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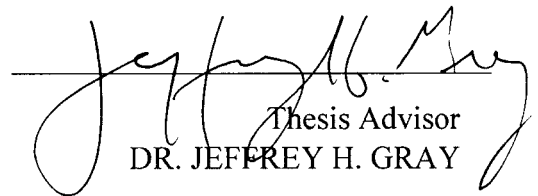
Second Reader: DR. MARY M. BALKUN

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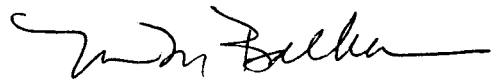
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ABSTRACT

HOW DOES POETRY CONFESS?

ZHAI YONGMING'S POEMS AND THE LANDSCAPE OF "CONFESSION"

by

XIN XU

Supervised by Dr. Jeffrey H. Gray

In the 1980s, a Chinese poet, Zhai Yongming (翟永明), published a linked suite of nineteen poems. Zhai entitled this sequence "Women" (Nǚren 女人) and claimed that her poems were largely influenced by American confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath. Chinese critics suggest that Zhai inaugurates the trend of confessional poetry in China. This paper will first contextualize the Chinese translation of American confessional poetry in the Mao and post-Mao age, and then problematize the concept of "confession" in Chinese poetry criticism by making American confessional poetry a counter point. Under the term of confessional poetry it is "the illusion of a True Confession;" a crucial point made by both Donald Sheehan and Majorie G. Perloff (470). The aesthetics of presenting the actual facts and creating the illusion of confession is the basic controversy but also the glamour of confessional poetry. For confessional poets, poetry not only presents confession but also represents it. In a close reading of her two most important poems "Women" and "Jing'an Village (*Jing'an zhuang* 静安庄)," this research will suggest that Zhai Yongming transforms "the night" inspired by Sylvia Plath to make her own landscape of confession, which is far beyond the term "confessional poetry."

HOW DOES POETRY CONFESS?

ZHAI YONGMING'S POEMS AND THE LANDSCAPE OF "CONFESSION"

Because of struggle sessions¹, "confession" had to be one of the most loaded words during the Cultural Revolution in 1970's China. Ironically, confessional poetry was soon introduced into the contemporary Chinese literary world. In the 1980s, a Chinese poet, Zhai Yongming (翟永明), published a linked suite of nineteen poems. Zhai entitled this sequence "Women" (Nǚren 女人) and claimed that her poems were largely influenced by American confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath. The content of "Women," fraught with feminine qualities and tropes representing female's gentleness, sensitiveness and tolerance, is about a women's refined perception of the world she lives in. In her subsequent poem "Jing'an Village" (*Jing'an zhuang* 静安庄), the personal and individualistic elements, which are related to female experiences such as childbearing in "Women," are projected more on the fate of village people in a troublesome time. Moreover, like Plath and Elizabeth Bishop, who rejected the phrase "woman poet," Zhai declared in her statement in 1986 that she would like to be a poet rather than a poetess. Therefore, Chinese critics suggest that Zhai inaugurates the trend of confessional poetry in China.

Previous scholarship has centered on feminist readings of Plath's and Zhai's poems in the framework of intertextuality, just as critics emphasize the feminist characteristics of Zhai's

¹ "Struggle session" originates from "to judge" (*pipan* 批判) and "to fight" (*douzhen* 斗争), and was shortened to the phrase "*pidou*" (批斗). It was used to shape public ideas and to execute political rivals. During a struggle session, the victim was forced to confess and admit his or her crimes in front of a crowd of people and to face public humiliation, verbal and physical abuse.

writing. “Women” has catered to Chinese critics ‘expectations: “if we believe that Zhai Yongming has participated in ‘women poetry’ by ‘creating a night,’ then we can expect that women poetry will by virtue of her go through the night to light” (Tang “Who is Zhai Yongming” 158). The earliest readings of “Women” always turned into a mere reflection on the status of women and women’s writing, based on the reference of masculine values and “bias,” without a deeper engagement with poetics, unfortunately. Obviously, interpretation within the scope of femininity limits our understanding of confessional poetry as a genre, formally introduced by Zhai in her poetry during the 1980s, when Scar Literature² (*shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学), which was aimed at reflecting the historical tragedy caused by the Cultural Revolution, rose at the end of the 1970s in China. Zhai’s choice of reading and imitating American confessional poetry essentially resonated with and responded to the rise of Scar Literature and new-generation poetry. Rather than paying attention to the feminine quality of Chinese and American female confessional poets, this study emphasizes confessional poetry as a genre unto itself and its literary and historical connotations.

Many studies have been done on American Confessional Poetry, particularly on Sylvia Plath’s poems. In this essay, I am primarily concerned with how the concept of confessional poetry is understood in the American academy and how it is translated, accepted, and criticized in Chinese poetry and the Chinese literary arena. Confessional poetry in China (in the 1980s) and in America (in the 1950s and 1960s) share several key characteristics: the idea of expressing the

² Scar Literature, as a genre, obtained its name from the fiction “Scar (*Shang hen* 伤痕)” by Lu Xinhua (卢新华)” published on *Wenhui Po* (*Wenhui bao* 文汇报) in 1978, while Liu Xinwu (刘心武), who published a fiction entitled “The Head Teacher (班主任)” in 1977, inaugurated the trend of Scar Literature. This type of works mainly engages with the suffering and tragic experiences of Chinese intellectuals during the period of the Cultural Revolution and the rule of the Gang of Four.

repressed and revealing the private, and the poetic goal of breaking with an older tradition. Yet, both of them finally have to face the conflicts between the private and the public, the individual and the historical, and the rational and the irrational. If we think confessional poetry provides a passage for an autonomous voice, then we must know how to answer the question “where could the autonomous voice come from?” (Breslin 12-13) Paul Breslin focuses his argument on the nature of art and forces us to think about how art is poised between “being sublimated” and “engaging reality” (14). Whether “engaging reality” impairs artistry and lyricism of poetry is a valid question when we consider and reconsider themes, linguistic features, and the general nature of confessional poetry. In fact, Chinese poetry in the twentieth century has never been exempt from the dispute between “overwhelming reality” and “afflicted poetic aesthetics.” In his essay “Robert Lowell’s ‘Confessional’ Image of an Age: The Theme and Language in Poetic Form,” Jackson G. Barry reminds us of the different poetic devices and rhetorical techniques respectively demonstrated in “Man and Wife” and “Memories of West Street and Lepke.” He asks us to notice that Lowell utilizes his particular experience to capture the sense of his age and successfully incorporates new symbols, rather than some hackneyed ones, to depict an image of the tranquil Fifties and the decade before it (57). Can we view the details of trivial life and exposure of private space as new images and thus a new form of poetry?

In terms of the reception of American confessional poetry in China, Jeanne Hong Zhang’s ground-breaking essay “American and Chinese Confessional Poetry,” through the theoretical framework of intertextuality, renders an overview of the history of “confessional literature” and the initial shape of its reception in China. She particularly notices that the labeling of Zhai Yongming as “confessional” is questionable: “death and dark scenario loom large in contemporary Chinese women’s poetry” (20). Undoubtedly, death and dark images and scenario

are the indicators of confessional poetry, but the scholar's query is whether the critics are able to justify their critic practice of "imposing the tag of 'confession' exclusively on women poets" (21).

Zhang theorizes about "Night Consciousness" in her book *The Invention of a Discourse: Women's Poetry from Contemporary China*, and argues that the adoption of the colour black by certain Chinese female poets is essentially a rejection of the colour red, which was "strongly politicized in Maoist times" (123). However, her research is still limited within the scope of gender and feminism, and thus does not touch much on the "confessional" – the poetic idea itself. Tang Xiaodu, who also writes about Zhai Yongming's poems, has discussed the issues of Chinese avant-garde poetry in the nineties. Although his criticism is beyond the scope of my research, Tang's poetic concepts of "breaking off and continuation" and "personal writing" shed light on our understanding of the idea of the "historical self" (77-89), and touch on the core of my discussion below as well.

Michael M. Day's study, *China's Second World of Poetry*, provides a fuller historical framework for contemporary Chinese poetry. By focusing his research on rediscovery of modern poetry, he not only addresses the domestic social and political situation of the post-Mao era, but also guides us to notice the idea of "expression of abuse" (Ch.1), which was once used to criticize the Misty Poets³ (*menglong shiren* 朦胧诗人). The Misty Poets, departing from social realism, which had officially dominated since the Mao era, insisted on their own poetic thoughts

³ The Misty Poets, largely influenced by the Western modernism, are a group of Chinese poets emerging in the late 1970s and the early 1980s. Bei dao, one of the representatives of the Misty Poets Beidao, was editing the poetry magazine *Today* (*Jin tian* 今天), which was the vital field of poetry diffusion of these poets. Their poetic ideas were against the restrictions on art during the Cultural Revolution and very aware of the poetic pursuit of independence and reflection of reality, though their works were denounced as "misty" and "obscure."

and continuously resisted the restrictions on literature and art. Though undergoing rigorous denunciation, they never stopped reading, writing, publishing, and circulating underground poems and persisted until the post Cultural Revolution period. The most notable Misty Poet, Bei Dao, who was exiled later on, was the editor of *Today*, the underground literature journal exclusively proclaiming its non-political nature at the time (Day Ch.1). In his essay, Day points out, “Between 1979 and 1983, a larger number of newcomer poets in all parts of China had been reading and emulating Misty poetry and formerly forbidden translated poetry from the west. By 1982, they had begun to find their own, very different voices. . .” (Ch.1) Zhai Yongming is a few years younger than most of the Misty Poets. She was writing in the historical circumstance when all these newcomers were, chasing after the Misty Poets, seeking a deeper exploration of individual language and placing greater emphasis on the life of the individual.

This paper will first contextualize the Chinese translation of American confessional poetry in the Mao and post-Mao age, and then problematize the concept of “confession” in Chinese poetry criticism by making American confessional poetry a counter point. Under the term of confessional poetry it is “the illusion of a True Confession;” a crucial point made by both Donald Sheehan and Majorie G. Perloff (470). The aesthetics of presenting the actual facts and creating the illusion of confession is the basic controversy but also the glamour of confessional poetry. For confessional poets, poetry not only presents confession but also represents it. In a close reading of her two most important poems “Women” and “Jing’an Village,” this research will suggest that Zhai Yongming transforms “the night” inspired by Sylvia Plath to make her own landscape of confession, which is far beyond the term “confessional poetry.”

Translating Confession in the Age of Executing Petty Capitalism

During the Cultural Revolution, life in China was highly “politicized,” and any exhibition, expression and reflection of individualism, not concerning the need of and service to the country, would be viewed as noxious and labelled as “bourgeois ideas” or “bourgeois behaviors,” and then receive invective and serious punishment.” 1979 was the first time in decades that foreign styles of clothing became available to the public, as before that time people had to avoid “bourgeois clothing;” both men and women wore the same army-style clothing with plain and solemn design (Atwill and Yurong Y. Atwill 318-319). The avoidance of “bourgeois clothing” from foreign countries epitomized the special social-political situation during the time, and foreign culture exchanges almost completely ceased. Books and journals of foreign literature were locked away and unable to be accessed in public libraries. It should be noted that the abandonment of “bourgeois” does not mean that all foreign things had to be forbidden, but those western cultural items representing capitalism were not allowed, as the “Sixteen Points” made by Chairman Mao in 1965 state:

At present our objective is to struggle against and overthrow those people in authority who are taking the capitalism road, to criticize and repudiate the reactionary bourgeois academic ‘authorities’ and the ideology of the bourgeoisie and all other exploiting classes, and to transform education, literature and art and all other parts of the superstructure not in correspondence with the socialist economic base... (Collier 86).

Following the death of Mao Zedong, the fall of the Gang of Four, and the liberating policy of Deng Xiaoping, the desire to articulate individual needs and emotion was tolerated, if not fully accepted, in the post-Cultural Revolution.

Certainly, western culture, which could serve to promote proletariat interests, was permitted in ideological considerations, and in this respect the most obvious cultural exchange with the

West in China was the importing of western drama. A “high tide” for the theater occurred from 1963 until the end of the Cultural Revolution. According to statistics, over three years during this period, a few national and regional joint performances were held, and “there were 327 pieces in the repertory of regional theater viewing and emulation festivals, of which 112 were pieces of western-style drama” (Hong 200). Drama was a conducive genre for advocating “class struggle” and achieving the literary and artistic goals of revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism, the combined style proposed by Mao Zedong. Compared to other genres such as fiction, prose, and poetry, drama was of particular importance to the Chinese politician: drama was probably the best instrument of propaganda, as original plays were easily adjusted, revised, and performed, and more importantly did not require well-educated audiences (To educate and enlighten illiterate or semi-literate masses had always been the task of Chinese intellectuals since the May Fourth Movement). Another reason, as Hong points out, is that drama emphasizes the participation of audiences and exchanges between authors, actors, directors, and audiences. Therefore, drama, as an integration of entertainment, education, and propaganda, jumped into the political arena with moral currency.

Poetry, by contrast, was not favored by the government. It was constantly struggling, undermined and even rejected. Chinese poets had difficulty seeking a balance between writing “pure poetry” and “serving the people.” A still more complex issue for Chinese poetry after “May Fourth” was the challenge of splitting itself from the old poetic tradition. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the May Fourth Movement brought about the New Cultural Revolution together with the literature Revolution, which started from language reform. Taking on the responsibility of casting off an old world and establishing a new nation, the New Cultural Movement pointed its spear to the old culture inducing classic Chinese, literature, culture, and

social norms. In 1918, Hu Shi published an article on Ibsen's plays, and criticized the issues regarding religion, law, ethics, family, and marriage in the "old" society, and advocated literary realism and individual liberation (*gexing jiefang* 个性解放), which came right after and supported the ideas of his "A Tentative Proposal for the Reform of Literature"⁴ (*wenxue gailiang chuyi* 文学改良刍议). In this essay, Hu Shi proposed eight principles regarding what to write and how to write, which were basically around the subject of "walking away from the past." The three suggestions – "Do not imitate the ancient writers," "Do not moan in works if not being sick," and "Do not use the technique of parallelism" (Ge and Shangguan 5) – were expressly against the old literary style. Though all the literary forms including prose, drama, fiction and poetry needed to be changed with the rising of the Literary Revolution (*wenxue geming* 文学革命), poetry experienced the most dramatic change, since the form of new poetry would be very different from traditional poetry due to the issue of rhyming. Some scholars suggested that it was not easy to write new poems at that time, because one had to release them from the old poetic form of being strictly rhymed. The new poetry with loosely-rhymed or even non-rhymed form caused a new problem of blurring the boundary between prose and poetry. For most writers and readers, the new poetry, also called free poetry lost the fabric, beauty, and poetic sentiment of the classical Chinese poetry (39).

Being aware of the new poetry's lack of rhythm, the new poetry writers tried to re-establish the form of poetry, and this attempt naturally led them to the path of borrowing the poetic form of Western poetry, because they could no longer turn to the abandoned poetic tradition. This could be viewed as the first time that Chinese poets asked the West for "help" since the May

⁴ This article was published on January 1, 1917 in *New Youth*. Hu pronounced that vernacular literature had to be the orthodox literature of China.

Fourth Movement. In other words, the New Literature writers' declaration of a divorce from tradition created a big gap, which classical Chinese literature could hardly fill. Therefore, translation, reading, critique, and imitation of Western works were justified, and the death of the old tradition was followed by the establishment of a new tradition. In an interview with He Tongbin, a contemporary literary critic at Nanjing University, Ouyang Jianghe commented on the poetic education of the younger generation, "either you [young poets] regard us as enemy or "kill" the father, or substitute us by killing us with a knife, and it is o.k. (But) after you have killed the father, what you are going to take to become a father? This is the essential query and inquiry of literature" (Ouyang 127). Ouyang's thoughts review and re-raise the issue of the inheritance of literary tradition, which not only concerns the poetry writing in recent ten years but also touches on and reminds us of the two watersheds of modern Chinese poetry after 1900 – one I mentioned above, and the other is the transitional period after the Cultural Revolution. Likewise, when analyzing the Third Generation of Poets (this refers to those who had grown up in the 1970s and were gradually recognized in the mid-1980s), Michel M. Day suggests, that the significance of literary tradition remained in question; it was easy for poets to revolt against the previous ideological constraints set by the socialist and revolutionary realism or literary convention of Misty Poetry; however, the difficulties of locating a literary tradition was always there. He further sharply comments, "We have already become orphans of literary tradition. In search of solace, by coincidence every one turned to the west" (25-26). Although Day's reflection here refers to the poet Han Dong's comments published in 1993, his insight sheds light on the reception of American confessional poetry in China.

When reviewing the poetry of Ouyang Jianghe, a member of Misty Poets who wrote a long poem "The Hanging Coffin" (*Xuan guan* 悬棺) in 1984, Jing Wendong claims that "death" is a

major theme of contemporary Chinese poetry. In her examination of American and Chinese confessional poetry, Jeanne Hong Zhang notices that Sylvia Plath's poetry gained a great popularity in China in the early 1980s, and under her influence the "death complex" as well as "night consciousness" led to a shared poetic mode of Chinese women's poetry (19-20). The reception of Plath's poetry was concentrated on the discussion and imitation of the dark images and poetic tone in *Ariel*; darkness itself and the other elements, for instance, absurdity, death, and fear – were repeatedly brought up by Chinese poets. Zhang argues that Chinese poets' embrace of Plath signifies their poetic quest for "the creative freedom denied by modern Chinese politics" (20).

When examining the reception of American confessional poetry in China, Chinese critics focused too much on Plath's influence, which is seemingly due to Zhai's personal reading of Plath's poems; she fairly appreciated "Black Consciousness" in her writings. However, the critics overlooked the fact that it was Yuan Kejia, a distinguished poet and translator, who first introduced two poems of Lowell's *Life* – "Skunk Hour" and "Union Dead" – as well as how Yuan Kejia interpreted them at the time. Even more importantly, we need to re-examine how Yuan Kejia understood the term "Confessional Poetry." From 1946 to 1978, Yuan, specializing in European and American literature and literary translation, had respectively worked at Peking University as a professor, at the Propaganda Department of the CPC Central Committee as a translator, at Foreign Languages Press as an English Editor, and at Foreign Literature Institute of Academia as an assistant researcher. Many of his papers on foreign literature were concerned with Western modernism, the poetics of modernism, and the modernity of New Poetry in China. In general, his literary criticism shifted from the discussion of the essence and significance of poetry writing in the 1940s to the appreciation of the Western literary canon, tradition, and

schools since the 1960s. After a new era came in the late 1970s, Yuan immersed himself in his study of modernist literary works, and his first round of commentaries were concentrated on stream-of-consciousness, Structuralism, Theater of the Absurd, and symbolist poetry, all of which were considered “very modern.”

Whether the connotation of “Confessional Poetry” was clearly introduced and understood in 1980s’ Chinese literary circles is arguable, as the person who translated and made comments on them showed his ambivalent attitude toward this genre. In 1980, Yuan wrote an essay titled “American Poetry since the Sixties (*Liushi niandai yilai de meiguo shige* 六十年代以来的美国诗歌),” in which he briefly introduced the different poetic styles of the major American poets after the 60s, including Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath, and several Black Mountain Poets, such as Charles Olson and Robert Creeley. In this essay, he called readers’ attention to the evident change of the American poetry circle in the 1950s, as he argued that the poetic style represented by Williams, who stressed life experiences and a new concept of linguistic rhythm, got enlivened by Confessional poets, the Beat Generation, and Projective Verse (*fangshe Pai* 放射派⁵) (358). Yuan examines these poets of the 1950’s in relation to the two poets of the last generation – T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams; the former poet, who dominated poetry circles from 1925-1955 and represented academics, repressed the voices of poets such as Williams, who made poetry out of ordinary life and language. Apparently, Yuan’s short comments drew a clear line between Eliot and Williams, and indicated that one poetry school was suppressed by the other, quoting Williams’ words in his biography: “*The Waste Land*

⁵ In Yuan Kejia’s essay, he uses “*fangshe pai*,” which literally means “the school of Projective Verse,” to refer to Charles Olson’s “Projective Verse.” The term actually came from Olson’s influential manifesto and was first published as a pamphlet. Later on it was cited extensively in William Carlos Williams’ *Autobiography* (1951).

expelled us from the world...and Eliot sent us back to the school again” (358). Yuan took Robert Lowell as the index of the transformation of American poetry in the 1950s, because he believed that Lowell’s *Land of Unlikeness* and *Lord Weary’s Castle*, in terms of both content and form, were yet not able to be detached from Eliot’s influence. In his article, Yuan wrote that, “For eight years after that, Lowell did not publish any poems. *Life Studies* published in 1959 designated the rising of Williams’ style” (359).

Noticeably, Yuan’s analysis of the difference between Eliot and William as well as Lowell’s poetic inheritance of and deviation from the tradition, which is represented by Eliot, essentially fits his theorization and criticism of New Poetry in China, and his literary analysis can be seen as a common mode in the Chinese literary arena. The “elite writing” featured by Eliot and the “folk writing” characterized by Williams are embodied in his endless reflection upon and debate over what and how Chinese poets write since the New Cultural Movement⁶ (*xinwenhua yundong* 新文化运动). Yuan marked 1912 and the mid-1950s as two turning points of modern American poetry, and attempted to seek the similarities between the developments of Chinese poetry and American poetry in the twentieth century. From this angle, we can understand the way that Yuan characterizes “confessional poetry”:

The poem is written in the first person...and talks about his opinions about contemporary American society and culture, and even not to conceal his own faults. The poetic style is more colloquial and filled with life sentiments. Some critics catch the feature of self-confession of this poetry collection (*Life Studies*),

⁶ From the mid-1910s and 1920s, Chinese scholars such as Chen Duxiu, Li Dazhao, Luxun, Zhouzuoren, Hu Shi and Cai Yuan pei, who had classical educations, yet initiated a revolt against Confucianism. They advocated the creation of a new Chinese culture which would embrace the western ideas and learning – Democracy (De Xiansheng 德先生) and Science (赛先生) are the paramount thereof.

and therefore name it “confessional poetry.” After July 3rd in 1965 the BBC broadcasted a group of confessional poems and led a discussion about it, this term has been well known. What is of interest to us is of course not his family or marriage story, but his reflection upon American society. “Fall 1961” is a poem describing people’s feeling under the atomic threat in that whole year. (359-360)

Yuan regarded “Fall 1961” as an elegy, as he claimed. Nevertheless, for him, “Skunk Hour” and “Union Dead” were more like social criticism, as he suggests that the animal imageries as skunk and fish in the poems satirized moral corruption and materialism in America (360-362).

Undoubtedly, Yuan’s criticism embraces strong Marxist color, which is further utilized in his interpretation of Ginsburg’s *Howl*, a work that Yuan counts as one of the earliest confessional poems. The critic absolutely ignores Ginsburg’s poetic innovation, as he does not even mention the poem’s form and structure. Rather, he points out the poet’s presentation of young men’s pursuit of sensational pleasure. It is important to realize Yuan’s attention to the double exposures in *Howl*: the exposure of sensational pleasure and the character’s self-exposure of a decadent life; as for the commenter, the two exposures are intermingled and then achieve one goal in the end: that they conclude in self-criticism, which simultaneously goes beyond itself and toward social criticism.

Yuan’s interpretation of the representative works of confessional poetry did much to the analysis of their content rather than the poetic form, tone, and style. The only “style” that drew his attention was the extensive use of colloquialism, for it is tightly related to the ordinary life that a modern artist should focus on. This explains why the realistic features of the confessional poetry were highly appreciated.

Confessional Poetry: The Nomadic Poetics between Realism and Producing Illusion

Critics usually see Chinese poetry in the post-Mao period as bearing the characteristics of “self-discovery,” “self-awareness,” “searching for self-identity” (Zhang 32). The introduction of American confessional poetry to the Chinese poetry circle is in fact self-evident in the autobiographical and personal aspects. In 1983 and 1984, Zhai finished crafting her poem “Woman” which she first sent out to her friends in 1984 and then got officially published in 1986. The publication sparked a “Plath tornado”; many imitators were following Zhai’s writing style which was, as the writer declared, under the spell of Plath. As the poet recalled, she had only read a few poems by Plath, which were translated by Meng Meng, at the beginning of the 1980s. Her friend Zhongming was editing the underground *The Selected Poems of Modern Foreign Poetry*, in which some of the Plath’s poems were included (Zhou Zan). We find traces of Plath in Zhai’s poems, but can at the same time recognize the influences of other western poets such as W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Wystan Hugh Auden, Odysseus Elytis, Juana Delbarbourou, Charles Baudelaire, and Robinson Jeffers. The most obvious example is manifested in “Jing’an Village,” a poem written at the same time she was writing “Woman” and structurally, stylistically and thematically very similar to it, and where she directly borrowed from Eliot’s verse “April is the cruellest month” (“Jing’an Village: The Fourth Month” 1). According to Zhang, Plath’s work was not the only resource and inspiration for the poet but also the attempt to make a dialogue with Jeffers and Eliot as well as with other modern Chinese poets like “Yang Lian” and “Ma Song” (19). For Zhai, these modernists are important to her writing, while for the critics Plath is of the most interest to them – the center of the discussion.

The word “zibai” literally means “confession,” but it takes on gender implication when being applied to indicate “women” poets like Lu Yimin, Yi Lei, Tang Yaping, and some others; as the scholar notes, the creativity of “women” poets is undermined for the tag of “confessional” is imposed on them by Chinese critics (Zhang 11). It should be noted that a literary fad called “woman poetry” emerged right after the publication of “Woman.” Within four years a new generation of woman poets formed, while almost all of them paid homage to Plath. Under this circumstance, the connotation of “confessional poetry” is simplified to the degree that it becomes a synonym for “woman poetry.” Some scholars gradually became aware of the problematic “tag” of “confessional” linked to “woman poetry” or “woman consciousness (*nüxing yishi* 女性意识).” For instance, Zhou Zan has questioned the way that many scholars use and define the aforementioned terms: In terms of “confessional,” as she points out, it always refers to American confessional school, particularly to the poetic style of Plath’s work. Nevertheless, none of the critics examines the confessional style of Plath’s poems. Moreover, the famous critic Tang Xiaodu posited that the emergence of woman poets was a historical phenomenon and initiated a new poetic consciousness. Since then the term “confessional” and “woman consciousness” were frequently brought up in academia, while the latter is understood as a writing subject of the unique life experience possessed by women, and they are either viewed as “critical, revealing, creative” or “destructive, pessimistic, and dangerous.” Therefore, Zhou argues that behind this type of criticism is a conflicting moral discourse (Zhou “Confessional Poetry from the Views of Translation and Gender”).

Apparently, Zhang and Zhou hold negative attitudes toward the gender-based criticism Zhai’s poem receives, but no matter how people critiqued “confessional” and “woman consciousness,” one thing was assured that “Women” brought into public sight. Wang Yao

reminds us, “In its participation in literary production, Chinese literary criticism, in a certain sense, makes an initial evaluation of literary works. This is what we call the ‘first selection’ of contemporary literary classics” (246).

Even though critics stick the tag of “confessional poem” on “Women”, this work looks less confessional, in terms of the expression and exposure of the private than some of Zhai’s later works, which were written during the period when Zhai, as Tang Xiaodu notes and the poet herself admits to readers, endeavored to break away from the influence of Plath and shape her distinct style: “By writing “The Song of the Coffee Bar” (*Kafeiguan zhi ge* 咖啡馆之歌), I finished the language transformation to which I had been expecting for a long time, it took away the confessional tone that was stressed, because of Plath, in my previous works, and then brought a new narrative style of subtleness (*xiwei* 细微) and simplicity (*pingdan* 平淡)” (Tang “Who is Zhai Yongming” 174). In this statement, interestingly, Zhai uses a “confessional tone (*zibai yudiao* 自白语调)” to summarize the characteristics of her past works. We are unable to find the clues for this claim if she attempts to accept the way critics treat her poem or she deems that “Women” is a confessional poem. But the change of her poetic style is absolutely acknowledged.

The poet’s claim points to the year 1993, when Zhai opened a new language, which turned into “The Song of the Coffee Bar,” “Reunion (*Chongfeng* 重逢),” “Grandmother’s Time (*Zumu de shiguang* 祖母的时光),” “Lili and Qiong (*Lili he qiong* 莉莉和琼).” The four poems present the important way that Zhai added the “flavor of life” into the verses: love between man and woman, the impression of urban life, and a person’s recollection of the past, all of which set a clear line from the author’s past writing. Nevertheless, the past style is still haunting and hard to be shaken off. Or perhaps the poet does not intend to remove it from the new pieces completely. Prior to these four poems, in 1988 Zhai wrote “Call it Everything (*Cheng zhi wei yiqie* 称之为—

切),” a poem that inherits the long-winded narrative mode of “Women” and its eccentric, gloomy and mysterious setting. However, we sense the author’s intent of de-dramatizing private life through her weaving of the sporadic depiction of “real life” into the novel scenes and imagery.

The first stanza of the section “Letter from the South” demonstrates this style well:

Dear Brother I am writing to you
 In the southern area of mine
 Our room’s windows are bright
 When the morning draws I finish the dress-up
 Walk out The sight of all the thistles and thorns
 The place that the sun get drunk.⁷ (“Call it Everything” 7:1-6)

The prosaic verses normalize the speaker’s writing behavior and establish the closest relationship to the activity of writing a letter in the real world due to its linguistic flatness. Until the “drunken sun” appears, the description of real life enters into the eddy of rhetorical narration which is, as we have seen in the former sections, bound with the poetic design like “The rotten grapes / Blankly stared at one another” (1: 32-33). In the following stanza,

We walked through quarry
 Saw the father of the dead grasping the well rope
 Ragged He held up hands
 Behind him Daytime scattered
 Going through lime layers
 Some rural workers stand upright
 In their hands is the folk prescription for remedy⁸ (7: 8-14)

the event derives from the speaker’s memory, in which she was walking with the brother and saw the misery, as the text suggests, caused by a mine accident. Compared to the verses in the beginning:

An age of peace and order, someone comes back home
 watching the fictional sky being devastated
 Five days five nights Toward north

⁷ My translation

⁸ Ibid.

Then toward south Icy snow is melting
 The wings of raven can be hardly kept
 He set off to the south⁹ (1:1-6)

this stanza is more realistic, as it is neither allegorical nor metaphorical. Reading the poem as a whole, “back home” is the main theme, which is constructed by fragmented memory starting with “my” earliest farewell to my mother. In the process of looking back, the speaker’s plain narration about the past is interlaced with the poet’s metaphorical expression occurring in her “present” writing. Zhai is trying to fuse “a poetic language / scene” and “a de-poetic language / scene.”

What is the significance behind Zhai’s poetic language and de-poetic language, even if I would like to argue that “Call it Everything” has no special relation to confessional poetry and the tag of confessional? What is this poem’s relationship to “Women” and to the poet’s later creation such as “The Song of the Coffee Bar,” “Reunion,” “Grandmother’s Time,” and “Lili and Qiong” mentioned before? Can we see the metaphorical expression as the way that Zhai “mythologizes” her personal life? As a matter of fact, I take “Everything” as the poem which serves as a key link between Zhai’s past writing experience represented by “Women” and her later innovation when “Coffee Bar” comes out, because the feature of “Everything” – half-realism and half-metaphorical – is exactly distinct from the poetic fantasy of “Women” and the reality of “Coffee Bar.”

Since I am discussing the realist elements in the section “Letter from the South,” I would like to turn to the discussion of Robert Lowell’s poem “Man and Wife”, one of the best known confessional poems in *Life Studies*. However, I have to clarify that I am not juxtaposing Zhai’s poem and Lowell’s poem here – there is no evidence that Zhai was influenced by “Man and

⁹ Ibid.

Wife”; I bring Lowell’s piece into the discussion because the technique and the concept of depicting the personal in this poem can aid our reading of Zhai’s writing.

Tamed by Miltown, we lie on Mother’s bed;
 the rising sun in war paint dyes us red;
 in broad daylight her gilded bed-posts shine,
 abandoned, almost Dionysian.
 At last the trees are green on Marlborough Street,
 blossoms on our magnolia ignite
 the morning with their murderous five days’ white.
 All night I’ve held your hand,
 as if you had
 a fourth time faced the kingdom of the mad—
 its hackneyed speech, its homicidal eye—
 and dragged me home alive...Oh my Petite,
 clearest of all God’s creatures, still all air and verve:
 you were in your twenties, and I,
 once hand on glass
 and heart in mouth,
 outdrank the Rahvs in the heat
 of Greenwich Village, fainting at your feet—
 too boiled and shy
 and poker-faced to make a pass,
 while the shrill verve
 of your invective scorched the traditional South.

Now twelve years later, you turn your back.
 Sleepless, you hold
 Your pillow to your hollows like a child;
 your old-fashioned tirade—
 loving, rapid, merciless—
 breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head. (“Man and Wife” 1-28)

In this poem, Lowell uses a satirical tone like that of “Waking in the Blue,” but its mode is essentially realist, as it is a poem talking about the speaker himself, his wife, and his memory of the past; or perhaps it is better to say that the speaker meets his former self.

Though the verses are partially rhymed, the form is generally free with a detailed narration. The first stanza begins with the poet’s memory of the time when he and his wife were lying on his mother’s bed. Then the manic episodes of the poet come in, which confuse reality and the

past. In “Waking in the Blue” the speaker’s imagination is interrupted by the reality brought by crows, while in “Man” the wife’s “old-fashioned tirade” assures the poet’s reality, and a less terrified emotion can be perceived. Instead, the very emotion exposed here is the poet’s loss and failure, which are intensified at the end of the poem, “your pillow to your hollows like a child” (Lowell 92). Arbor argues that the figure in the poems “images tradition as a second means of stultification” (116), but it seems that the scholar does not clarify what tradition means. What we can sense here is the shifted time and the figure’s acute perception of time, which is actually a consistent characteristic in Lowell’s two other poems “Waking in the Blue” and “Skunk Hour.” “You were in your twenties” is as important as “Now twelve years later,” because this designation of lapsed time is designed for a highly personal experience, which is not only about time but also embroils a man’s sense that he still loves his wife regardless of how impotent the love feels.

In “On Man and Wife,” Marjorie Perloff comments that the setting of the speaker’s first meeting with his wife is more emphasized than the emotion, but I would rather argue that Marlborough Street and Greenwich Village provide the fertile soil of emotion (Perloff “On Man and Wife”). The capturing of emotion opposes the impersonal mode of Eliot’s generation, which dominated during the first half of the twentieth century. Lowell would not agree with Eliot’s dogma that poetry should escape from emotion. On the contrary, he insisted in an interview with Frederic Seidel,

Almost the whole problem of writing poetry is to bring it back to what you really feel...A lot of poetry seems to me very good in the tradition that just doesn’t move me very much because it doesn’t have personal vibrance to it, I probably exaggerate the value of it, but it’s precious to me. (Lowell *Paris Review*)

Perloff called Lowell's fondness for emotion "a return to the romantic mode" (473). However, she further suggests that Lowell's poem is alien to the romantic poetics due to its factual documentation, because the allusions to particular images such as Miltown, Marlboroug Street, and the Rahvs of Greenwich do not produce a web of symbolic implication. Besides, the sudden switch from "Mother's bed" to the "green tree" on "Marlborough Street" leads to the disconnection of them (474-475). In her analysis, Perloff denies the explicit connection among the references in Lowell's poem. Although the imagery in "Man and Wife" can not form a chain of meaning, in the poem Lowell integrates two important modes, which are separated and non-interfering – the romantic mode and the realist mode (476).

Lowell wrote this poem when he was at Mclean for psychological treatment. With his contemporaries Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath also there at the time, this mad house almost became a poetry workshop, what Alex Bean calls "The Mad Poets Society," since it gave birth to the fashion of writing about mental breakdown and relevant subjects such as hospitalization, depression, insanity and suicide. In the American cold war era, this literary excess – the over-exposed personal life, especially individual trauma – often became the target of castigation, because it was "often linked to a national consensus about American political and cultural values" (Davidson 5). These values, along with the political containment, derive from postwar foreign policy concerns about the existence and spread of communism. George F. Kennan first explained the word "containment" in his theory of foreign policy that American national security would not be threatened "if the power of the Soviet Union could be contained within a clearly-defined sphere of influence" (May 13). But the term containment also describes a general attitude toward the American domestic life under the dual potential danger of nuclear threat and communist ideology. At the end of the 1950s, when the cold war was at its peak, Vice President Richard M.

Nixon extolled the merits of the American way of life in his debate with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Nixon clearly expressed his idea of American superiority: the secure family life with its material appearance and modern appliances. In such a family husband and wife perform their own roles. The political version of containment of both the atomic bomb and subversive individuals, who should be contained for security and peace, then took the shape of domestic containment; “the ‘sphere of the influence’ was the home” (May 14). The prevailing family norm pertinent to both individual and familial well-being was designed to show the superiority of American freedom over communist ideas coming from Soviet Union. Familial well-being contains the element of consumerism, which was the means, as Elaine Tyler May argues, “for achieving individuality, leisure, and upward mobility” (18).

If it is the case that American superiority represented the essence of American freedom, it unavoidably problematizes itself. Nixon proclaimed, “To us, diversity, the right to choose ... is the most important thing. We don’t have one decision made at the top by one government official... We have many different manufacturers and many different kinds of washing machines so that the house wives have a choice” (May 17). The freedom of choice falls to the material level. It is a kind of freedom that means housewife can choose household appliances, but it is not a freedom that allows a man or a woman to choose his or her ways of life, as one’s individual behavior is regulated by the political culture. May perceptively points out, “domestic containment was bolstered by a powerful political culture that rewarded its adherents and marginalized its detractors” (14).

What Lowell writes in “Man and Wife” runs counter to the American superiority which Nixon advocated, because the marriage is dismissed “twenty years later” when the wife turns her back; no picture of a happy marriage is shown in the poem. Between the memory of the

magnolia blossom and the wife's back is the absence of the marriage's normalcy. Instead of a full-time female homemaker and a male breadwinner, we see a husband's individual plight with his sleepless wife; they no longer want to touch each other. The poem presents "the movement from a tranquilized present in which life is feared and denied, to the memory of a romanticized bohemian past, and back to the present with its open-eyed realization that marriage is torture but also salvation" (May 481-482). The marriage is only regarded as salvation due to its ability of bringing the speaker back to reality again. The ocean wave terminates the romantic return to the past but simultaneously weakens the speaker's slumber.

Autobiography is the most important aspect of confessional poetry, such as what Lowell did: utilizing the images which originate from real life to bring about confession; but obviously confessional poetry relates the personal to a larger social and historical context. Though it is hard to conclude whether confessional poetry is a production of containment or a kind of resistance to it, the poetry mirrors the period of the poets' life rather than only reflecting the poets' inner world. Irvin Ehrenpreis comments on Lowell's autobiographical poems that they "became the analogue of the life of his era; the sufferings of the poet became a mirror of the sufferings of whole classes and nations" (28).

Therefore, for poetry toward the end of the 1950s, the autobiographical style is meaningful in the aspect of responding the world outside poetry. Paul Breslin and Donald Hall remarked that post-war American poetry went through a style which possessed rigorous rhyme and rational narrative to a style which was shaped by free verses with more individual, irrational and emotional spirit (1). But Breslin suggests that the paramount point about post-war American poetry is what critics and poets value the most in these poems. In other words, critics admitted that the traditional forms did contain individual and emotional elements, but they particularly

appreciated the new poetry's rejection of the past which was marked as "authoritarian culture"; "the emotional and irrational were now to be valued rather than the rational, the inward or 'intimate' more than the 'external' " (1-2). Many poets took the "improvised form" and highly individualized content to protest against the rational order which was regarded too excessive (2). For confessional poets, the exposure of individual experience is far less important than breaking up with the literary past by exhibiting a fake private life. Perloff terms this fake private life the "illusion of a True Confession," which must be presented by the poets, whereas whether they are presenting the actual facts of their experience is "irrelevant" (xi, 4).

Perloff's argument is to view confession as an artificial literary product of individual experiences, and this is exactly her way of understanding Lowell's poems; she describes them as "mythologized personal life." Indeed "Mythologizing" or "Mythology" is the common word in critics' discourse to generalize the literary technique of presenting lived experience (Perloff 472; Breslin 95-117). Jeanne Hong Zhang puts confessional poetry into the entire confessional literature realm, and suggests, "The received view of confessional literature is to see it as artefacts of lived experience disclosed in an exhibitionist way (12)." Tracing back to church-based confessions before the Renaissance and the precursor of Western confessional literature represented by St. Augustine, Zhang articulates that there existed four forms of confessional literature, which I summarize as follows: 1) autobiographies: the author is the speaker who confesses; 2) biographical novels, poetry and dramas: the author confesses in the name of the protagonist; 3) non-autobiographies: there is a confessional protagonist in the work; 4) works embraces confessional feelings and guilty but without a confessional theme (12-13). Zhang's examination of confessional literature is based on the literary meaning of the word "confession," which is roughly equal to "confessing sins, crimes and the feeling of guilt" in dictionary.

Departing from this point, Zhang compares the cultural and literary base of Western confessional literature with the idea of confession in Chinese literature, and then points out that there is little and that pre-modern literature is even devoid of “confession” (13). Literary confession had been yielded to the mainstream of literati writing which was aimed at illustrating the vehicle of the Way (*wen yi zai dao* 文以载道)¹⁰ in ancient China. Until the modern age, the predominant mode of literary creation had been illuminating social justice, political ethnics, moral creed, and other such Confucian thoughts. At the beginning of the twentieth century, under the huge impact of Western literature, we see the obvious imprint of “a man’s confession” in some renowned pieces in modern Chinese literature such as “Diary of a Madman (*Kuangren riji* 狂人日记)” and “Sinking (*Chenlun* 沉沦)” (Zhang 13-14). Understandably, in an age advocating the emancipation of humanity, writers were eager to let the “self” come out of stereotypical patterns of literary expression and stand vividly on paper. Zhang notes, “all professing aspirations modernize the individual selves” (14). However, the confession in these literary works was attached to national salvation during and after the May Fourth Movement. When leftists took part in the agenda of national building and salvation, leftist literature ensued, which made a splash for social realism.

¹⁰ “Way (*dao* 道)” refers to the traditional Confucian ethic and morality.

During the Song Dynasty, the Neo Confucian and essayist Zhou Dunyi 周敦颐 (1017-1073) proposed the idea “the vehicle of the Way” in his work *Almanac of Zhouzi-Diction* 《周子通书·文辞》 as one of the writing principles: Essay is like the vehicle of the Way, (which is just like the carriage being the vehicle of man), regardless of its delicate ornament, the carriage becomes useless if it cannot carry man, and the ornament is just ornament. (文所以载道也，轮辕饰而人弗庸，涂饰也。) From Zhou’s standpoint, literature ought to serve the function of moral instruction, and the primary criteria of evaluating whether an essay is good or not lies in if its content fits, explains, and advocates the Confucian morality.

If we consider confessional literature to be demonstrating the realist mode, then we cannot help asking what makes it different from social realism? In fact, in their respective studies of confessional poetry, both Zhang and Breslin come to the idea of “authoritativeness” which leads to conformity. Beslin finds that the 1950s is portrayed as a period of conformity and that “the inner life was sacrificed to external social codes,” and this conformity had really emerged in 1945, which is the real beginning of “the fifties” (3). Similarly, Zhang articulates that following the step of leftist literature in the 1930s, when confessional consciousness had subsided, socialist realism obtained predominance in the literary arena in the Maoist age. Under this circumstance, contemporary confessional writing is “a backlash to orthodox socialist realism” and to the old literary tradition of “the vehicle of the Way” (14). To break away from a collective conformity, either in terms of literary conformity or political and social conformity, can be regarded as the paramount goal of both Chinese and American confessional poetry in their own transitional time.

To return to the poem “Call it Everything,” the speaker is talking about his countrymen – “some suffer from gout” and “some are noncommittal (6:2)” who are not the figures “In the heavy snow, practicing marching / At dusk camping out by the village” depicted in the poems during the age of Cultural Revolution.¹¹ A large number of poems which were written “above the ground” in the Cultural Revolution were later regarded as instruments of propaganda, while many true realist poems were created by the underground poets, except for some works written by the poets such as Zang Kejia, Li Ying, Yan Zheng¹² and some others who dared to go against those superficial works openly (Luo 19). According to Luo Zhenya’s research, 390 kinds of

¹¹ The verses are originally quoted from the poem “Camping (*Luying* 露营).” See Luo Zhengya’s essay “False Reality: A Brief Discussion about the Fake Realism Poetry in the Cultural Revolution.”

¹² 臧克家, 李瑛, and 严阵.

poetry anthologies have been published from 1972 to 1976, but surprisingly around two thirds of them were under the signature of “writer of workers, peasants, soldiers¹³ (*gongnongbing zuozhe* 工农兵作者).”¹⁴ Therefore, Luo is suggesting that the poems in public in that age lost the individual and lyrical space which the poets would like to create; on the contrary, they were produced by an uninformed grammatical system from the Cultural Revolution. Luo’s criticism is pointing at the hackneyed, mawkish, and dogmatic texts, which display false realism and give the wrong impression of a prosperous poetry arena. In 1964, Chair Mao in his remarks on “Report on the Rectification of National Literature and Arts Association and Other Major Associations”¹⁵ said that until now many departments in the field of literature and arts were still ruled by “the dead,” and many communists zealously advocated the feudalist and capitalist arts rather than the socialist arts (Chao 288). The so-called socialist arts refer to the social realist arts which are aimed at promoting communism and socialism. Since social realist art mainly concerns reality, it is particularly regarded as a mirror of social conditions. However, it still excessively extols and criticizes the political environment. For poetry, the bigger problem of this distorted realism is the great loss of the poetic essence – the genuine language of one’s emotional life.

¹³ Workers, peasants and soldiers (*gong, nong, bing* 工农兵) are regarded as the pillars of the new China (1966-1972). During the cultural Revolution they were commonly portrayed as the main rulers and positive forces of the country.

¹⁴ As Luo indicates, most writers in China were unable to write from 1966 to 1971 (19).

¹⁵ 《关于全国文联和各协会整风情况的报告》. This report was published by the propaganda department of the central committee of the communist party of China on May 8 in 1964. See Chao Feng’s *The Dictionary of Cultural Revolution* (page 288) and Li Song’s *The Political Aesthetics of Revolutionary Model Plays* (page 84).

The contemporary Chinese poets in the 90s, as Tang Xiaodu argues, faced a serious situation of wondering how avant-garde poetry of the new generation might move forward, and it was by no means the first time that this question of breaking-off and continuity was asked, but it has been constantly interrogated in twentieth-century Chinese literature. For Chinese poets, “How can writing to be continued?” is always the question during and after the period of the Cultural Revolution, just as it was the question being asked in the early period of the century. Tang describes a catastrophic backdrop of poetry in the 90s: two of the most gifted poets Haizi and Luo Yihe,¹⁶ passed away in 1989, which seemed to forebode a more tragic destiny of Chinese poetry, battered by the consumerism and money worship sweeping across the country. The disastrous background of the poetry in the 80s was surely the result of the social-political movement which was intended to eliminate all the infiltrated bourgeois elements in both the communist party and society; as for poetry in the beginning of the twentieth century, it accompanied one of the most drastic social changes. The title “Radical Poetics and Radial Politics” which Paul Breslin uses to sum up the American Poetry in the Fifties also matches the features of Chinese poetry world in the 80s. This shared feature can lead us to a better understanding of Zhai Yongming’s poems – what was special to the age, what has been overlooked, what has been misunderstood.

As I have suggested above, what makes Zhai’s depiction of life experiences in “Call it Everything” meaningful is first of all that it moves away from the fake realism and approaches real life, and this real life is lined up with women’s bitter and trapped circumstances. History is gradually narrowed down to a history of a region, a history of a decadent family and in the end goes to a female’s individual experience in a time of peace and prosperity:

¹⁶ 海子 and 骆一禾

My grandmother I was a child having been abused
 Internal organs were wounded capriciously
 Eyes are laden with dreadful innocence
 I remind of your kind looks
 At that time how thin and small I was
 wearing mother's breathable shirt"¹⁷ (9: 1-6).

These verses' suggestive dimension – female's painful experience – is similar to:

You are my mother...
 ...you wake me up
 ...You let me born, you let me with misfortune to shape
 the dreadful twins of this world¹⁸ (Mother 3-6)

in Zhai's earlier work "Women," which critics label "confessional." Thus, we turn back to the questions "How does "Women" confess," "What does it confess," and "Based on what we treat it confessional?"

In the discussion of Zhai's "The Song of the Coffee Bar," I mentioned the poet's intention of language transformation, moving it toward "subtleness" and simplicity," but it should be noted that this pursuit started from the time when she was writing "Women." In her famous essay "Night Consciousness," which has been taken as the preface of the poem, she writes, "I might not be a wise man, and do not think myself as a typical female, but I am the representative of my own, and as a poet my limitation is exactly my own idiosyncrasy. I am more interested in expanding the most unaffected and subtle feeling in my soul, namely, what I think about the "female disposition" (*nüxing qizhi* 女性气质). Moreover, in her collection of essays, *Architecture on Paper* (*Zhi shang jianzhu* 纸上建筑), published in 1997, Zhai writes in the early chapter titled "The Author's Confession,"

¹⁷ My translation

¹⁸ Use Michael M. Day's translation

An architect says that the cultural progress is to get rid of the superfluous decoration of practical matter.

Another architect Van Der Rohe's notable dictum "less is more" becomes my aesthetic standard of things beyond architecture and my golden rule of writing.

When I read essays, I particularly care about the succinct form of the essays, as I treat an essay's subtleness as a kind of literary attainment. (*Zhi shang jian zhu* 3)

Apparently, Zhai was concerned with linguistic simplicity throughout her 80s and 90s, and such attention is in connection with how we examine Zhai's literary idea of Night Consciousness and poetic images of blackness. As many critics suggest, the emergence of the "Plath tornado" in the Chinese poetry arena started with "Blackness" in "Women." Under the poem's title, Zhai quotes four lines of poetry, two come from Robinson Jeffers and two from Sylvia Plath, as the epigraphs: "Your body / Hurts me as the world hurts God" ("Fever 103" 35-36).¹⁹

"Me A wild thought" at Night: Zhai Yongming's Image of Selfhood

Plath's profound influence on Zhai's writing is one thing, and the other thing is Zhai's life also having a great impact upon her. Michael M. Day finds in her poem Plath's favorite images, such as night, mirror, stone, the empty house, and so on. and maintains that Plath is more obsessed with death, having more exploration of her life than the night (Ch 6). He further indicates that Zhai was not afraid of death because she was very young, neither had she pondered deeply over suicide, and "her concept of the consciousness of black night has more to do with

¹⁹Zhai uses the Chinese translation: "你的身体伤害我 / 就像世界伤害着上帝."

sex than death” (Ch 6). This scholar certainly notices that Zhai stayed in the hospital to accompany her sick mother at the time she was composing “Women” and she brought the translated poems of Plath and Jeffers for reading. However, her experience in the hospital merits a closer look, since Zhai’s memory of it speaks to the essence of her concepts of blackness, death, and poetry. She writes in her essay “Facing the Writing of Soul (*Mianxiang xinling de xiezu* 面向心灵的写作),”

Since I was writing “Women” in 1984, a large number of words and imageries about “death” and “darkness (*hei an* 黑暗)” jumped in “Jing’an Village” and “Living in the World” and some short poems; this high-frequent and extensive emergence of “death,” for me who was in the tender youth at the time, inevitably gave people such an impression that I “created sadness affectedly when I wanted to write a poem.” But when I was writing “Women,” “Jing’an Village,” and “Living in the World,” as a matter of fact, I have been staying in a filthy room over the three years, and, frequently, after ten o’clock I suffered from the chilly wind while I was sitting on the bench and writing, because the lights were out after ten. The gloomy street lamps nourished the darkness in my inner heart, and the permeating smell of death and medicine inside and outside the ward nourished my awareness of death as well, exactly as Rilke said, “all space become the fruit which encloses the core.”²⁰ It is a ward that encloses “Women” and the core of the writing during that period, and the axis of the ward is a sickbed, and along this axis are so many terrifying words

²⁰ I am unable to identify the original source of the poet Rilke’s words, which Zhai quotes in her writing. Presumably, this quotation here originated from the idea of the poem “Buddha in Glory”: Centre of all centres, core of cores, / almond that encloses and sweetens itself- / everything reaching to all the stars / is your fruit’s flesh: Hail.”

which enclose this ward: “death,” “blood,” “bone,” “specter,” and “wound.” On the basis of the order of this axis, I searched and developed the things valuable, and these things then presented my poems. (*Zhi shang jian zhu* 196-197)

By utilizing the poet Rainer Maria Rilke’s idea, Zhai claims that the ward is the space encasing her writing, which is designed to convey the nature of the work. But what does Zhai mean by the core of the writing? The space, which assembles the secular feeling stemming from the witness of death, does not serve the goal of presenting “the experience of death” or “the gender issue.” It is true that Zhai’s personal experience of death offered her poem an important metaphor, yet she made it clear that death was the question that concerned her most in her writing rather than a poetic subject tinted with the artificial sadness.

In “Women,” Zhai makes use of “black dress, black cat, black spider, black sun, black night²¹ and other “dark” images to construct her black territory. In the first part “Premonition (*yugan* 预感),”

The woman in the black gown comes carrying the night
 her darting, secretive glance exhausts me
 suddenly I remember this is the season all fish die
 and all roads pass through the traces of birds in flight
 ...
 I’ve kept an unusual calm throughout
 As if blind, and so I see night in the day
 ...
 The night conculses, or doesn’t, like a cough
 Choked back in the throat, I’ve already quit this dead-
 end hole.²² (1-22)

²¹ “Black night” (*heiye* 黑夜) should be translated into “dark night,” but in the poem Zhai Yongming uses the Chinese character “black.” Some editions of ““Women”” do not include the epigraphs.

²² Use Michael M. Day’s translation of “Women.”

It is undeniable, as Qin Xiaoyu argues, that Zhai Yongming was learning writing from Plath, but it also shows that she was making conversation with Plath. Qin claims that “The woman in the black gown” has the reflection from “Edge” that “her blacks crackle and drag (Plath “Edge”16)” (20). Similarly, the textual relation can be found again between the speaker’s final question in “Women”: “When it’s done, what of it (The Finish 24)” and “The woman is perfected, / Her dead / Body wears the smile of accomplishment (1-3)” in “Edge (Qin 140-141).” We are uncertain about the textual link assumed by Qin, but in the following discussion he suggests that there is a “circulation (轮回 or 循环)” departing from “Edge” to “Women.” Because “Edge” was collected at the end of *Sylvia Plath: The Collected Poems* by Ted Hughes, the poem looks like Plath’s last words (“Edge,” which was written before Plath committed suicide, reflects the depth of the poet’s desperation, indeed it possesses a sense of finality and accomplishment, to both of the poet’s life and literary career.), and Zhai starts “Women” from “Edge,” which symbolizes Plath’s death, and then back to “Edge” again in the last stanza of “Women.” Zhai’s other works such as “Jing’an Village” and the internal structure of “Women” demonstrate the process of circulation (141).

In fact, what the scholar is trying to argue is that in “Women” Zhai Yongming takes in “a woman in black,” a figure who turns into a metaphor referring to Plath’s influence.²³ Plath’s “The Night Dances (1962),” “Daddy (1962),” “Dark House (1959),” and “Poppies in July (1962)” are all associated with Zhai’s poetry (141). “The woman in black” indicates the origin of the

²³ Jeanne Hong Zhang might be the first one who makes this interpretation. Michael M. Day comments, “Jeanne Hong Zhang suggests it is possible the woman in black of the first line might be Plath invoked as an eyewitness to the I-speaker’s journey both through this poem and the rest of, and that there may be an explicit ‘anxiety of influence’ at work. (See the web resource Michael M. Day “China’s Second World of Poetry” Chapter 6.)

metaphors of darkness, and “she” was mingled with the other dark imageries to accomplish her own “season.” What is the relation of “circulation” to the metaphors of darkness?

When discussing the great works of four women poets in the 1960’s, Peggy Rizza writes, “Poets are explorers of the language: they become familiar with its terrain, and the brave ones attempt to alter it by inventing new uses for it” (171), which essentially has a universal applicability in the literary field, if we think about the “anxiety of influence” theorized by Harold Bloom. As for the images of blackness and darkness in Zhai’s poems, Jeanne Hong Zhang maintains that in contemporary China they are “the most striking textual markers of female-authored poetry (123).” Clearly, Zhang links darkness and blackness with a female author’s gender awareness. In the traditional Chinese concept, night and the color black signify “yin (阴)” (123), the feminine cosmic principle opposed to “yang (阳)” often discussed in *The Book of Changes (Yi Jing 易经)*. Since female, as a gender, is treated as imperfect man and therefore symbolizes “weakness,” the darkness which represents the feminine cosmic principle bespeaks the negative trait of things. Darkness, placed in a cluster of dichotomies – day and night, sun and moon, masculine and feminine, life and death – each of which combines a positive side and a negative side, is countered to daylight and connected with the negative perspective.

Nevertheless, the connotation of negative signifiers such as night, moon, and darkness is varied in poetic creation and discourse. Night and moon can be used to express a poet’s homesickness and lovesickness, which themes are found in many traditional Chinese poems, or they can serve to celebrate light and hope in modern Chinese poetry (Zhang 124-125). Zhang explains that in “Women,” on the one hand blackness, darkness, and night fit the traditional concept of harmony between *yin* and *yang*, and on the other hand they manifest as a mutual conflict (125). The representation of this conflict is the confrontation between female and male,

as “the giant birds” with “cruel and male consciousness” “look down on me from the sky with human eyes.” In “Monologue” she writes,

Me a wild thought, imbued with the charms of the abyss
 accidentally born of you. The earth and the sky
 combined as one, you call me woman
 and consolidate my body

I’m as soft as water’s feathery white body
 you hold me in both hands, and I take in the world
 an ordinary embryo wearing a body of flesh, in the sunlight
 I’m so dazzling you find it hard to believe

I’m the gentlest, most understanding of woman
 I’ve seen through it all, yet am willing to share in everything
 I long for a winter, a huge black night
 My heart as the limit, I want to take hold of your hand
 But facing you my pose is a kind of crushing defeat

When you go, my pain
 wants to throw my heart up from my mouth
 To kill you with love, who’s taboo is this?
 The sun rises for the whole world! But only for you do I
 focus the most hostile tenderness on your entire body
 From tip to toe, I have my ways

A chorus of cries for help, can the soul also give a hand?
 with the sea as my blood it can
 lift me high to the foot of the setting sun, who remembers me?
 but what I remember, is surely not just one life²⁴ (1-23)

Obviously, the speaker’s gender identity is confirmed as female, as it is not only directly presented in the first stanza, but also indicated by the tropes of white feather and water. In front of the sun, which is synonymous with male, the speaker is totally defeated due to her devoted love for it; for men, she is the most understanding and gentlest woman on earth. This woman is similar to the sisters in another Zhai’s poem “Black Room (*Hei fangjian* 黑房间 1984)” who are three fair ladies dressing up every day in order to meet their Mr. Right,

²⁴ Use Michael M. Day’s translation.

At night, I feel
 Our rooms are in great danger
 Cats and Mice are awakened
 We go to sleep, in the dream look for the strange
 Room numbers, at night
 We are women whose maturity reach its peak...
 marriage, is still the center of mating.²⁵ (19-27)

Men, love, and marriage inevitably become the tragic destiny of woman, no matter whether she is the gentle, considerate and committed lady in “Monologue” or one of the pretty but relentless sisters in “Black Room.” The individual sensibility toward the tragic failure is women’s collective memory and history, because the speaker cries out in the end “who remembers me / but what I remember, is sure not just one life,” as Zhang argues that the woman “partakes of women’s collective destiny” (126).

Despite her unfortunate and determined fate, the speaker is the one who creates night. She is identified with blackness, darkness and night as well as “drawing on the strength of night” (126). However, she declares that she is “a wild thought, imbued with the charms of the abyss,” a dream builder, who is eager to embrace a winter and a night. The speaker’s initial behavior of creating and welcoming night reaffirms the speaker’s identity as dream builder, who shows herself indistinctly in the beginning section of “Women.” Facing the lifeless mountain in darkness and a gigantic bird’s aggressive eyes, the speaker says, “As if blind, and so I see night in the day (A Premonition12).” It is true that for a woman without eyesight day and night is the same thing – she can only perceive night. However, she imagines herself as a blind person but emphasizes the act of seeing. A reasonable explanation for a blind woman who can see things is that she draws a landscape in her mind. For a person who pretends to be blind, she imagines everything and denies her ability to see in order to inform bystanders of her capability of

²⁵ My translation

imagination and autonomy. In other words, she suspends her vision, which enables her to eschew external influences, and concentrates on building up a cave for exhibition: “The night convulses, or doesn’t, like a cough / choked back in the throat, I’ve already quit this dead-end hole” (“A Premonition” 21-22)²⁶. We might argue that it is a preexisting “dead-end hole,” as it designates the external space occupied by the brute masculine “slaughter,” as Zhang Guangxin remarks that Zhai lets her protagonist be a pseudo- blind person, a female creates a private internal cave to contend against the external cave where she dwells (40). Nevertheless, the hole can also be viewed as a non-preexisting cave, which emerges and manifests itself only through the speaker’s narration. It has been forgotten in silence but is now exposed by her voice.

The only way for the speaker to achieve autonomy is to shut the door which approaches the outside world. The significance of fulfilling autonomy through displaying the extraordinary landscape inside a cave lies in the speaker’s determined will to create and accept night and darkness. In his review of “Women,” Tang Xiaodu insists that Zhai partakes in Women Poetry by creating a night (158). Joyce Carol Oates had a subtitle “Nature as Object and as Nightmare” for her essay “The Death Throes of Romanticism: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath” (Butscher 213), and this subtitle coincidentally catches the essence of Zhai’s dark night. Oates reminds us that the reading experience of Plath’s poems is of course a terrifying one, because “it is like waking to discover one’s adult self, grown to full height, crouched in some long-forgotten childhood hiding place” (214). The forgotten childhood in the poems “Winter Trees,” “Tulips,” and “Daddy” gives rise to the verbal impediment of the protagonists – “Ich, ich ich, ich / I could hardly speak” (“Daddy” 27-28) . The very forgotten part in human history which is revealed by the female

²⁶ Michael M. Day’s translation

voice in “Women” is the history of woman. It is a history of wounds, misery, insignificance, and silence, all of which constitute the unspeakable cave.

The silent history of woman is remembered, evoked and presented through the darkness of the unspeakable cave. Despite its attention to searching female’s self-awareness, “Women” is not and should not to be read as pure feminist poetry. Nor does Zhai admit her identity as feminist. In her essay “Another Discussion on ‘Night Consciousness’ and ‘Female Poetry’” (*Zaitan heiye yishi he nüxing shige* 再谈“黑夜意识和女性诗歌”) in 1995, she writes,

I am not a feminist, so we can discuss a kind of “female” literature which might exist. However, the embarrassing status of female literature is actually due to the hierarchical viewpoint based on gender....Although the sequence poem “Women” and the essay “Night Consciousness” have full attention on the destiny of female, I have been bored with the image, created by critics, of resisting patriarchy and striving for the emancipation of women, as if except “Women” most of the rest of my works have lost meaning. (*Zhishang jianzhu* 235)

Obviously, Zhai was unsatisfied with the pervasive mode of criticism which belabored feminist elements, so she did her utmost to defend the meaning of her writing. As a matter of fact, during the time she was composing “Women,” Zhai set forth her view on this poem and poetry. She articulates in her manifesto,

As one half of humanity, from the moment of her birth, a female faces a completely different world. Her first glimpse of this world is of course colored by her individual spirit and sensibility, and possibly even by a psychology of private resistance. Will she muster all of her strength and energy to engage in life by creating a Black Night?

This is the very first Black Night, and as it ascends, it brings us to an altogether new and unique position and point of view, which only the females of this world possess. This isn't a process of redemption, but rather a process of complete awakening. . . .

In the end, consciousness is a sort of raw material. From birth, the interior of the female body conceals a premonition of destruction. It is precisely this premonition that, charged by a reality full of infinite possibilities, brings us into a condition of predestination from which we can never return. And for precisely this reason, when a woman poet lays claim to her mythological world, that world is not only linked with the moment of birth, but it is also connected to the kingdom of death. In the increasingly blurred boundary between the two, you have to see yourself clearly in order to maintain the reality of the Black Night in your own heart. Only when you're permeated by a Black Night consciousness that you've unearthed through the revelation of the pain that lies inherently within you, can you truly annihilate your own fear.²⁷ (Zhai "Black Consciousness")

Zhang argues, "For her (Zhai Yongming), night consciousness is synonymous to gender consciousness" (126), but Zhai's intent is very clear here that she is searching for a language unique to the female, since she is a woman and she believes this gender identity enables her to grasp the most sentimental emotion and moment in the natural world. Perhaps, it would be better for us to understand her poem in this way: She understands the nature of poetry through her gender, rather than the nature of her poems as gendered.

²⁷ This is a translation from Andrea Lingenfelter. See pages 158 and 159 in *Chinese Writers' on Writing* edited by Arthur Sze.

Zhai's female sense makes her more attentive to death. When we re-read her manifesto above, we are aware that her statement is a more individual reflection on death and poetry than a poetic credo designed for or shared by all other Chinese women poets. The subtle relationship between female sensation and death is peculiar to her. Other than "Night Consciousness," in which she first mentions this connection, we find more discussion on this topic in her 1996 essay, "A Mexico Woman" (*Yige moxige nüren* 一个墨西哥女人). In this essay, she writes about the painter Frida Kahlo and the resonance that she finds in her album of painting. As a gift from an American woman, the album of Kahlo, according to Zhai's description, collects the painter's personal photos, documents, paintings with introduction, records of her family and social activities from her childhood to later years (*Zhishang jianzhu* 64-74). Zhai views the album as a special painting collection, in which the details of the painter's life, including the painting drafts, the record of her long-time illness, destiny, her Mexico dress and shawl, make the poet feel "dizzy" (65). Zhai feels it so interesting because these paintings, as well as the protagonist's narration and dream convey all the information and sensation to her so that Zhai experiences a sort of intimacy- "It's like that I have already known the painter for years" (65).

However, the most striking thing for Zhai is that females' sensitivity to "life and death" is surprisingly alike. She found this significant similarity between a woman from South America and a woman from the East (herself) (68-69). Zhai understands that she shares the experience of facing death with Kahlo, who had a nearly fatal car accident at the age of nineteen. Both of them make art with death, which is tightly associated with femininity, as Zhai explains, "for Mexicans, death means a kind of creation. For a person who walks with death, life is an endless death; for a Mexico woman, death is even the womb of human beings, and tomb is the matrix of human

being” (67). In her interpretation of Kahlo’s painting “My Birth,”²⁸ Zhai extracts a short verse from “Women,” “I’m even your blood that flows at a daybreak / in the blood pool where you’re astonished to see yourself” (“Mother” 3-4). The starting point of life and the ending point of death create a completed circle, when the mother finds another “her” after the labor, and the labor “wakes me up.” Prior to “Mother,” the poet writes

Waves strike me
 As the midwife strikes my back, in this way
 The world bursts in to my body
 Alarming me, making me feel a measure of wild joy
 I still treasure it, in the mood
 Of that mighty wild beast, I gaze at the world, lost in thought
 I think history really isn’t far away²⁹ (“The World” 9-15)

Although the protagonist is one of the twins of misfortune, she does not regard herself as a victim of the world. As a woman, she celebrates her innate capability of reproduction, which gives her power to accept the world. For her, the world only means its dark part, and this explains why she has been “witness for the world,” and so makes “black night to spare all men disaster”³⁰ (“The World” 23-24), as the world containing the daytime does not belong to her, nevertheless, her primitive ability to create a black world is endowed even before she is born.

Zhai’s notion of “Night Consciousness” is necessarily determined by her idea of “Night Consciousness” itself. It is composed of her depressing experience of being ill and witnessing death, her feminine sensitivity of understanding world, and her philosophical reflection on poetry. In her article “The Revenge of Death in Another Way (*Siwang de ling yi zhong baofu fangshi* 死亡的另一種報復方式),” Zhai writes that she refuses to identify herself as “a helpless housewife”

²⁸ Zhai Yongming’s Chinese translation is “我的出生.” See page 66 in *Zhi shang jian zhu*.

²⁹ Michael M. Day’s translation

³⁰ Ibid.

seeking for the origin of death, but by using a poet's sensitivity she looks for the smell of death (*Zhishang jianzhu* 152). In spite of having an unpleasant feeling, as the poet notes, the smell of death produces a dreamy illusion for people. It is difficult to locate the smell; however, it provides a passage for the poet to sense isolation and mystery, both of which are great catalysts for imagination. In this article, Zhai tells us that the smell of death originates from a dead mouse, which is misled by people into a dead-end. It is alone and dead, but is viewed, by Zhai Yongming, as a sacrificed body revenging itself on human beings. It is never dead, because it has revived itself by virtue of giving fear to mankind (153-154).

In fact, we have seen this dead and lonely mouse, which “becomes a scapegoat of darkness (153),” in the form of a female speaker in “Women.” Her voice does not seek revenge in the real sense, but she leads us to see herself isolated, undergoing death, and finally she is the creation: “I’ve been left in the world, by myself, the sun rays, / envelop me sadly, once you bow down to the world do you know what you’ve lost? / The years put me in a grinder, force me to see myself pulverized. . . .³¹ (“Mother”13-15). It is important to note that Zhai considers the mouse a bound spirit who is absent (*buzaihang* 不在场).

For the dead mouse, being absent is inescapable, while for the poet “to be absent” is so important and cannot be naturally attained. In many places, the poem “Women” talks about “dream” which sways our confidence that the voice is present. She says in the beginning, “dreams appear to know something of this, in my own eyes / I saw a block of time that had forgotten to flower / weigh down on the dusk” (“A Premonition” 16-18). Following it, she asks herself “Where the dream breeds...First of all, am I disappearing? What is the oak tree?”

³¹ Michael M. Day's translation

(“Conjecture” 5-6).³² Jeanne Hong Zhang has argued that the tone of “Women” is skepticism, because the first-person speaker doubts objects around her, such as the sun, the sky, the oak tree, the moon, and some others (132). Obviously, the oak tree, as the scholar maintains, is a reference to the poem “To the Oak Tree (*Zhixiangshu* 致橡树)” (1977), written by the female poet Shu Ting, representing masculinity.³³ Even if we believe that the voice in “To the Oak Tree” is resisting masculinity by questioning the sun, the sky, and the oak tree, as these three are masculine emblems, we cannot follow the same logic to argue that the voice in “Women” is resisting femininity by doubting the moon.

The most likely explanation for the skeptical voice toward the moon is that the protagonist builds a “self” aloft by suspecting her existence. This suspicion makes it even harder to locate and affirm the speaker. We find the images of “the moon” and “the tree” in Plath’s poem “The Moon and the Yew Tree” (1961),

The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right,
White as a knuckle and terribly upset.

....

The yew tree points up. It has a Gothic shape.
The eyes lift after it and find the moon.

The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.

Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.
How I would like to believe in tenderness——
The face of the effigy, gentled by candles,
Bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes,

I have fallen a long way. Clouds are flowering
Blue and mystical over the face of the stars.
Inside the church, the saints will be all blue,
Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews,

³² My translation

³³ I must be a kapok, the image of / A tree standing together with you.

Their hands and faces stiff with holiness.
 The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild.
 And the message of the yew tree is blackness-blackness and silence. (8-28)

Both Plath and Zhai are fascinated by the traditional concept of the moon as a feminine symbol, and they coincidentally employ the tree as a masculine sign. This poem begins with the speaker's wandering in a place separated from her house, and "a row of headstones" leads her to nowhere. Previously, it was common to understand that the moon and the yew tree were personified respectively as the poet's mother and father. However, there is a new interpretation of this poem. Sally Bayley comments, "Plath's mature 'tree poems' adhere to the tenets of the Romantic artist: that the artist should paint not only what he sees in front of him but also what he 'sees within himself'" (Bayley 100). The fomy and spirituous place provides a space without directions for the speaker, "she cannot see 'where there is to get to'" (103). She needs to have a new object. Unfortunately, her new object – the moon without a door – is removed from its role in the poem. Bayley remarks that the moon is a worn metaphor and its light is too much for the yew tree, which causes the crisis of artistic identity. The speaker in the first stanza is replaced by the moon, the yew tree and Mary. "I" cannot see the way out of there, neither can the moon: "The moon sees nothing of this" (Plath "The Moon and the Yew Tree" 27). With the light sound of consonant "s," owls, tenderness, candles, eyes, pews, stars, saints, hands, faces and holiness all walk into the eventual blackness and silence, within which the moon is "bald and wild." It is a moment when whether or not the moon is cold and distant becomes unimportant, because the speaker's attempt to gain a new form of consciousness from the moon is invalid. In a nutshell, it is a poem, according to Bayley's analysis, about one familiar subject struggling out of a familiar tradition, and the poetic form shows up in "the surrealist's dream world" (104). In this dream

world, the natural objects transcend themselves and then turn into the inner landscape of the speaker, which can then be seen in the text.

Compared to Plath's "The Moon and the Yew Tree," a poem composed of four stanzas with six verses each, "Women" is far from in order. The disordered structure of the poem creates a marvelous spectacle just as what the odd and black imageries do. The verbal play and changes in form informs us that dew, swan, tree truck, spider, bat, stone, flower bulb, and poppy neither refer to any natural phenomena nor to the poet's state of mind. Drawing on Freud's dream theory, Zhang Guangxin adds that Zhai Yongming is creating a poet's daydream, in which she engages with the black night (42).

In her daydream, verses can be short or long, and rhymed or unrhymed, which invites us to watch the changing landscape of the textual form. These partial stanzas from "Mother" and "An Instant" illustrate this:

There are too many places I haven't the strength to reach, my feet hurt,
 Mother, you haven't taught me how to be infected by ancient griefs in rosy
 Rapacious dawns. Only my heart's like you

You're my mother, I'm even your blood that flows at daybreak
 In the blood pool where you're astonished to see yourself, and wake me

无力到达的地方太多了，脚在疼痛，母亲，你没有
 教会我在贪婪的朝霞中染上古老的哀愁。我的心只像你

你是我的母亲，我甚至是你的血液在黎明流出的
 血泊中使你惊讶地看到你自己，你使我醒来 ("Mother" 1-4)

Stand here, just stand
 and become one with the twilight spitting blood
 take back the stain-black sun for me as patient as death is this stone
 spellbound, suddenly you know the sky is already far-off
 At the last moment the stars pull out, until
 The night is cast off and I fall silent³⁴

³⁴ Use Michael M. Day's translation

站在这里，站着
 与咯血的黄昏结为一体
 并为我取回染成黑色的太阳
 死亡一样耐心的是这块石头
 出神，于是知道天空已远去
 星星在最后的时刻撤退，
 直到夜被遗弃，我变得沉默为止 (“An Instant” 1-7)

In terms of external form, “Mother” is distinctive: each stanza has two verses which are longer than the verses in others. Those restrained short verses, implying silence and being controlled, in other passages serves as a foil to the strength of maternal power revealed in “Mother”, which creates new life by passing through great pain and death. At the end of the poem, the primitive power of giving birth reappears:

...

The body is up and down like billows 身体波澜般起伏
 Seems to be resistant to the invasion of the whole world 仿佛抵抗整个世界的侵入
 Give it to you 把它交给你
 As such a life filled with crisis and refuses to be freed
 这样富有危机的生命、不肯放松的生命
 Connive at daily massacre 对每天的屠杀视而不见
 Fearfully moves from which planet 可怕地从哪一个星球移来
 Fluid undisciplined on earth unwilling to disappear 液体在陆地放纵，不肯消失
 What kind of airflow is absorbed into sky 什么样的气流吸进了天空？
 This kind of inflated gift such a tiny universe 这样膨胀的礼物，这么小的宇宙

It is gazing the most horrifying in the world 它正凝视这世上最恐怖的内容³⁵

(“Life” 5-28)

After the first stanza which bespeaks a woman’s labor, these twenty four verses in stanza two keep running without one stop, and it is another unique form in the poem. Obviously, this

³⁵ My translation

linguistic power is configured by the poet's understanding of maternal power. In her essay "A Soliloquy about *Soliloquy* (*Guanyu ziyu de ziyu* 关于自语的《自语》)," Zhai talks about painting and believes that the canvas, as the eternal existence of an abstract symbol, can determine the composition of a painting. During the process of painting, the composition of a painting establishes its own language when all other elements, such as colors are extracted from the canvas. She comments on the painting "Soliloquy," observing that in the totally isolated condition created by "Soliloquy," the color of rigid rules and the soft cakey texture of the canvas are uncompromisingly in opposition to each other, which turns into metaphysical, enigmatical, and mysterious imagery, and all of these carry religious meaning (Zhai *Zhi shang jian zhu* 78). More importantly, Zhai raises a question as to how many of us understand the uninhibited eyes locked beneath veil, when we are facing the "self (*ziwo* 自我)" depicted by the painter (78). The poet's strongest voice for "Women" is her criticism of this painting. Zhai is fond of discussing the artistic form of architecture and painting. Both kinds of art are references in her writing. Most of us fail to notice the varied layout of certain stanzas in "Women," which is presumably due to the casual style of the poem: having rhymes but not precisely; written in tidy sections but not coherently. Fortunately, the poet is telling us that the composition of the stanzas speaks for itself; its layout demonstrates as much meaning as a painting's composition does.

Compared to the unique layout of "Mother" and "Instant," the section "Desolated House (*Huangwu* 荒屋)" looks more normal; I would like to argue that it is very well controlled and even reaches aesthetic perfection. The awareness of "self" is seldom seen in other sections in "Women":

There are dark purple stairs
There plants are red sun-birds
There face of mankind grows out of stones

那里有深紫色台阶
 那里植物是红色的太阳鸟
 那里石头长出人脸

I often walk through there	我 常常从那里走过
With all kinds of nervous gestures	以各种紧张的姿态
I am always weak at dusk	我 一向在黄昏时软弱
While the desolated house tightly closes his eyes	而那里荒屋闭紧眼睛
I stand here watching	我 站在此地观望
Watching the painful light of day flow away from his body	看着白昼痛苦的光从它身上流走
...	
There all are like rumors	那里 一切有如谣言
There lamps with fever provide conspiracy	那里 有害热病的灯提供阴谋
There has been proved: nothing to be found	那里 后来被证：无物可寻
I am coming I am approaching I am invading	我 来了 我 靠近 我 侵入
...	
His days with arrogance are still unmoved under dusk	它的傲慢日子仍然尘封未动
Just like it is a desolated house	就像它是荒屋
I am my own ³⁶	我 是 我 自己

(“Desolated House” 1-25)

As I have stated above, poetic form is important to the poet and to meaning. The pronouns “There (那里)” and “I (我)” open the verses and attempt to show the interior of the desolated house as well as “my” action and perception of the house. It seems that the repetition of these two words has put both subjects on exhibition. However, can both of them show anything to us? Can we approach them closely? Or, it might be a better way to ask, “Is the house presenting itself to the fictive speaker, if not to us?” Though “I often walked through there (the house),” the house is not a place of nostalgia for “me.” It is clear that the house can be a piece of picture, but it exists only for itself. It can neither be approached nor investigated. So, why is there a need to write about a house that is inaccessible, especially when we see that in the more careful verses – words are carefully arranged and syntactically inverted in the poem? The only possible reason

³⁶ My translation

for it is that the house symbolizes something which can be understood, and deserves to be addressed. Zhai's use of odd images creates an imaginative moment – a dreamlike moment – in which the house has been proved an isolated place. This isolation exactly parallels the speaker's isolation.

Many scholars have drawn on the theory of intertextuality to examine the relation of “Women” to Plath's works, yet they have barely noticed the interrelationship between the different sections within “Women.” It is therefore worthwhile to note the linkage between “Desolated House” and “Night” (*yejing* 夜境). “Night” basically talks about a woman entering a castle, which is obviously the transformed text of “Desolated House,” because the latter, as discussed above, is about a woman's attempt to explore a house. The major difference between the two texts is that the woman of “House” does not step into the building.

This section begins and ends with the dark imagery of the “raven,” which speaks of the night's unease and the protagonist's fear:

When ravens are active
— the legend begins as such
She has entered into the castle, and gradually feels terrified

During those nights trees are sleeping on water
The water is as graceful as the name of the moon
A black cat runs over to break the light
The skinny archway puts hands down
Like the flower of night³⁷ (1-8)

Since the protagonist fears the things around, as the poem shows us, we might anticipate the fearful scene in the “legend.” However, the scene depicted in the second stanza makes us see a peaceful night, despite the fact that poet uses dark images. The sleeping trees, the quiet water, the

³⁷ My translation

running cat, and the archway have neither created emptiness nor nightmare, but instead a night full of animation. The legend continues,

The legend is written as such
 Obviously having rain, having illusion
 Like ghosts move along windows
 But she does not know
 During those nights the hallway hides the shadow of dianthus caryophyllus
 The wall of the well is not durable, moss is too old
 She feels everything familiar but far from dream

The legend continues to write——now
 She is standing inside the mirror, surprised³⁸ (9-17)

Similarly, in the third stanza the rain, the dianthus caryophyllus, the moss, and the ghosts alongside the window do not trace out an appalling view. The hallway resembling the archway is anthropopathic and a vivid presence. Instead of terrifying the protagonist, the natural objects and the castle allow “her” to explore. Until the fourth stanza, we recognize that the very thing causing tension, if any, is the main character herself. The mirror reflects her image and further leads her to find the book,

她以站在镜子中，很惊讶 She is standing inside the mirror, surprised
 sees her own, also sees a book opened on the terrace
 整个夜晚风很大 In the whole night it is very windy
 一棵榉子树对另一棵发出警告 a chinaberry is sending a warning to the other one

The peaceful mood is to some extent broken by the protagonist’s appearance on the terrace, as she feels the high wind and hears the warning sent by the tree. The rhyming words “讶(*ya*),” “大(*da*),” and “告(*gao*)” all include the vowel “a”; the vowel of the rhyming words “怕 fear (*pa*)” in the last verse of the first stanza. The rhymes of the words “fear,” “surprised,” “big (wind),” “warning” have reinforced anxiety brought by the sentence meaning, in apparent contrast to the

³⁸ Ibid

personified trees, water, archway and hallway. Nevertheless, the anxiety is not carried further, and the peaceful mood returns back:

She lifts her dress and walks up, picks up the book
Without beginning, without end
但她觉得一切很熟悉，像读她自己 (ji) But she feels all familiar, like reading herself
(21-23)

She is surely not in a panic after feeling the fast wind. The legend does not talk about “fear” again, but instead it concludes with the soft vowel “i.” This section then ends with the voice of the poet who says “The legend just gets started / the story ends like this / ——when ravens are active”³⁹ (24-26). At the end of this section the poet draws our attention on the difference between “legend (*chuanshuo* 传说)” and “story (*gushi* 故事).” It is difficult to judge whether legend is more trustworthy than story, particularly after what we read in this section. Just like “the book” and this section itself, the protagonist symbolizes the intrinsic mystery. This intrinsic mystery simultaneously fits the trait of “night.” It is worth noting that this section is titled “Night,” while its content is more about a woman’s exploration of a castle. However, the images and the legend support the theme of night. The images – “castle,” “mirror,” and “book” – each share a piece of darkness in this night, and reinforce the subject position of the protagonist as an isolated woman who is in a space of mystery. The protagonist finds herself mysterious as well, since the mysteries, which are scattered all over the castle, reflected in the mirror, depicted in the book, and eventually flock together in her body. Because the poet lets her figure proclaim “everything familiar / but far from dream,” it is unlikely to separate “authenticity” and “fiction.” In effect, no matter the authentic or the fictive derives from the poet’s creation. All “the others”

³⁹ My translation

which can be observed – castle, moon, flower, book, and mirror – are the incarnation of both protagonist and poet.

Though the trope of night is always interpreted as “a pointer to historical injustices perpetrated on womanhood” (Zhang123), the textual meaning of the section “Night” is well beyond it. In reference to Zhai Yongming’s essay titled “Raven is Auspicious” (*Wuya shi jixiang de* 乌鸦是吉祥的), “When ravens are active” is apparently not designed for repeating the meaning of the trope of night. In this essay, Zhai attempts to subvert the symbolic mode of raven, which has been regarded as “desolation,” “the symbol of filial piety,” and “god of protection” (*Zhishang jianzhu* 59-61). Rather than giving a new symbolic meaning to “raven,” the writer borrows a painting from He Duoling to make her point. In his work “Waiting” (*dengdai* 等待), he paints a woman waiting under the eaves, on which there is the shadow of a raven. Zhai comments that the woman and the house are real, but the raven is an unstable element collocating with reality. The woman’s face is immersed in death due to the appearance of the raven, and the themes of time and termination are presented (63). In fact, Zhai notices the painter’s frequent use of raven in his painting. From Zhai’s view, He Dongling is seeking a middle path between the Baroque style and New Symbolism in “Waiting,” whereas New Symbolism is a new term created by the painter; a term “close to symbolism in poetry” (62). “Raven” preserves the beauty originating from the symbol of blackness. This symbol of blackness does not take on any connotation in the traditional sense, but rather is multivocal, displaced in reality, and similar to the words in poems (62). Zhai appreciates He Dongling’s employment of raven and his attempt to make a new way for his art. Undoubtedly, she not only sees the artistic ideas which really fit her poetic thoughts, but also utilizes them to explain her poem. Looking back to her “Confession of the Author” (*Zuozhe zibai* 作者自白), the poet remarks, “Poetry is not a

construction; might be a pavilion or a high platform, holding wind from everywhere, attracting attention in public, and free for coming in and out (*Zhishang jianzhu*1). This statement reminds us of the verse in “Night”: “She is standing inside the mirror, surprised / sees her own, also sees a book opened on the terrace / the whole night it is very windy.”

The ending of “Night” – “The legend just gets started / the story ends like this / ——when ravens are active” – intimates that the story of the protagonist ends in this poem, but the poet’s textual experiment will be continued. In this sense, it would be more appropriate to see the section “Night” as a real poetic confession of the poet, and this interpretation might explain why Zhai writes one story twice in her poem and the external forms of “Desolated House” and “Night” are both more carefully designed.

National Memory in Dreamland

In her interview with Wang Ai, Zhai said, “I did not intend to create a wonderland, but most of the words in ‘Jing’an Village’ (hereafter abbreviated as “Jing’an”) are like sleepwalkers going bravely forward on the papers, and change themselves in unreal space and time” (*Zhi shang jian zhu* 252). She frankly speaks of her lucid intuition that she seemed to see the village in the sky and to hear the sound underground when composing this poem. For Zhai, “Jing’an Village” is the other important poem, in which she goes on carving her domain of darkness. Like her most famous poem, “Women,” “Jing’an” presents at great length about individual sensory experience. After the earlier experience of writing darkness, the poet no longer needs a woman “in the black gown” to open the narrative, and this time she confidently writes, “even the first time I come across a pith-black day / Everywhere there are paths that look much the same” (The First Month

4-5).⁴⁰ The poem was completed in the spring of 1985, when the poet was still in a state of depression. The scholar Qin Xiaoyu notes that this poem was written under the influence of Plath as well, which is undeniable. Nevertheless, I would rather raise this question why she is so obsessed with Plath's verses.

“Jing’an” is composed of twelve sections which represent twelve consecutive months in a year. The poem is constructed in three parts: “I set off to the village,” “what happened in the village,” and “I left the village.” In 1974, during the Cultural Revolution, Zhai dwelled and worked in the Jing’an Brigade, located in a quiet village, “County of New City” (*xindu xian* 新都县). According to her memoir, the village was much drearier than another village called “Ravine of Pear Blossom” (*shanlihua gou* 山梨花沟) where her best friend Yan Li worked during that age. In contrast to the Ravine of Pear Blossom, which was scenic, abundant in fruit trees, and always had a delightful atmosphere, Jing’an Brigade only rendered for Zhai the hardship of farm work, a humid storeroom, and a few old and torn-off books. In “My Seventies” (*Wo de qishi niandai* 我的七十年代), she recalls,

...On the mornings when it had frost, my fingers were almost frozen off...I felt boring and lonely, and for most of recess, I used them to read books. I often thought later, if I would have been in the rural areas like “Ravine of Pear Blossom,” I would probably become Fu Tianlin; would have become a poet of orchard, and would have never, after so many years, written “Jian’an Village.” (Zhai “Wo de qishi niandai”)

⁴⁰ In this chapter, the entire translation of “Jing’an Village” is using Tao, Naikan and Tony Prince’s version. See *Eight Contemporary Chinese Poets*.

From the words above, it is easy to speculate that the tough farm work and long-time sullen mood, just like her depression in the early eighties, make her admire Plath's writing style. It is a style that allows inward desperation to pour forth. But this speculation is not sufficient to answer why the inward desperation is not the center of emotional presentation in "Jing'an." (In fact, there is not much of it in "Women" as well.) If we agree that "Jing'an" is a confessional work, then based on what do we consider it confessional? Or, if we believe that it has confessional elements, then we have to trace their origin, define them, and further understand how these things have significance to Zhai's poems and the age that these poems represent.

It is worth mentioning a passage from Zhai's interview: "'Jing'an' was a spiritual home of my adolescence; there is found an irreversible fate. I always want to celebrate it by writing a long and epic-like poem. When I was young, my ideas were sometimes impractical. . . ." (*Zhi shang jian zhu* 251). As Zhai originally planned, "Jing'an" was the second chapter of the poem, and she put all her effort into it. But she finally decided to cut off the first and the third chapters, for she was not pleased with them. As the poet has said, the village is her spiritual home and deserves to be praised. And yet the poem reveals to us something exactly different from celebration, at least the depiction merely leaves us with a ghastly impression. Supposedly, what she means by "celebration (*zansong* 赞颂)" is a synonym for reminisce.

The essential content of this reminisce is "Looking back through this morbid village" (The Tenth Month 24). Reminisce, in this way of celebrating her past life, is so odd that the poet even borrows her persona's mouth to wonder "how all things are conjured up / In those invisible moments" (The Twelfth Month 41-42). This verse can be understood as meaning that invisible events exist through the poet's imagination. Some scholars have noticed sound effects in "Jiang'an." Unlike Zhai's earlier work, "Women," the landscape is generally constructed by

problematic. However, Zhai's representation of the historical event in her poetry does not cause much controversy among critics, since she does not establish an intimate relationship between an imagined tyrant and a daughter who mourns him. Although almost all the critics approach "Jing'an" through a feminist perspective, Qin Xiaoyu argues that this poem also epitomizes the Cultural Revolution in China. He further suggests, Zhai has abandoned the common patterns of Scar Literature and Educated Youth Literature (*zhiqing wenxue* 知青文学), works that in general reproach the tyrannical violence in a historical event directly (144). In "Little Fugue," the daughter's memory and mourning is ambiguous and impeded because of the inaccessibility of sight and sound to her father (Ramazani 1149), while in "Jing'an Zhuang" Zhai represents the memory of the havoc by creating a paradox – an absolutely quiet village filled with sounds.

We should notice a date given by the poet under the title of "Jing'an;" it reads:

Xinchou Day, earth
(the moon in *bizhen*, the cart)
Festival of the Spring Congregation
February 16⁴¹

This is from the Chinese lunar calendar and is meant to "imply the sense of darkness in this sequence" (79). Such a specific date as "February 16" transfers the sense of reality to a metonymic process through the poet's use of traditional chronometry. The authenticity of this date no longer draws our attention, but it invites us to recall the darkness of the historical suffering in 1970s'China.

⁴¹ According to the footnote of Naikan Tao's translation: "*xin* and *chou* are used to refer a day belonging to earth, one of the traditional five primary elements; the term *bizhen* is used to indicate a day when four planets appear in the shape of a cart (*zhen*) in the southern sky and eclipse one of the twenty-eight solar mansions" (79).

This recollection in its initial stage encounters a collective silence, which contradicts, as the poet tries to tell us, various sounds in the village. The first time the figure walks close to the village and says,

As though it had long existed, as though pre-arranged
I walk here, the sound quite beyond my control
It installs me in a side-room facing south

....
I hear the roar of Pisces
And the ceaseless trembling of the sensitive night

....

A fishing rod glides on the water's surface
Oil lamps flare up and die down again
The hoarse, frenzied barking of dogs induces contemplation
Yesterday the wind's titanic roar seemed to understand everything
Don't leave any room for black trees
Set a fatal ambush in every corner
Endure the moment when human bodies are everywhere
Now there is nothing to stop me from becoming moonlight

Married couples hear the sound of dawn rain in their dreams
Black donkeys lean against the millstone discussing tomorrow
The earth there composed of mingled yin and yang
Knows all the years and months like back of its hand

I hear roosters crowing
And the sound of a waterwheel (The First Month 1-27)

In the ways of presenting pictorial images, the stanzas above are very like Plath's *Winter Landscape, with Rooks*. Susan Bassnett indicates that Plath creates two kinds of landscape for her readers, one is "the immediate landscape" (53), which anyone might see; the other one is the metaphoric landscape, which contains connotations (52-53). On one level, in Zhai's poem, "the immediate landscape" is constructed by the sliding fish rod and the luminous oil lamps on the river, the barking dogs, the wind blowing over the land, the rain, the donkeys by the milestone, and the crowing roosters, all of which can be seen and sensed if one is close to or at the poet's

angle of view. On another level, some images are much more than descriptive language, such as “the sensitive night,” “black tree” and the omniscient earth. These shadowy and impalpable images complicate the definition of the landscape. In fact, it is the essential feature of Zhai’s poetic technique. If she did not learn it from Plath, she at least attained it from the days that she spent in the ward during the early 80s’.

Bassnet cites Plath’s own comment on “Winter” to suggest that her metaphoric landscape after all turns into a “psychic landscape” (52). Nevertheless, it is almost impossible to argue that Zhai’s poems including her earlier work “Women” are depicting a psychic landscape, as she never delves herself into her individual mental state. Things like psychological outcry and “poppies in July,” can hardly be found in her poems. Rather, “the sensitive night” with the sound beyond the speaker’s control points us to other symbols of sound in the poem.

Though occupying a perfect spot (“in a side-room facing south”⁴²) and guided by various sounds, the figure does not have a smooth journey. Her journey is as uncontrollable as the landscape. The sounds in the first month not only guide the speaker but also echo the sounds in the later parts of the poem. All of them represent infertile land, plague, and misery, which are “pre-arranged”: “shouts are heard on Cold Food Day,” followed by “the loud cry of childbirth”. “As I search I always wear a faltering smile,” the speaker says and questions herself “how can I enter Jing’an Village” (The Second Month). Zhang Guangxin suggests that she faces a situation like the surveyor K in Kafka’s *The Castle* who struggles to get access to the castle: “she is accommodated in Jing’an Village in an absolutely absurd age, and cannot actually be accepted by the village” (45).

⁴² In China, buildings and rooms which face south are considered auspicious and livable.

Kafka's surveyor is rejected because of the absurdity of the modern era, while "I" is not a woman who is not accepted by the villagers, but rather a person who is deep in thought about how to enter into the village. In the second chapter "I" has asked this question twice: "How can I enter Jing'an Village? . . . / I think: how can I enter / This village where even the crows and sparrows are silent now?" (The Second Month 18; 23-24)

The action of "entering into the village" equals the action of writing about the village. As I have discussed above, Zhai felt more confident in composing "Jing'an," and this confidence and maturity are expressed in her verses. Besides the familiar paths that the speaker passes by ("Even the first time I come across a pith-black day, / Everywhere there are paths that look much the same"), she announces her ambition, "Now there is nothing to stop me from becoming moonlight" (The First Month 21). Since the image of the moon in "Women" symbolizes the persona "her" and feminine power, the strong desire to become moonlight here again can be read as the subjectivity as poet. Her ambition is then reassured in "The Third Month": "When I come here all is stillness" (6), which implies her dominance upon "recollecting memory."

Therefore, "Recollecting memory" is aimed at rewriting landscape and re-defining landscape. Scholars point out that Zhai transforms Plath's verse in "Little Fugue" – "I was seven, I knew nothing" into her own "I was nineteen, completely ignorant, in nature barely a woman" (The Ninth Month 6). Certainly, she is not innocent about her creation:

Last year I was at Great Sandy Head, dreaming of this village
 The freckles on my face glowed with the brightness of the Ninth Month
 Now I have squandered my resources to the point of ruin
 And my cheeks bear memories of unfathomable intent

Was it I who brought poisonous sounds into this region?
 I was nineteen, completely ignorant, in nature barely a woman
 But I heard a frank howling from my body
 Who could have thought that I would grow into a disease?

I lived here, cold as ice, but without losing my innocent appearance
 Never naked, more contented than a clean haystack
 Suddenly the sun disappeared, and entered the most ardent part of me
 I was still young at the time, and preserved a boundless reticence

(The Ninth Month 1-12)

“I” is indeed standing in the season of harvest and is the same identical female who wrote “Women.” In the first stanza, the persona clearly informs us what she is doing. She is squandering her resources by “dreaming” her memories. Her resources are inherited from “Women” and national history. I have to argue that there is not a rupture between “Women” and “Jing’an,” but rather a rewriting process after “Women.” In the first section of “Women” there is a part entitled “Desolated House,” in which the poet, as I have explained, creates an imaginative moment and makes the house isolated. More significantly, the house mirrors the selfhood of the poet. It is more than the production of the poet’s imagination, but rather the incarnation of the poet. In “Jing’an” the desolated houses are “extremely vicious, and covered with red dust;” they are transformed into a huge theatrical stage, on which famine and slaughter are performed: “Along the road on which ants are doomed to die /...Sunflowers have been beheaded /...Straw rain-capes pretend to be gods and will commit all kinds of evil by night” (The Second Month 9-13). After turning one desolated house into desolated houses, the protagonist believes that she might “grow into a disease.”

This disease is the metaphoric disease which reclaims Plath’s “Dying / Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well” (“Lady Lazarus” 46-47). These verses were first inserted in “Women” as a mark of darkness, and then put on as the outerwear of disease. Disease here can be treated as a metonymy of the art of death. The poet confesses that she is “never naked, more contented than a clean haystack,” as she is practicing the art of death. The critic Cao Mengyan argues that silence in the poem implicitly fits Zhai’s lyrical style which is “rather calm”

(*pian leng* 偏冷), and she is wandering outside events and sounds (“The Secret Imprint of Body: Study on Zhai Yongming’s Poems”). I am afraid that I would not agree with this viewpoint. On the contrary, Zhai does not let herself stay outside the sounds and events. Although she gives the protagonist an omniscient perspective, she is the crucial participant in the poem. Not only does she create the events, but she also makes the illusion of silence. Critics like Cao Mengyan often mention the reflection of divinity in “Jing’an” and “Women.” As Cao suggests, the divine still exists – there is a secret “it,” but the divine of “Jing’an” seems to be at the state of aphasia (*shiyu zhuangtai* 失语状态). Undoubtedly, Aphasia is a term frequently used under the discourse of feminist criticism. Those repressed bodies, emotion, and language always parallel “Aphasia.” But if we can merely think of “Aphasia” when reading poems written by women, then what else can we say about these women poets and their poems. Certainly, the divine has never lost her voice in “Jing’an Village.” She is not at the state of aphasia. Rather, she is sort of at the state of ecstasy, and rejoices at the dream of the intrusion of the sun and; she recites that “suddenly the sun disappeared, and entered the most ardent part of me” (The Ninth Month 11). The image of the sun appears pervasive in Zhai’s early poems and is often viewed as masculine power, yet his radiance fades at this point. It is in the speaker’s plan that the sun will be withdrawn from the scene. The fifth section reads,

This a day full of doubt, she arrives here
The moon shows an ominous light, begetting heart-breaking secrets

.....

Aching trees have been transformed overnight
The watcher in the wheat-field is astonished
The undulating earth has eliminated all its roots
She comes and goes with the air of an illusion
The massive pomegranate from the low wall enclosing the corner
Reveals its lascivious colour within
She walks slowly,

Hating every wind
 Sharing in the malevolence of all kinds of things, as she has always done

(The Fifth Month 1-20)

I have to note here that the fifth section appears abruptly in “Jing’an,” as it is not relevant to the main narrative and makes a rupture between the fourth section and the sixth section. The narrative is supposed to display a general view of the village with the first-person perspective, whereas it has been changed to tell “her” story and action. The poet’s motivation for changing the view and the route of the narrative is apparent in that she deliberately draws the reader’s attention to what she is saying in this section: “She makes whiteness stand out so clearly, / Many nights have been changed afresh, her hand / Placed on your chest is still mysterious.” Including the verses above, the whole section is playing with metaphors. “Many Nights” and “her hand” reflect the relationship between the subject and the objects, and imply the construction of verb-object in both senses of grammar and semantics. If we understand that nights are the creation of the poet, then it is not hard to figure it out that the poet intends to give a brand new night. The mystery of changing night merely belongs to the moonlight and expels the role of the sun. To change the night is seen as lascivious and malevolent, and has been done for a long time – “as she has always done.” This behavior can be understood no clearer than the power of Zhai’s textual practice which is intimidated by the disease becomes more and more sinister.

However, it is noteworthy that this disease cannot exist without the evocation of sounds and the disease as plague. The poem summons up literary affiliation an ocean away with T.S. Eliot but its vision is uniquely Zhai’s, an individual experiment with the concept of poetry. Zhai does write about death in “Jing’an,” but death transcends itself to a metaphoric fusion and transformation with sounds and plague. Let us read “The Third Month”:

This plague is the same all year round, like water turning into ice, like fire

And the Third Month provides its power; they have gained nothing
 The air we see is extremely transparent
 Beating arrhythmically, streaming
 Through eyelids opened or closed
 When I come here all is stillness, the heart of the village is a pomegranate

The origin of this plague is unknown:
 The shadows my eye lights upon have lost their shape
 The village flows towards me like a fatal moment

No-one knows why this plague came here

(1-16)

The main idea of this section can be concluded as such: what we see “gains” nothing, so we have to rely on what we hear, which explains why the poet writes “lilacs clamour at the door / ...I hear my mother’s voice raised in anger” (The Fourth Section 5; 10) right after “The Third Month.”

The sounds are emphasized again in April “the cruelest month.” “When I come here all is stillness” appears once again. “Beating arrhythmically, streaming, / Through eyelids opened or closed” (The Third Month 4-5), which ironically says to the poet herself, could yet be viewed as a critique to the collective silence both in nation and the poetry circle in China. “Woman” and “Jing’an Village” are essentially arrhythmical. They touch on the historical memory on the edge.

The natural images and the landscape depicted in both poems are as alien and distorted as the plague that can be barely connected to the past memory or the status quo of Chinese society.

Where does the plague come from? It only arrives in the text through Zhai’s dream. The poet writes,

The night is so humid and prolific, the striped window paper
 Reminds me of the heart, at a street corner
 A blind man feeling his way with a stick sees in the stones
 My ultimate fate being quietly predicted by many gods

(The Fourth Month 43-46)

As a matter of fact, the last two lines should be translated as follows: “A blind man feeling his way with a stick sees me in the stone / The fate of the lowest being quietly predicted by many gods.” Ordinary people undergoing that turbulent age are quietly recorded in the verses. It is not the gods who have predicted these people’s fates, but these different tragic fates have been pre-arranged by the poet.

Conclusion

Going on to seek “the subtlest emotion and the nature of poetry” (“Words in the Small Suitcase” *Zhi shang jian zhu* 188) in simplicity, Zhai Yongming has created the “world” that she wants to see – embracing everything and being ubiquitous. She writes, “Our lifelong desires, chances, imaginations, and memories integrate and overlap each other in this world” (184). The flavor of real life has been more than ever emphasized in Zhai’s poems since the mid-1980s, while the eccentricity and mystery of “night” have faded out. The real-life events and places help Zhai to overcome the influence of Plath, and further provide energy to renew her writing. She raises the question by citing Zhong Ming’s words in her poem, “The only woman among us / how does she demonstrate the weight of language?” (Zhai “The Color within Color 颜色中的颜色”: “The Fifth Variation: My Personal Portrait” 3-4). Critics thought that “in her big and deep eyes / there is the scene of extreme” (5-6), whereas Zhai said, “not everyone can express the most complicated meaning through the simplest form” – for a writer, the difficulty lies in the sense of propriety between plain narrative and daily language. (“An Article like This” 这样的文章 *Zhishang jianzhu* 201). The night in a woman’s deep eyes in the end transforms its power into subtleness and simplicity, which can be easily inspired through a person’s daily life.

The recital of life events is at the core of confessional poetry, and feeling free to confess both external and inner life is a triumph of poetic rhetoric. This triumph was whispered through the pitch-black night when the Chinese new-generation poets, such as Zhai Yongming, were soberly looking for the new path of modern poetry. In his analysis of the poems of Wang Xiaoni, one of Zhai's contemporaries, Geng Zhanchun argues that the things seen in daily life such as magpie, lotus, tractor, people who carry coal and so on. were once placed in the traditional and modern rhetorical context, yet they are de-contextualized by the poet. Through this de-contextualization, the ordinary things have modified the structure of the metaphors and generate brand new connotation and rhetorical imagination (190). Similarly, Zhai de-contextualizes the metaphor of night. "Night" conventionally symbolizes terror and femininity, but in "Women," under the cover of confession, it takes on the mission of meditating life and death, "transforming the world into a giant soul," and evoking the poet's secret and rebellious passion for poetry.

In his succinct afterword to *Collected Poems*, Frank Bidart reminds us to think about how Lowell's candor is an illusion. He notes, "The power aimed at in *Life Studies* is the result not of accuracy but the illusion of accuracy, the result of arrangement and invention. . . . Candor in the confessions is not simply self-laceration, not covert self-promotion or complaint" (997). Underneath this claim, we see the power of history and artistry, which are constructed by "the real." At the same time, we realize the significance of "control" and the threat of "excess" – transcribing endless emotional outpourings and events could be regarded as confessional but not poetry.

After World War II and on the eve of the cold war, Americans turned to home, marriage, and parenthood. It was a time that young Americans were eager to enjoy peace and affluence, and put hardships brought by war behind. It was also a time that atomic fears and the Bolshevik

threat set the focus of American civil defense strategies on domestic life. As the cold war took hold of American political concerns and cultural values, domestic containment took the place of “home.” Portraits of abundant family life were not compatible with immoderate personal display. As Michael Davidson points out, from 1945 to the early 1960s, strictures about literary excess had never stopped in America. Nevertheless, the scholar also denotes:

If there were a single ideology to the cold war cultural front it was the idea that, in Daniel Bell’s famous phrase, we had come to the ‘end of ideology’ and that the arts had to remain a bastion of aesthetic free enterprise against totalitarian censorship.

(Davidson 4-5)

In the age when the arts faced censorship, the first person “I,” which to a great extent symbolized freedom, fell into a plight that confession became the threat, but the “threat” was necessary. The big “I” calls to mind lyrical expression of the authentic confusion, struggle, suffering, despair, and loss in this secular world. This expression is remarkable for the inclusion of the most powerful sites of resistance, tolerance and innovation. As least, for Chinese poetry after the 1980s, poetic innovation was what poets were looking forward to. Zhai Yongming’s poetry corroborates a claim that no such thing can be really called “private language;” language always involves others. Her “lady in the night” speaks to the past plangent decade and the present flourishing age, an age that can be described as “it was the best of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the epoch of belief” for poetry. After years of pretending silence in poetry circles, many of Zhai’s contemporaries began to experimenting with new narrative techniques and exploring new poetic subjects. In answer to the question at the beginning of the thesis – “Where could the autonomous voice come from?” – we realize that we have never lost this kind of voice, because it is too important to us; we hear it from the still but ardent Misty poetry which had remained active from the start of the Cultural Revolution till its end. After the 1980s, the voice,

which had accumulated enough energy in the past decade, was spread among a new generation of poets. No one wants to lose the voice; if we lose it, not only the realm of art will be shaken but the realm of individuality and the locale of resistance will also be in jeopardy.

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