

Abstract

This article attempts to investigate how Chinese women writers themselves understand binary genders. Being named as the Aother, @feminists in the west can speak from a politically Adifferent@ position against centered patriarchal ideology. By contrast, Chinese women in the 1980s find their female gender completely inscribed within the state feminism, which emphasizes Asexuality@ rather than Adifferentiation.@ Therefore, this article focuses on the female double image, the masculine/feminine double, created by Chinese women writers in the early 1980s. This reveals Chinese women writers= struggle to find a way for women not only to reject the social roles that men have imposed on them and women have too often accepted but also to actively participate in deconstructing and reconstructing definitions of femininity, and to get beyond gender divisions.

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Women and International Development

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Feminine or (Un) feminine: Struggles over the Meanings of

Femininity in Chinese Women=s Literature

by

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Women and Writing

Bringing *femininity* into the discussion of gender identity is a crucial agenda for Chinese women writers and critics, which aims at reconstructing the definitions of femininity and redefining female literary tradition. The terms “women’s literature” and “woman writer” have come under increasing criticism for their limiting and derogatory connotations in post-Mao China; Chinese women critics in the 1980s have substituted the term *nuxing wenxue* (female literature) for *funu wenxue* (women’s literature), to avoid implications of a “style” which has been limited by male critics as “graceful, warm and feminine” but “insignificant.”

The terms “women’s literature” and “woman writer” first appeared in Chinese critical vocabulary in the 1920s, the May Fourth period. There were two main reasons for this. First, during this period, traditional social and moral values were losing their validity. Women’s issues, such as foot binding, prostitution, women’s education and independence, became the primary issues of the time. This provided Chinese women an opportunity to explore new types of female subjectivity. Second, the newly created western-style literary forms such as the “I-novel,” or first person narrative, “diary literature” made literature far more accessible to women writers and readers. Quoting the words of a critic at that time, “Chinese literature has developed towards the warm and soft personal fiction, and this literature is most suited to a woman’s pen” (in Larson 1993:60). Indeed, most successful authors of the 1920s, both male and female, adopted the “I-novel” or “confessional fiction” to express their innermost sufferings and passions. Yet after 1925, leftist critics and male writers called for a new literature of social commitment that

denied the validity of individual experience and promoted a literary orientation to which women have therefore been denied access; women's writings as defined in the early May Fourth--preoccupation with personal emotions--became undesirable in such a political and literary re-construction (Larson 1993:58-73). Instead of asking what challenge these women's writings pose for the traditional thinking about women and literature, critical thought conveniently read them as deficient or "failures"; they lacked the balance, the mature detachment, the finality, that make for great works of literature. By attributing women writers' failures to the limitations of "femininity," the patriarchal literary tradition completed the vicious circle that helps guard its stability (Chow 1993:90-105).

It is from the 1980s that the term female literature (*nuxing wenxue*) has acquired new historical meanings and become extremely popular, while the term women's literature (*funu wenxue*) seems to have dropped out of women critics' vocabulary. The women's studies series, edited by Li Xiaojiang, a Chinese feminist critic, is devoted to recognizing not only a good number of women writers but also a female literature and female literary tradition that could be traced back to the May Fourth generation (Liu 1993:34). Female literature claims its focus on gender issues and its effort to bring the female tradition--rewrite the female self and the feminine--to light. Thus, the problem at hand is not simply that women writers' contributions to modern Chinese literature should be recognized as having equally profound meanings as men's, but how they can be recognized in their specificity.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1984) discuss a significant image, a "madwoman" double motif (angel/monster), that was created by nineteenth-century western women authors to overcome confinement by gender. They argue, the cultural role assigned to women is that of *servicing* an image, authoritative and

central, created by men. Thus, on the one hand, woman's *inauthentic* self lives as the "object-self" seen by the male world; on the other hand, women's *authentic* self lives as a "withdrawn--invisible self--invisible at times even to oneself" (Donovan 1985:137). As a result, a woman's person is split; as May Sarton (1966:48) puts it, she has been "broken in two/By sheer definition." Women write with such a profound split between their social, sexual identity and their artistic practice that this split becomes the insistent subject, sometimes overt, often hidden or displaced, of much women's works. Like the poetess of Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's "The Other Side of a Mirror" (1908), she looks into her glass to find that the woman she sees is not the angel she has pretended to be but a madwoman that she feels she really is. Coleridge, like many of her contemporaries, records the emergence of a monster from behind the mask of an angel. The perception of the image in the mirror as both angel and monster, as the same and different, reveals the true point at which female *authentic* subjectivity is attained. The madwoman double motif, thus, is the woman's quest for her own *authentic* self because there is no essence of eternal femininity prescribing a ready-made identity for her. The function of this female double is to act out the anxiety and rage against gender confinement that are represented in a text's central female character and to unify women writers' sense of fragmentation.

Obviously, emphasizing angel/monster double or the male-female binary is one of the key issues of western feminism to unify women's sense of fragmentation. As Nancy Chodorow (1979:51-70) argues, gender difference and differentiation are much more closely linked for men than for women. Masculinity is learned as "not female," and women are the object/other against which men need to define themselves. Being named as the "other," the female gender in the west is exploited more on the grounds of her "difference" than the lack thereof. Feminists can speak from a politically enabling

position against centered patriarchal ideology. By contrast, Chinese women in the 1980s find their female self completely inscribed within the state feminism that is based on Mao Zedong's notion of "equality" between men and women, as shown in Mao's well-known slogan, "What men can do, women can also do."¹ Since 1949, Chinese women have not only been legally guaranteed the right to work, but have almost no other choice. They were taught to believe that they should dress like men, behave like men, and could do whatever men can do. Gender became an unmarked and neutralized category. Gender politics was replaced by class politics. In other words, there was an emphasis on "asexuality" rather than "differentiation" in Mao's China (Li 1999:261-277; Yang 1999:35-67).

Yet, the liberation of women was tied with the liberation of nation from the very beginning. Women's issues always seem to be subsumed under the larger historical issues of the nation, the people, and so forth. It is not that the state discourse on gender 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 (the All-China Women's Federation) (Barlow 1991:146).² Thus, the "empowerment" of Chinese women in Mao's China means little more than equal opportunity to participate in public labor and uphold the authority of the Party. Instead of promoting female subjectivity, Dai Jinhua (in Yang 1999:46) argues, the ostensibly gender-neutral language of state discourse actually assimilates female gender to the male. In other words, this women's liberation, though giving value to women's political rights and social positions, was achieved at the cost of suppressing women's gender consciousness and female subjectivity.

In the wake of individual subjectivity in post-Mao China, writers, including women writers, started questioning such a gender-neutral image of women. An attempt to

reestablish a clear gender role for women began with the critique of the Iron Girl (*tie guniang*), the model figure representing Mao's slogan that women hold up half the sky. In their study of the critique of the Iron Girl concept, Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter (1989:23-30) found that the idea that women could or should behave like men was explicitly rejected by post-Mao Chinese society as just another ill-conceived Cultural Revolution attempt to challenge human nature.

The call for the return of a more feminine nature was among the early themes of Wound Literature.³ In "The Class Teacher", by describing a female character's refusal to wear a colorful dress, Liu Xinwu reveals that both political dogmatism and extreme puritanism have distorted a feminine desire for beauty (Liu 1977). At the same time, Zhang Kangkang's "The Right to Love" called for the return of the female's fundamental right to enjoy love and to be loved (Zhang 1979). Zhang Jie's controversial story "Love Must Not Be Forgotten"⁴ went even further by suggesting that a loveless marriage is unreasonable and immoral (Zhang 1979).

What is worthy of note here is not the critique itself but the consequence of the critique. In other words, what kinds of feminine nature should be realized? From the critique above we already see the difference between men and women writers: while the former calls for the return of a femininity that values gentle behavior and colorful dresses, the latter begin to ask for the liberation of women from political suppression and conventional but "distorted" marriage concepts. Further, in the attempt to reestablish a clear gender role, a search for masculinity was begun in 1980s Chinese literature, especially "root-searching" fiction, in which writers were interested in constructing an ideal masculine subject (*nanzi han*). The narrative pattern in these writings is still that of a hero lending his voice to a gentle, chaste, self-sacrificing, and thus virtuous woman.

This seems to suggest that men could recoup their lost masculine subjecthood by asking women to return to their traditionally-feminine position. To be sure, such an unreasonable attitude toward women leads inevitably to women's disappointment in men and their questioning of the definition of *femininity* itself.

The heightened awareness of a clear gender role is itself problematic. The center of the problem is, as Chris Weedon (1987:22) points out, "the common-sense assumption that there is a natural way for girls, boys, women and men to be. This gives rise to a battle to fix particular versions of femininity and masculinity as natural." The central question for Weedon is, obviously, not "natural" but how to fix particular versions of femininity and masculinity "as natural." Thus, when the heroine of Zhang Xinxin's "How Did I Miss You?"⁵ decides to change her so-called masculine temperament completely and be a more feminine woman for the director (her lover), it is clear that "woman" itself implies a model or a masquerade: for a woman to be feminine, she must "adjust" to (not "naturally" become) and accept the behavioral norms for her sex (Zhang 1980). The heroines in Zhang Xinxin's and other contemporary Chinese women writers' writing find themselves frequently involved in a struggle to *cure* themselves of womanhood. It is women's unhappy feeling of being forced into the mold of femininity that leads them to realize that the separation of masculine women from feminine women is indeed one construct--the same as Mao's violation of natural differences--through which the male-controlled power structure defines and controls women. Therefore, in her study of the phenomena of gender-neutral image of women in China, Zhong Xueping separates the western concept "androgyny" (with the hope of beginning to change fixed sex-role behavior) from the Chinese term "gender-neutrality" because the later has come under increasing criticism for its derogatory state feminist connotations (Zhong 1990:43-46). The problem is, then, not

the image of the male-female binary itself, but how historically determined connotations define the term.

This essay thus attempts to read the female double image Zhang Xinxin⁶ created in her writing, “a woman with an overly masculine temperament” (Zhang 1980), to investigate how Chinese women writers themselves understand binary genders. Zhang Xinxin’s masculine/feminine double problematizes the neglect of biological difference, while it articulates the author’s awareness of “the essential falsehood of gender as a way of defining and expressing the self” (Blum 1988:78). The heroine in Zhang Xinxin’s fiction is no longer an “angel in the house”; she is in some sense imbued with the interior feelings of that “witch-monster-madwoman” (Gilbert and Gubar 1984:79). She is a professional woman who prefers to conceal her feminine traits in order to “survive and keep on going,” but she seems also locked into a disconcerting double bind: she must protest that she is “as strong as a man” because she faces the same struggles and challenges as men face; simultaneously, she has to admit that she is “only a woman” because the society that values her struggle still requires her to fit the masculine idea of the feminine. Thus, this cultural definition of femininity frequently appears as an exposure of her failure to be “normal”—she is not what she is supposed to be. Therefore, Gilbert and Gubar’s approach to analyzing the angel/monster double can provide an interpretive framework for understanding Zhang Xinxin’s female double image in two ways: (1) in terms of separating her masculine/feminine double from the gender-neutral image of Iron Girl, a Chinese category, and (2) as a way for women not only to reject the social roles that men have imposed on them and women have too often accepted but also to actively participate in reconstructing the definitions of femininity and to get beyond gender divisions, a category shared across Chinese and western women’s writing. The

male/female bond, according to Joanne Blum (1988), can be described as a productive communication or interaction in which the male and female selves overreach their culturally-established gender identities.⁷ Thus, male and female become less separate identities, and the boundary between male and female becomes blurred.

The Masculine/Feminine Double

The masculine/feminine double motif first appeared in Zhang Xinxin's fiction in her short story "How Did I Miss You?" (Wo zai nar cuo guo le ni?) in 1980. The story didn't attract critical attention until several years later, when critics both inside and outside China became more interested in the female voice of contemporary Chinese women writers (Dan 1985; Wang 1986; Roberts 1989; Leung 1989; Zhong 1990). Still, to some critics, the story was simply another call for the return of the femininity that had been damaged by the political turmoil of the Cultural Revolution.⁸

The unnamed protagonist in "How Did I Miss You?" is a conductor. Every day she loudly demands tickets and aggressively shoves passengers on a crowded trolley bus, as her job demands. Yet every night, pursuing her own identity, she adopts another role: she attempts to write a play. She has a boyfriend, Li Ke, who is a decent person. Her friends and parents all consider him to be the best choice for her. She, too, cannot find any fault in him, though their relationship lacks passion. One day, as she gathers all her strength to push and shove her way to the door she must shut on a crowded bus, someone decidedly forces his way onto the bus behind her and pushes her up and forward. She feels quite grateful to him (for helping her to shut the bus), but as usual she simply issues the curt order, "Extinguish your cigarettes!" She is surprised to learn that night that the

“thirty-odd and quite ordinary-looking” man is the director who will direct her play, now completed and in production.

She soon falls in love with him. She admires his talent, his fighting spirit and his self-confidence, which are the qualities she pursues herself. With disappointment, she finds that though he values her masculine fighting spirit, he still requires her to meet certain feminine standards--to be gentle and quiet. She wants to make herself more feminine, as he wishes, but at the same time she worries that she is going to lose her own self-confidence, for which she has struggled hard. She also doubts that becoming a more feminine woman will truly make her lovable, since her so-called masculine temperament has become part of her.

She decides to keep silent during the play rehearsal, in order to change her image. She is regarded as extremely stubborn, a quality that is generally viewed as negative for women but positive for men. But she later finds herself in such strong opposition to the changes made to her play by the director that she finds it impossible to remain silent:

I really didn't want to argue with you, but you insisted on your own way. I had no choice but to speak; my characters must be as I had drawn them. My voice became louder and my words rolled out faster. I kept talking and talking. Suddenly, I realized that you would again interpret my insistence as stubbornness. You would never change your opinion of me. I stopped immediately and stared at you. You were saying something, but I couldn't catch a word of it because I was too busy in controlling my temper (1980:56).

The heroine consciously stops arguing with the director because she is afraid that he will think her stubborn and competitive, and he interprets this as her compromise. She finds herself in a dilemma in which she must either compromise her views or lose her “femininity.” Obviously, unless she remains silent and noncompetitive, she will be labeled as having an “overly masculine temperament” or as being “unfeminine” in a world where women are often expected to play the passive role of a “wordless” listener.

The play is successful. During the dance after the play, the heroine stands up and places her hand on the director's shoulder at the second invitation to dance. But just at this moment, the music stops. Suddenly, the director's comment, which the heroine heard from the main actress of the play, comes back to her: "The director often told me to observe the playwright, who herself is a woman with an overly masculine temperament" (1980:58). The heroine is very upset at being reduced to a stereotype because it means that he denies her struggle to be a unique female self. She wants him to understand her and regard her as an individual, not label her as either an "angel" or a "monster." Thus she says, in a deliberately cynical tone, "It seems we have no luck with each other" (*Kanlai, women wuyuan ne*) (1980:60). She knows she is going to lose him.

The story begins and ends as third-person narrative, yet the main body is told through the heroine's first-person flashback. When the flashback section begins, the heroine has already lost her chance of developing a love relationship because of her so-called overly masculine temperament. However, the story would have little value if it were only to call for the return of feminine nature in order for women to find fulfilling love.

From the beginning of the story, Zhang Xinxin clearly expresses that it is difficult to write a story with a protagonist who exhibits traditional feminine attributes. The story opens with a vivid picture that shows a woman lost in a sea of grey and blue:

It was another late Saturday afternoon as the streetcar moved from one stop to another along the familiar, noisy avenue. She was busy selling tickets as usual, clipping them and pushing them through the throng passengers. She was wearing a straight, loose greatcoat with a collar of camel hair and, if it had not been for the neutral professional tone of her voice trying to cover up its femininity, one would have had no way of telling she was a woman for she was buried under a sea of blue and grey. Now, she was hopping up and down in the doorway, stamping her suede boots laden with heavy mud. Brusquely she hustled the passengers on and off, or simply gave them a shove. (1980:31)

Through the uninvolved third-person narrative, Zhang Xinxin thus provides a typical story of a Chinese female conductor's daily routine and her stereotypically male behavior. Some critics have used this image to illustrate that it is equal sharing of physical labor with men that masculinizes the protagonist's behavior and temperament. But, if this image presents the idea of work equally shared, it also highlights a social reality: women now must be responsible for both their old roles as daughters, wives, and mothers and their new social role as workers. The image of a man-like female is too "common" (this is emphasized by the frequency of such words as *you*, *yiran*, *zhaojiu*) to be regarded as unusual; her colorless dress and her tough work environment make her so undistinguished that it is hard to pick her out in that "sea of blue and grey." Zhang Xinxin has no intention here of supporting or rejecting the idea of equal sharing of physical labor with men in every kind of work. What she wants to show is that man-like behavior and temperament already affected the conceptualization of femininity in China in 1980s. If this is the case, then what should be changed are the traditional concepts of femininity and masculinity. She suggests that changes in female behavior should be interpreted in a social and historical matrix.

This sentiment was amplified by the presentation of the director's dead ex-girlfriend as a symbol of perfect femininity; through this absent character, Zhang Xinxin implies that the director's expectation is indeed something already dead, something non-existent. Two incidents reveal this underlying tone. In the first incident, the heroine catches the sight of the girl's photo on the director's desk after she has just had an argument with him about her play. He accuses her of being "extremely stubborn." The heroine finds that the girl was terribly pretty! She had large, dark eyes and a gentle, soft appearance. Hers is a refined and beautiful portrait of a woman; that is, she was an

“angel” who presents an idealization of male desire. This is in striking contrast to the heroine. In the second incident, the first time the director expresses his feelings to the heroine, he says: “You look something like her, no, not really . . . I hope you will change your character. There is absolutely no reason why you can’t be strong while relying on your innate feminine qualities” (1980:51). The “innate feminine qualities” the director expresses are those he used to praise his ex-girlfriend, who was “quiet and gentle.” The heroine clearly proclaims her doubt that the ex-girlfriend was strong and yet quiet and gentle at the same time, as her narrated monologue asserts: “If she were still alive, she would be just like me” (1980:54).

Does this mean that the heroine identifies this quiet and gentle girl as her double, the image of herself in the past? In what sense, then, is this dead “angel” the heroine’s double? As Albert Guerard notes (1987:3), “the word double is embarrassingly vague, as used in literary criticism.” The double figure may be a personality we have attempted to disown, the “mirror image,” the “opposing self,” or a separate, autonomous character. According to Claire Rosenfield (1987:314), “The novelist who . . . exploits psychological Doubles may either juxtapose or duplicate two characters; the one representing the socially acceptable or conventional personality, the other externalizing the free, uninhibited, often criminal self.” Thus, the dead “angel” represents the socially acceptable feminine personality, contrasting with the stubborn and competitive character of the heroine. But her appearance in the story as a dead “angel” implies the death of the aesthetic ideal of perfect femininity. Furthermore, this quiet and gentle “angel” appeared in the story not only to serve as the “opposing self” of the heroine but also the “mirror image” of her. They both have been quite “aggressive” in their professional careers. In asserting that “If she were still alive, she would be just like me,” the heroine seems to

suggest that the quiet and gentle “angel” represents her own self and gender in the past. Because of the pain of being labeled a “monster” or “unfeminine,” the ex-girlfriend has to hide behind the angel’s mask. This may also suggest that she is only created by the director to “fill his dream.” On the other hand, the heroine is not simply a woman with an “overly masculine temperament.” There are many detailed descriptions in the story to show that she is, indeed, quite feminine because “Women who are simply ‘equal’ to men would be ‘like them,’ and therefore not women”(Irigaray 1992:87).⁹

The “angel” cannot be entirely understood in terms of the heroine’s individual psyche. Further, neither the heroine nor the “angel” can be described as antisocially inclined in the usual sense. The heroine could be considered “antisocial” only in the following sense; she acts as an ambitious and competitive woman in a culture that defines “woman” primarily in terms of passive femininity: gentle, quiet, self-sacrificing, and thus virtuous. The “angel” and the heroine are not set apart by categorical opposites. They are quite alike, representing two sides of one image in a mirror: an image of an angel/monster double, or of a masculine/feminine double.

The question the heroine bitterly asks through the retrospective narrative, indeed, is not “How did I miss you?”, as in the title, but one which underlies the text and is voiced indirectly: “Why can’t I be a woman with a masculine temperament--ambitious, self-confident, and stubborn--since it is an innate aspect of myself?” Or, in other words, “Why can’t I be a woman who is more like a man?” According to Lesley Stern (1988), such a question is unanswerable. The relation between the two terms, male and female, has been described as oscillating. In the question, “Why can’t a woman be more like a man?”, the word that signals this oscillation is “more.” Why more rather than less? Are more or less much the same? Are men and women more or less the same or more or less different?

The answer always turns into a further question (Stern 1988:25-34). The heroine is then doomed: she has no way out of her dilemma. However, a rhetorical question implies an answer. The implied answer is obvious: for a woman to be more like a man is for her to act out of her established female role, and if a woman acts out of her role she cannot function in a gendered culture or play her role in the current version of a love relationship.

It is perhaps for this reason that the heroine wants to change herself into a more feminine woman for the director, with whom she is in love. But she finds out that she cannot for two reasons. First, she finally recognizes that the masculine stance she adopts is not just a cover for her behavior, but a part of her character that she could not change even if she wanted to. Second, she doubts that changing herself into a more feminine woman will truly make her lovable. This doubt is revealed clearly in her explanation of the masculine mask she wore:

I would not assume the mask of neuter, sometimes even a masculine mask, if it were not for dealing with the pressure of society. But putting this aside, would I be able to change into someone a little more lovable? (1980:53)

In other words, she would be taking off a masculine mask to put on a feminine mask.

Will this feminine mask make her more like a woman, or just a woman wearing a feminine mask? The heroine does not actually ask this question but she does imply it.

The underlying idea of putting on a feminine mask is more directly voiced eight years later in Zhang Xinxin's novella "Which Half Will You Play This Time -- Husband or Wife?" (*Zhe ci ni yan na yi ban?*) (1988a). The I-narrator in the novella discovers that it is too easy to change someone into a woman. All one needs is to make up a face, put on a dress, and soften and lower the voice. Femininity, in both stories, seems to invite a reading framed by the concept of masquerade.

This concept corresponds to Lesley Stern's discussion of *My Fair Lady*. Stern writes that it is Professor Higgins who picks out the flower girl and creates her as a new woman, an ideal of femininity. She argues that what Professor Higgins does produce is indeed "competent mimicry": "How then is Eliza feminized? Or indeed is she feminized? Her transformation involves not only speech training but training in etiquette, deportment and dress." In flaunting her femininity, the Eliza figure (the flower girl) invokes the idea of "femininity is attained through dressing up and acting out a masquerade" (Stern 1988:29) and leads one to understand that it is femininity itself that is constructed as a mask. This similarity between Stern and Zhang--both writers view femininity in terms of a mask or masquerade--reveals a crucial paradigm that challenges the definition of femininity: sexual difference is biologically given, but the term "femininity" should be understood as a product of gender/culture, not of nature.

Yet as Nancy Chodorow (1979:51-70) points out, the dominant ideology will be internalized as "natural" or inevitable, and any contradictions or dislocation will be experienced within the woman as splits, divisions, and fragmentation. Zhang Xinxin's heroine's sense of the discrepancies between what she is and what she is supposed to be is shown in her repeated and unanswered self-questioning: "Did I really appear so self-confident in your eyes?", "Was I too open and direct?", "Or perhaps it was because of my habit of straight speaking and laughing with no attempt at concealment?" and "Were you [the director] laughing at me again for being like a man?" Endlessly she interrogates herself.

Interestingly, the heroine's self-doubting questions all concern her worries about her "masculinized" image in the director's eyes. This suggests that she knows from the beginning what causes her to lose him. Therefore, her reminiscence of her "lost" love

establishes a fact: it is not the power of love that compels her to recognize the loss of her own femininity, as some critics argue. Instead, it is the fear of losing her possible love relationship that forces her to change herself: “I wanted to change myself completely for you and be a woman more feminine” (1980:54). Her determination increases the sense that being a woman involves more or less feminine role-playing. By creating a competitive heroine with an “overly masculine temperament,” Zhang Xinxin questions the double standards of masculinity and femininity and claims the possibility of crossing gender boundaries.

The Male/Female Bond

The male/female bond that is an image of male/female relations reflects an effort, mainly a woman’s effort, to transcend traditional gender roles through pursuing an equal status with men, spiritually and professionally. In Zhang Xinxin’s perception, gender divisions can be transcended through mutual understanding between the two sexes. However, this cannot occur in the context of romantic bonding, since gender identity is the very foundation of social structure.

Transcending gender roles is no easy task. In “How Did I Miss You?”, the development of the relationship between the heroine and the director is characterized largely by conflict. From their first conversation after reading the play script, the terms of the conflict are clear. When the heroine challenges the change he proposes to meet the demands of staging, the director says: “While reading the play I thought you were a gentle, quiet girl, but in actuality you have a manly temperament”(1980:40). The heroine, habitually frank and straight-speaking, is not upset because she would much rather be what she is. She responds by saying: “I think that society demands more from women

today; family duties and social functions fall more upon our shoulders. We must be as strong as men. I regret to think why there are so many men lacking manly qualities” (1980:40). This response leads the director to remark: “Have you always been so aggressive?” It is apparent from the beginning that their relationship already centers on the testing of the boundaries of gender roles and the questioning of the twin concepts of femininity and masculinity.

The play plays a key role in their relationship. The description of their first encounter in the rehearsal room, as colored by the heroine’s feelings, shows that she initially falls in love with the director for the way in which he reacts to her play:

The deep and baritone voice made me feel so close to him; I was immediately deeply moved. Maybe I felt this way because the play was the result of my lonely struggle against defeat; mapping out my play only to cast it all awry, writing word after word only to tear up sheet after sheet. . . . I had pushed through a whole day of work, my entire body was sore and exhausted and my stomach empty, but within an instant of hearing that voice I forgot everything . . . (1980:36).

What truly moves her is her own play and, specifically, her own struggle to be creative.

The play is a mirror of her inner self, and a material expression of her sense of what it means to be an intellectual woman. Through the director’s reading of her play, she finds him to be understanding and knows that he is the one who will value her struggle. She is further attracted by his self-confidence and fighting spirit, which she herself pursues and admires, and which her boyfriend Li Ke lacks. It is this common fighting spirit shared by the heroine and the director that causes their “female” and “male” selves overreach their culturally-established gender identities.

The intensity of the heroine’s sense of the male/female bond is most evident in her exclamation “Take a close look--I am your mirror,” after the director accuses her of being extremely stubborn during their work on the script of the play. The heroine’s

exclamation, “I am your mirror,” reflects strongly their blended identities, but simultaneously this statement underlies the impossibility of romantic bonding between them. As the heroine recognizes later, “You valued my struggle, but still required me to fit in with feminine standards” (1980:42).

Some critics take the heroine’s stubbornness to be the reason why her love relationship with the director fails to develop. Some suggest that it is caused by her feminine reserve (Zeng 1985:121-124). I might add, however, that the heroine fails in her pursuit of love partly because of her inability to express her feelings. Whenever there is an opportunity to express her feelings, she becomes embarrassed and shifts the topic back arbitrarily to the play. She is confident and straight-speaking in professional matters, but full of self-doubt and confusion when communicating with the man she loves, ending in either a quarrel or complete speechlessness. The female I-narrator of “On the Same Horizon” (Zhang 1981) seems to have the same problem in communicating with her husband. In her study of the love relationship in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, Tonglin Lu (1991:138) argues that since the Chinese language lacks rhetorical expressions in love, “quarrels permit the lovers to understand each other’s feelings much better.” In Zhang Xinxin’s stories, however, quarrels do not serve as a channel for expressing one’s feelings. Her heroines’ inability to express their feelings is caused mainly by their uncertainty regarding their own romantic attachment in the social context. Their perspectives on themselves are so different from those presented established female gender roles that they feel such roles to be unacceptable. In terms of traditional gender roles, a cross-gender relationship involves the subordination of one self to the other, and it is most often the female self who is subordinated. The heroine of “How Did I Miss You?”

is threatened by the intervention of her female selfhood in a romantic attachment and thus becomes self-doubting and speechless.

To the heroine of “How Did I Miss You?”, the play (her professional career) points the way to the creation of a male/female double bond which transcends the divisions imposed by gender. “Male” and “female” become less separate identities. Thus we can understand why the heroine refuses to delete the female character’s lines in the play and is upset when the director insists on giving his own gendered reading of her play by declaring that the playwright herself is just one “stereotyped” man-like woman. Gender-role stereotyping will not only limit her possibilities for development as a unique self but also deny her effort to create a space in which it is possible for both men and women to get beyond gender divisions. She has no choice but to say with a broken heart, “It seems we have no luck with each other.”

“On the Same Horizon” (Zai tong yi dipingxian shang) (Zhang 1981),¹⁰ a novella published one year later, presents a similarly dismal picture of the possibilities for real understanding and sharing between men and women. “How Did I Miss You?” deals with a young urban girl who refuses to echo the male-imposed idea of femininity; a married woman in “On the Same Horizon” determines to divorce her husband because the traditional role of the self-effacing wife hinders the development of her selfhood and career, though the couple actually remain fond of each other to the end of the story.

“On the Same Horizon” opens with a question--“What’s to be done?” (*Zenmeban?*)--which functions to introduce a double point of view in the beginning of the story. It is a decision the heroine, a young married woman, needs to make at that moment. She has difficulty choosing between the items “single” and “married” in filling out the application form for the Central Academy of Drama. She is worried that her marital status

may influence her admission to the academy.¹¹ Her dilemma also presents her confusion and anxiety concerning how to solve her emotional and marital crisis. She and her husband are living separately. She is pregnant. Should she have an abortion in order to have one last chance of fulfilling her long-time dream of being a director? Or should she take on the traditional female roles of wife and mother, as her husband expects her to? She is locked into a difficult dilemma: “Why to a man, love exists only when he needs it; but to a woman, love becomes a heavy duty she must repay with all her suffering and self-sacrificing” (1981:168). The story is constructed around the problematic aspects of the relationship. What is problematic in the story, too, is the estimate of female subjectivity: the role of a wife limits women’s self-development. The crisis of marriage arises mainly because the husband has his patriarchal notion of what a wife should be, and the wife refuses to play the so-called wife’s role. The separation is thus inevitable.

The heroine (the female first-person narrator) first met the hero (the male first-person narrator) when they both were dispatched to the poor countryside, far away from the city and civilization. A sudden rain brings her and her friend Qiao Yaguang to the hero’s small bamboo house when he is out. She is deeply touched by the power of his paintings, which reveal a kind of effort with which she feels familiar. She kneels on the floor, watching and thinking, until she hears an “absolutely self-confident” voice behind her asks about her opinion of paintings:

He stood behind me. At first sight, I already knew that it was him. He wore a pair of ragged pants covered with mud, with a raincoat under his arm, the raindrops rolling down from his naked strong chest . . .

“How are the paintings?”

“They are very good.” Unusually, I flattered him face to face, since I was busy studying him.

“No, these are even better.” He opened his raincoat, took out some new water-colored sketches. Using his finger, he pointed to one and then quickly to another:

“Here! Here! What do you think?”

I smiled at him: an absolutely self-confident one (1981:142).

From the time of that meeting, the heroine begins to write down her own impressions under the oil lamp night by night, because she realizes that she can record more than he does if she keeps recording all her inner feelings. Obviously, what causes her to fall in love with him, but not with Qiao Yaguang who was her good friend from childhood, is a kind of shared understanding, a common fighting spirit. It is clear that for the heroine, connection with the masculine is a necessity part of her creative self-definition. As she notes, “He actually has what I lack and need” (1981:231). Her self-definition hinges upon defining the “otherness” of the male, which blurs the boundary between self and other.

Interestingly enough, not only does the heroine feel and need this kind of spiritual support and sharing, but also the hero stresses that he needs her intellectual stimulation. Nevertheless, he values her intellect only when he needs it. This is evident in his monologue about their failed marriage, which reflects his clearly masculine point of view: “Our marriage is like a snake with two heads, or one tied body with two minds. Either of us wants to crawl toward his own destination; neither is willing to sacrifice. Perhaps, she will be successful one day; but as a wife, she is the worst” (1981:154). In other words, the wife’s duty is to provide the husband with solid grounding and a warm home. Thus, again, we sense the limitation of “sharing” between males and females in the context of marriage bonding, even for a couple who has common experiences and same fighting spirit.

Why? The husband wants an intellectual wife when he needs it, but most of the time, after he returns home from his daily struggle to earn artistic recognition, he wishes to see a wife who is meek and gentle, and who performs wifely duties. The husband’s true feelings about the wife’s role are shown in his misogynistic remark: “By now I still

don't understand why she has trouble being 'domesticated' (*xunhua*)" (1981:155). The term *xunhua* deserves some discussion. While it refers to the animals which can be tamed and trained, it is here transposed into patriarchal language to describe the "ideal" wife at home. The fusion of domesticated femininity with trained animals signifies a deep-rooted, gendered culture geared toward accentuating the woman's "difference"; a woman's difference is tantamount to her "domesticated" inferiority.

The wife thus finds herself in an unresolvable dilemma. When she attempts to abandon her ambition to become a writer and director in order to help him achieve his goal, she feels unhappy and lost. She cannot stop asking: "And me? Where am I?" It is her unhappy feeling about being a man's "shadow" and her sense of "domesticated" inferiority that lead her to challenge established female gender roles. Her questioning reflects a female selfhood threatened by the imposition of the marriage bond. In addition, as a wife she wonders if her husband will lose interest in her if she no longer offers him intellectual stimulation. This reveals a female wish for male/female bonding: equal communication with a man on spiritual, intellectual, and psychological planes. In such explorations of male-female relations, Zhang Xinxin makes clear the reality of the gender divisions that underlies marital conflicts: what a husband really wants from a wife is that she performs her so-called wifely duties. Thus, a woman who refuses to do so has no choice but escape from her "imprisonment" as a "wife," even though she may still, in some sense, love her husband.

The story is told through alternating first-person monologues by both husband and wife. This provides Zhang Xinxin with the psychological depth she was seeking to probe beneath the surface of "his" and "her" feelings of anger and frustration due to their inability to communicate with each other. Not only does the subject matter go far beyond

the ideological and literary practices of the previous decades, when romantic love, self-sacrificing woman, and the ideal masculine subject were more popular themes, it also raises questions about the very premise of love and sees marriage as a profoundly gender-based bond, for it is disadvantageous to a woman who has to depend on her husband for self-fulfillment after she has acquired social and economic independence. As the husband puts it, “How far can you go on your own? I know you have sacrificed yourself for me. I will take care of you. You’d better follow me. Come!” (1981:157). But the wife clearly realizes that the woman never comes first in the struggle for existence (*shengcun jingzheng*): she and he face the same challenge in the competition for professional success and personal happiness. If the heroine in “How Did I Miss You?” still regards the masculine subject, or *nanzi han*, as an ideal lover, the heroine in “On the Same Horizon” challenges the so-called ideal masculinity by questioning the biased concepts of “wife” and “marriage.” On the other hand, the alternating first-person monologues also epitomize the impossibility of a productive communication between husband and wife. Communication that is expressed not in the form of dialogues but in the form of monologues reveals the difficulty for the two sexes to come to mutual understanding.

The novella ends in a restaurant with the couple about to finalize their divorce. The heroine has just come from a showing of her first ten-minute film. Her husband has finally earned recognition as a talented painter; his paintings of Bengal tigers are going to be published. In a scene that recalls their past love, they both feel tenderness and wonder about the possibility of rebuilding their marriage:

“I hope that you will meet a quiet and meek wife next time.” She raises her glass, speaking with a low voice and a wittiness she used to have. Her eyes, used to be as smooth as a child’s; now you can already see slight wrinkles.

“I hope that you will meet a husband who shows you every consideration.” He also raises his glass. As usual he smiles calmly. There is something strange on his

face. Is it a new scar on his forehead? I don't know why but I do want to put my hand into his disheveled hair, comb it slowly until it looks neat . . .

I put down my glass. I suddenly want to tell her: "Come! Let's go to ..."

The food arrives (1981:245).

The musings seem to have been interrupted by the arrival of food. The arrival of food may suggest that it is daily trivialities that cause the conflicts between them and finally lead them to end their marriage. However, it also may symbolize peace of mind the heroine eventually and finally obtains: although she still in some sense remains emotionally attached to him, she is able to see their separation as a renewal, or the incident as even a rebirth of her female subject. Indeed, this is where she becomes creative and is able to face him and herself confidently and calmly for the first time. Her rebirth is based on an escape from the "imprisonment" of the marriage bond and a refusal to *serve* as a "mirrored" image for the male subject.

"On the Same Horizon" is regarded as a piece of autobiographical fiction. There is a mirroring or doubling effect in the relationship between the female I-narrator and her story, and between the author and her story. In fact, Zhang Xinxin was facing her own marriage crisis when she wrote the novella. The repeated self-doubting questions of the heroine may have been the very questions that beset Zhang Xinxin herself: "What can be done?", "Is it finished like this?", "What's wrong?", and "Family, husband . . . can I really shoulder all the wifely duties any longer?" Writing thus became a means for self-questioning; as she says, the first motive that led her to write "On the Same Horizon" was a very personal and emotional need: to understand and to be understood (Zhang 1988b). Perhaps Zhang Xinxin was attempting to reconstruct her understanding of her failed marriage and her failure to be "normal" through her own writing. Thus she felt the same

way as the poetess of “The Other Side of Mirror” did--as if the very process of writing had itself liberated a new woman from the man-centered idea of the feminine.

In her article, “Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory,” Jane Flax (1990:45) argues that “gender relations’ is a category meant to capture a complex set of social processes. Gender, both as an analytic category and a social process, is relational....” Donna Haraway similarly argues that formulations of “gender” have changed in different discourses and different sites: from distinguishing gender as a concept from biological sex to providing paradigms through which female identities are constructed (1990:190-227). Rather than posing the problem of a female as a victim in the culturally constructed cage of femininity, both Flax and Haraway examine the different ways in which women participate in the production of gender discourses. In other words, “woman,” “femininity” and “femaleness” become not static, unchanging categories but, rather, are produced within “relational” social and historical contexts. Understood in this light, Zhang Xinxin’s masculine/feminine double image--“a woman with an overly masculine temperament”--could become a way for women not only to reject the roles that society and men have imposed on them but also to actively participate in reconstructing the definitions of femininity and redefining its limits. This is especially the case when the exaggeration and celebration of gender difference and sexuality in the rapid growth of China’s market economy has again turned female subjectivity to the object of the male gaze. Classes that teach women to be more feminine and to realize their sexual identity have sprung up in the 1990s’ China. In the new identity as a beautiful woman and a different gender, a male structure “defines the female by encouraging her to evaluate herself in her reflection in the male” (Yang 1999:49).

In the figure of the female double, one can see clearly Zhang Xinxin's cross-gender effort through the heroines' identification with the heroes as a separate, yet very much related, self. It is clear that for her and many Chinese women writers, gender-role stereotyping will limit not only a woman's but also a man's possibilities for development as a unique self or into "human wholeness."¹² However, the question of what it means to be a woman, when asked, can function to deconstruct and reconstruct the definitions of femininity. When pursued, as the heroines are in the two narratives, it can mean doomed to barren emotional lives. What is problematic in such a pursuit is perhaps what is significant in Zhang Xinxin's fiction. Being able to see the advantages of choosing *not* to be one of society's "normal" member--to be excluded and marginalized--Zhang Xinxin and Chinese women writers have created a woman who is freed from being stereotyped and idealized, a woman who is "autonomous, intellectual, unwomanly and ultimately lovable" (Heilbrun 1990:308). Here then is a woman writer who has imagined for other women a self that she has achieved through her (re) writing of herself--a female self that has moved, without apology, outside the established feminine framework and beyond internalized pain and anger, and has finally transcended gender identity.

Endnotes

¹ This was probably the most frequently cited proof that women in new China had become equal participants in society during the Mao period. But as Lydia Liu (1993) and Tani Barlow (1993) point out, 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. For further information, see Tani Barlow, ed. *Gender Politics in Modern China* (1993).

² Tani Barlow (1991:146) 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."

³ Wound Literature, *Shanghen wenxue*, that first brought the topic of critique of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) to the literary scene, represented the literary mainstream in China in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

⁴ English translation in Yang (1986: 1-14).

⁵ English translation in Roberts (1987: 92-124) and Tam (1999: 189-214).

⁶ Zhang Xinxin was born in 1953 in Nanjing, but not long after her birth, her family moved to Beijing. Like many urban youth of her generation, she was sent to a military farm in the Great Northern Wilderness of outer Manchuria to accept education from farmers and soldiers during the Cultural Revolution in 1969. In 1979, at age twenty-six, she passed the college entrance exam and entered the Central Academy of Drama. Her first literary effort, a short story, "In the Quiet Ward," appeared in *Beijing Literature* in 1978. Since then she has published about twenty short stories and novellas. I am going to discuss three of her fiction in this essay.

⁷ In her book, Blum argues that women writers of fiction such as the Brontes, Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence have repeatedly tried to create a female/male double bond. She calls this "female double intersubjectivity." She points out that in the male/female bond, one self does not necessarily take precedence over the other, nor can one self be usefully considered as a representation of some aspect of the other. The female/male bond is a dynamic interaction between male and female that defies and transcends the gender constructs.

⁸ Lai-fong Leung, who has devoted considerable attention to the study of the image of young female intellectuals in post-Mao women's fiction, ends her analysis of "How Did I Miss You?" by noting that, to Zhang Xinxin, "for a female to be capable of a fulfilling love, she must regain her genuine femininity which has been masculinized for political purpose" (Leung 1989: 151).

⁹ For Irigaray, female's subjectivity would not be established on an equality that ignores sexual difference, since such an equality still requires women to accept being judged as "not women" by masculine standards.

¹⁰ "On the Same Horizon," published in 1981, gained immediate popularity and first earned Zhang Xinxin literary prominence. She succeeded because she was extremely self-centered in the novella, recording and revealing the sensibilities of her generation as it struggled to break social and cultural conventions. But when the political winds chilled two years later, this novella provoked harsh criticism. Not only were her stories literally seized from the printing press, but also she was denied a job assignment and even her diploma from a drama institute.

¹¹ The story reveals later that her worry is grounded. After she passes the college entrance exam, a new policy is issued. She calls the academy and gets a response: according to the new policy, she may not be admitted because she is married.

¹² Betty Friedan (1981) encourages both men and women to work toward an androgynous future in which all human beings would mix within themselves mental and behavioral "masculine" and "feminine" traits. She claims that "human wholeness" is the "promise of feminism."

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