a woman first and last. She seeks a language appropriated to herself, far from the speech monopolised by men.
- 36 We are living in a period when life's tragedies have changed, a period significantly marked by the experiences of exile, of nomad writing: language, like literature, is a floating space for a person writing for his or her interior reader, fleeting, for the most intimate "self", and for the most distant. The writer experiences a double exile, interior and exterior at the level of subjectivity and writing. We may date the start of this period from the end of the 1970s.
- 37 During the 1990s, Chinese women writers who left China took a different approach to this theme of double exile. When the state apparatus of their country of origin no longer exists in their living space, when the political, social and moral "enemies" against whom they once fought with all their strength are now too far away to be physically opposed, and when the national frontier disappears, how do they live in their new existence? Each is directly confronted by herself and by the problem of the linguistic environment (*yu jing*). This double encounter is the hardest test. There is no longer an exterior world to be heroically resisted! How then can we know what will be the outcome of this encounter between the "I" and the "self"? The exterior exile prompts another exile, far more serious, an exile in the interior of the "I".
- 38 This exile becomes unbearable when it touches (inevitably) upon the problem of language. The language forged and conceived by political and national frontiers is no longer right for expressing so new an experience. The young women writers try to overthrow the dictatorship of this constricted language, seeking new connections between the signifier and the signified. But the frontiers have not disappeared, as one usually thinks: they are still there, between one's country and other countries, between one's native language and other languages, between the "I" and the "self". Exterior exile leads to interior exile. It is the price of liberty. These writers realise that being free is in the end an unbearable lightness. Unbearable because their mother tongue suffers from this freedom; it lives in exile, at the meeting with the other language or the other languages, and in literature that is reflected by a serious slide. Language has its own frontiers closely connected to those of the state. How can it be maintained in this exile, between the frontiers of several cultural spaces?
- 39 Liu Suola is known for her novel *You Have No Other Choice* (*Ni biewu xuanze*). She lived in London before settling in the United States. London inspired her to write an unusual novel *Hundunjialigeng*¹⁰. In it she records her reflections on this freedom so longed for in China, on the weighty history of her homeland, and on the language that she cannot manage to do without. Critics have described this novel as "postmodernist". Through the irony and the humour, there shows through a deep disappointment with the idea of freedom and a harsh critique of the Chinese tradition. The character Huang Haha has left China for London. She has dismissed the memory of the Cultural Revolution but without really being able to forget it. She feels attached to no country, but she needs Chinese, her mother tongue. Still worse, she uses only slang words, the coarsest street dialect of Peking. She had thought she could become a universal citizen and, now that

she has fallen in love with a young British man, she finds she has only one wish: to read the family correspondence from Peking; she finds that she is forever thinking of "Peking Man", 690,000 years old, who was discovered in 1927 in Zhoukoudian, near Peking, and who disappeared in the 1930s during the Sino-Japanese War. This popular style enables her to test the flexibility of the Chinese language.

- 40 In her short novel *The Dream of Eden* (*Yidianyuan zhimeng*, 1992), Liu Suola does not flinch from putting love in conflict with civilisations. The heroine refuses to be Adam's concubine. She leaves in search of a dream lover to whom she has given the name Zhi (which means "to show"). Is he a spirit or a God? For her it does not matter. What is sure is that he is neither man nor woman, a sexless being, at least in the book. The woman ends by being transformed into a piece of stone between her mother's legs. The symbolism, a human being metamorphosed into a thing, is very contemporary.
- 41 The image of a stone reappears in the writing of You You: *The Stone Uttering a Piercing Cry* (*Jianjiao de shitou*, 1991), *Nothing to Say* (*Wuhua keshuo*, 1991) and *A Flying Stone* (*Huifeide shitou*, 1993). The flying stone is divine: it defies gravity. It flies in the air; it travels with the female "I" in love. Suddenly the "I" tears itself apart in an explosion of blood and begins a sickening fall. The fall of the "I" and flight without gravity are two antithetical images. Woman's destiny is soberly traced here. In her other novel, *Huangxi huxi* (1993), You You describes the psychological confusion caused by being in exile. Where am I? Among the family? English, the language in which the "I" is expressed, makes her realise that the "I" exists outside the context of her native language; while Chinese, in which the "I" is expressed at the same time, puts it back in the context of its own culture. Thus, the "I" fluctuates between two linguistic contexts. The language in which the "I" is expressed inspires in her a profound homesickness; is it Mandarin Chinese, or a certain dialect? The "I" does not know. It recognises each word, without being able to grasp the sense of what is said. So the "I" is in an odd situation: it no longer has any landmark or reference to safeguard its identity. Geographic exile (exterior) is accompanied by an exile still more difficult to manage, that of the language. The identity of the "I" is lost in this double exile. Where is this identity? It resides neither in the "I" nor in any specific place. It is nowhere; it is in the hand of the "I" that is ready at any moment to move on; and the "I" says to itself, "You are constantly on the move with 'your family' in your hand ¹¹." Gao Xingjian has spoken of the torments suffered by exiled Chinese writers. Questioned about the link he maintains with his own language, he replied that there was an interaction: he spoke the language and the language spoke to him at the same time. When writing, he said, he forged his own language, bent it to his inspiration, and the language, in return, fashioned him ¹².
- 42 There is the time of the "I"—woman's time, as some critics say—and historical time. Between them, between the unreal and the real, the "I" leaves an imperceptible trail. A first "I" lives in the memory of family life, or in the memory of its everyday life; another "I" constantly questions the accuracy of these fragments of memory, and the truth of what has happened, taking care not to fall into the woman-man dichotomy. It is a war of a single woman, a world of a single woman. The other person's speech is that of the "I". The "I" is dissociated and transformed into someone else.
- 43 Yan Geling (1959-) began publishing her novels in the 1980s. The best known, written before she left for the United States, are *Green Blood, the Private Life of a Woman Soldier* (*Yigenübingde qiaoqiaohua*) and *A Female Meadow* (*Ci xing de caodi*). While *The Girl Xiaoyu*

(Shaonü Xiaoyu), written in the United States, caused quite a stir in the community of Chinese writers overseas, *Le Fusang*, her next novel, exploded like a bomb. In the epic style, the writer relates to us for the first time the dreadful life of prostitutes and of the immigrant Chinese labourers, in a society steeped in misunderstandings and racism. The epic style gives place to psychological writing in the novel *The Human World* (*Renhuan*) and the narrative becomes a monologue, the confession of a woman patient undergoing psycho-analytical therapy, angled from the specific point of view of a narrator who has grown up in the West. She casts a new eye on Chinese men, recounting their suffering as men. This is a story of the masculine world as seen by a female “I” in whom different cultures coexist.

- 44 Hong Ying (1962) begins writing poems in 1981. Seven years later, she turns to the novel. Resident in London, she still lives in her interior world, a world of the “I”, which is not, however, that of the “self”. “‘I’ is not the ‘self,’” she points out in the postface to her collection *London, a Dangerous Place for a Date* (*Londres, weixian de youhui*). The “I”, as Rimbaud said, is another. *The Dirty Finger and the Cork* (*Zangshouzhi*. Pinggaizi, 1994) is a fragmented piece of writing. The “I” is a figure composed of several young women thrown into constant battles, either with their families or with men. The novel tells of a young woman who says goodbye to her father. She sets off without knowing where she is going. She meets a man covered in the skin of a cat and makes love to him without knowing why. Love and humiliation, beauty and decadence, attraction and disgust become intertwined, cancelling each other out. She experiences the “awakening” while being present at the slaughter of a pregnant woman. The family network shackles her freedom. She is obliged to witness a terrible scene: the castration of a cat, the symbol for man in the novel. Her mother forbids her to write; she goes so far as to tear up her manuscript. What the reader is reading is only what survived the disaster. That explains why the story is so fragmented.
- 45 Here, the sensitive time, to borrow Julia Kristeva’s expression, does not coincide with the time of the story. The woman’s time (that of the events in solitude) and the time of the story (the social horizon of the experience) make up the fabric of the narrative—a chopped and fragmented narrative, in no way linear. The narrator keeps her distance from the events. She describes the problem of the “I” in a raw and direct way.
- 46 Elsewhere, in the telling of other stories of passion, one finds the same distancing of the “I”. So it is with *Studies of Yu Hong over Recent Years* (*Jinnian Yuhong yanjiu*, 1994). This is an enquiry carried out by the young poetess and researcher into her own grandmother, the writer Yu Hong. It is a name that seems dangerous to bear. A diary, photos and so on punctuate the story of the discovery. Who is Yu Hong? The ageing editor, who will have spent her whole life looking for her, decides to eradicate all trace of her physical body and of her work. She no longer exists, other than as a shadow, like the story of Yu Hong, a shadowy enigma.
- 47 This writing, which frees itself of chronological and cultural boundaries, paints a picture both personal and social of women’s experience. It is a new literary form, in which the female “I” constitutes, on the same social horizon as men, an open space with its own experience arising from accurate memory or from real memory. The boundaries between the accurate account and the real account have never been so confused. The writing is fragmented, subjective, interior. The problems that the “I” encounters spring not only from the conflict between traditional values and modern minds but also from the opposition between the “I” and the “self”. That is how Chinese

women writers question themselves about the meaning of the “I” as well as about the meaning of the existence of the “I”.

- 48 Autobiographical writing has become these days a favoured literary genre. It is different from what it was in the years between 1920 and 1940. The gallery of characters is no longer ordered and structured around such themes as the revolt against the old system, the search for light in the darkness, and so on. No longer does the antagonism between romantic writing of the interior and the exterior serve as a model. Here, the exterior world is absent or exists only in the mind of the “I”. This subjective world, of the “I” stifled by interior images is not just a space reserved for memory writing. Subjective life occupies as much space as the work of memory.
- 49 In 1994, Ai Xiaoming (1953-) published her fictional memoir *Consanguinity* (*Xuetong*). The novel sets out to describe a childhood similar to that of her contemporaries and different from that of others, for it is in the social field that the “I” lives through its own experiences. A family story broken up by the viewpoint of the “I” in the revolutionary years—before, during and after the Cultural Revolution. What makes it different from other novels in the same literary genre is this fragmented writing, following the rhythm of the viewpoint of the “I”. This viewpoint enables us to perceive with the narrator everything felt by the “I”. The narrator is lavish with detail in descriptions of the space offered to the viewpoint of the “I”, the surroundings of the house, the rambling progress of the thinking of the “I” in contact with other people. What gives the novel its strength is the viewpoint of the “I” across the natural environment and among friends and family, reaching to the deepest part of the “I”. This is a new kind of autobiographical writing.
- 50 While Ai Xiaoming captures her world of the “I” using a fragmented style, Zhang Zhijun’s style remains soberly naturalistic. In her autobiographical novel *The Red House* (*Hongfangzi*), she shows us, in a raw but subtle way, her own experiences as a Chinese woman of poor origins. Very often, in autobiographical accounts of the revolutionary years, the narrator tells an extraordinary story of some rich and noble family whose members suffered appallingly. Many such accounts try to show how the proletarian revolution reduced people of the middle and upper classes, intellectuals and former nobility, to the condition of vagrants, beggars, in every sense of the term. *The Red House*, by contrast, relates the experience of a poor young woman, the child of a labouring family, and of an upward journey in the social scale over the thirty years that followed 1949. With her family she was part of the privileged class and was logically assured of a fine future. The life described was commonplace—but commonplace does not mean easy or free of stress. Whatever their origin, no one can escape being pauperised in a totalitarian society. The tensions are created, not merely out of the conflict between the “I” aspiring to freedom and the totalitarianism of society, but above all out of the conflict between the female “I” and a conservative society in which only the existence of men is recognised.
- 51 The “I” in *The Red House* is a woman of character. The strength of her character is what brings about the failure of her two marriages, which earns her the disapproval of a society in which divorce is frowned upon—and particularly when the divorce has been sought by the woman. But this same strength helps her to succeed in carving out for herself a place in society and in overcoming all her suffering. This “I” practises self-defence: it is not the traditional model for women in fiction (weak, poetically romantic

and given to day-dreams). For the “I” in this case, it is a matter of life or death. Women must be born strong and resistant. Romanticism is a luxury that they cannot indulge in.

52 Thus, there appears a new pattern for the Chinese woman. No longer does she live in wait for a man. She is not shy about standing up to male critics. She does not depend on men. It so happens that the only man capable of bearing the harshness of their lives, a man who had helped the whole family to survive the most painful years, turns out to be her brother. He is neglected by the family and decides to end his life, just as living conditions are beginning to improve. He has to disappear for the “I” to realise how much she misses him. He is the only man she will love. This tragedy has a strong symbolic meaning: the world of men is far away; it is lost in the unknown. The narrative is sober and neutral. The author tells us of the dullness of life and of its cruelty, writing so soberly as to lend great force to the “I” of ordinary people. This is the vital force of human beings, the only force capable of overcoming the suffering of human existence.

53 At a time when the generation of women writers born in the 1960s is mostly absorbed in the intimate world of the deepest “I” and concentrated upon its monologue (*duyu*), Mei Zhuo, a Tibetan woman writer, is not content with the monologue; in common with a few of her contemporaries, she has abandoned the subjective world. She does not even use the first person, this “I” that is today omnipresent. In her novel *The Tribe of the Sun* (*Taiyang buluo*, 1997) ¹³, the narrator tells a story of life, love and death in a conflict between two Tibetan tribes. It is an epic story but one outside time, since the time is not defined in the novel. There are in Tibet two enemy tribes, all descended from Songzanganbu, a Tibetan rebirth of the Buddha Guanyin. Right from the start of the novel, the reader loses all notion of time:

They ask him where he comes from.

He points behind him.

They do not understand his language, but conclude from his pointing finger that he comes

from the sky.

Accordingly, they make a litter and carry this man sent from heaven to the tribe ¹⁴.

54 Who is “he”? Where does “he” come from? Who are “they”? The first lines of the novel provide no answer to these questions (the same doubts that preoccupied Gauguin)—no more than do the closing lines. The narrator is content to repeat a legendary name, “Zanpu”, the first prince in Tibet’s history. Communication between “he” and “they” is impossible. Language, humankind’s most basic tool, becomes powerless here. Only belief counts in this kind of encounter. These first lines are based upon a Tibetan conviction as old as Tibet’s culture: there exists, beyond language, another way in which we think, act, communicate and understand: it is our sensitivity, elusive, immaterial—but palpably there, deep in our hearts.

55 “They” accept this unknown “he”; they think he has been sent from heaven. Dialogue with heaven is difficult, for they do not know whether heaven hears them; what they can be sure of is that this stranger is an “offering” sent to their tribe by heaven.

56 From the start, the narrative mixes legend, ancient customs and mystery; it plunges the reader into confusion. The questioning is as basic and as inexhaustible as the birth of the universe.

57 The love story and the story of the tribes are intertwined in a space devoid of chronological time. The narrative is fragmented. Now we read

of the death of the parents of Jiacao, an only son who had been until the age of 17 a careless young noble; now we read of the couple's marriage, the bride having spent her first night with the steward of the house. Now we read of Jiacao's flight after his parents' death, and of his stay with a poor, unknown family whose daughter he eventually marries at her father's request. Why did the young bride give herself to the steward? According to a not very enlightening comment by her big sister, the steward looked like someone. Who was the "someone"? That remains a mystery. Why did the father of the daughter break into sobs in the middle of the night before begging the young man to marry his daughter? That remains a mystery. What is the origin of this ring of solar stone that is transmitted from generation to generation on the fingers of the heirs of the same blood? It has "the reflection of gold and silver, the virtue of jade" ¹⁵; it is made of the blood that passes from generation to generation. It is transparent, but this transparency conceals a deep mystery. It forecasts good and bad fortune:

Thus, it sparkles, golden, and shines like the sun; its light irradiates every corner within the fortress of Yasaicang. For hundreds of years it has been predicting good times and bad for the tribe of Yazha. When its light is golden, the tribe knows propitious winds and timely rain and human beings and animals prosper; when the light is darker, and clouded, disaster will strike ¹⁶.

58 Where did she go, Xiang Sa, the young woman who lost, first, her father at the age of two and then her lover at the age of twenty and who took refuge in the cave where her grandmother, having been hunted by the tribe, spent her last days before disappearing? Who is this transparent man with a white beard whom the young woman perceived in front of the cave? After his appearance, the young woman's little sister, who came to bring her food once a week, never found her again. All that remains a mystery.

59 These tales of generations, of tribes, unfold in a time when the present, the past and the future are mingled. The reader has no landmarks to date the period. The only reference point is love. Does the author mean that any love story is eternal, that it repeats itself forever in different guises? In the novel, nothing seems to be able to clear up these mysteries, nothing except death. Death, omnipresent, is the companion of love. The author writes:

Only under a western sky can all Tibetans die in peace, simply because the western sky calls them, these extremely virtuous souls. They do not die; they transcend themselves into eternal samsara ¹⁷. The death of the body means no more than the end of suffering ¹⁸.

60 These mysteries are not merely part of the romantic fabric. They are rooted in Tibetan culture, so that the novel becomes the portrait of a way of life, representing a Tibetan mindset, so distant and yet also so close.

61 The question of time occupies an important place in Chinese women's writing today. When it comes to language, society and literary themes, it is clear that there is a homology associated with the period. Writers tend not to date events. Historical time is absent, which would have been unthinkable during the 1950s or 1960s. In some way, writers give up historical time, and epic time.

62 The "I" becomes apparent during the 1970s, firstly among young poets who seek, fumbling, for a way of treating what presents itself to them, to recreate it from within.

They wonder, "Where are our times that have disappeared?" (*Women xiaoshi de suiyue zai nali?*). They experiment with past, present and future, as though unrolling a length of material, without calibration in the narrative. It is a subjective form of time, stringing images together, making connections under a critical gaze. Subjective choices govern the excisions, rationally and irrationally.

- 63 This narrative time is strongly linked to the inner present. It enables memory to be transformed into imagination, and an accurate account (events) to be transformed into a true account (fictional writing). This narrative time does not suppress historical time—the memory of history—but reverses the priorities. Instead of measuring and dating the event, instead of structuring it, the writer means to occupy a panoptic, that is, to be everywhere at once, in the same time. This is one aspect of the modernity of Chinese subjective writing. An attempt is being made to be free to write as oneself about oneself in a world outside time.
- 64 Imaginary time in the work of Chinese writers is a rhythm set by a historical time, an inner time and an intermediary time. The historical time is the time of the event when the "I", as narrator, sets himself or herself up as a biographical reference point, within a past that is reconstituted, updated by words. The inner time is that in which the "I" is not a historian. It is distanced from the accurate account to be independent of any historical truth of reported facts. Far from the generalising formalism of the grand national anthem sung by a crowd, the "I" concerns a particular truth, an uncertain truth. Between the past, the present and the future, chronological frontiers disappear. Timelessness. This is how it is in the work of the women writers we have mentioned.
- 65 These four periods of women's writing lend emphasis to the development of subjectivity in Chinese literature. First comes the awakening of the "I" with writing devoted to social problems. Writers argue for women's right to social equality. The awakened "I" then commits itself to the revolution, losing its subjective existence while joining in with the national chorus: thirty years go by. It has been recovering its subjective existence only during the past twenty years. To sum up: looking from inside to outside to win women's rights round about the 1920s; looking from the revolutionary world of outside to the disappearance of the "I" in the period from the 1930s to the 1970s; again looking from inside the "I" to the exterior, reformist world, the world of men, from the 1970s to the 1980s; and finally, looking from the outside world to the deepest place within the "I", an enquiry that brings us from the end of the 1980s to the present day.

NOTES

1. Zhai Yongming, "More on the subject of 'the conscience of the night' and of 'women's poetry'" (Zai tan "heiye yishi" he "nüxing shige), in *Shitansuo*, No. 1, 1995, p. 129.
2. Xie Yu-e ed., *Studies on women's writing (Nüxing wenxue yanjiu)*, Kaifeng, Henandaxue chubanshe, 1990, p. 325

3. Zhang Jie, born in Peking in 1937, is a graduate of the People's University (Ren Da) in Peking. She published, in July 1978, her story *The Child Who Came from the Forest*. We should mention here her main published works: *The Sensitive Woman*, *There is a Young Person, Who Lives Best?* and *The Heavy Wings*
4. Zhang Kangkang was born in 1950 in Hangzhou, and left school at 16. She worked for eight years on a state farm in Heilongjiang, and began publishing her work in 1972. Her novels include: *The Dividing Line*, *The Right to Love*, *He is not a Hero* and *Summer*.
5. Wang Anyi was born in 1954 in Fujian, and spent her childhood in Shanghai. In 1969, she went to work in a village in the north of Anhui. Her first published work appeared in 1975.
6. Cf. Chen Sihe, *Textbook on the History of Chinese Contemporary Literature* (*Zhongguo dangdai wenxueshi jiaocheng*), Shanghai, Fudandaxue chubanshe, 1999, p. 350.
7. Chen Ran was born in Peking in 1962, and finished her studies at the Normal University of Peking (*Beijing shifan daxue*).
8. Lin Bai was born in 1958 in Guangxi. After spending years in the countryside as a young educated woman, she studied at the University of Wuhan. She was a librarian, and then an editor before becoming a writer
9. Hai Nan, whose real name is Su Lihua, came originally from Yunnan. Her early poems were published in 1982. A little later, she gave up poetry and turned to writing novels.
10. Liu Suola, *Hundun jialigeleng*, Hong Kong, Xianggang Tupu chubanshe, 1991
11. In *Today* (*Jintian*), 1993, No. 2, p. 37.
12. Gao Xingjian, interview with Jin Siyan and Wang Yipei, in *Dialogue*, Nice, Alliage, No. 2, 2001, p. 102.
13. Mei Zhuo, *The Tribe of the Sun*, Peking, Zhongguo wenlian chubangongsi, 2nd ed., 1998.
14. Mei Zhuo, *ibid*, p. 5.
15. Mei Zhuo, *ibid*, p. 13
16. Mei Zhuo, *ibid*, p. 13
17. The succession of rebirths and existences.
18. Mei Zhuo, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. 290