



From Singing to Confession: An Expression of Discourse on 1980s' Female Poetry

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Received 8 April 2015; accepted 10 June 2015
 Published online 26 July 2015

Abstract

There is a certain relationship between the boom of female poetry in 1980s and the establishment of female confessional discourse model which differs from the male. The need to excavate subconscious areas enables poetess from singing and chanting in the past to the confession in the 1980s. They advocated "My Hand, My Heart" and gave an expression of the form of series of poems and the leaping structure. They described women's unique individual life experience. In their poems, confessional discourse does not mean monologue show. In fact, there exist the latent dialogue and the communicated perspective.

Key words: Confessional; Female poetry; Latent dialogue

Chen, R. X. (2015). From Singing to Confession: An Expression of Discourse on 1980s' Female Poetry. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 11(1), 41-45. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/7315>
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/7315>

INTRODUCTION

"Female poetry" writing had been prosperous once upon a time in the late 1980s. It sprung up a group of poetess with distinctive gender awareness, such as Zai Yongming, Lin Xue, Hai Nan, Tang Yaping, Yi Lei, Zhang Ye and so on. At the same time there are also relatively subtle and various styles poetesses like Lu Yimin, Zhang Zhen, Wang Xiaoni, Hong Ying, etc..

It should not be overlooked that the impact of American Confessional Poetry which is represented

by Sylvia Plath to 1980s' female poetry of China. Confessional poetry is a style of poetry that emerged in the United States during the middle-20th century. The main representatives are Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and John Berryman. It is generally believed that the direct source of "female confessional poetry" is to follow the example of Sylvia Plath and the indirect background is Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* that was translated and published in the mainland. "Confessions" utterance poetry widens the distance with the grand narrative, but approaches to the individual's life. At the same time the expression of style is direct rather than indirect. The flourish of 1980s' Chinese feminine poetry has a certain relationship with the model of confessional discourse which differs from men's expression. With a strong body conscious way, poetesses construct a kind of speech-writing paradigm which takes body language as the main mode (Chen, 1996). They wrote from the lyrical ballads to the maternal or sweetheart's love in the past toward the female confession in self emotions and life experience. Female poet with great courage stretched poetic tentacles into women's inner world and directed at the emotional feeling and primordial life experience, such as menstruation, first sexual experience, abortion, birth, sex and marriage and so on.

Women poetry is the female performance of self-consciousness. Such a poetic idea about female poem's body characteristics makes poetess invariably to take monologue as the most essential way of writing (Zhao, 2001). In those women poetry influenced by feminist, Women's unique gender experience is a major source. Hai Nan said "Most men live for the community or sociality. On the opposite, women are alive for their own feelings and history. So, I just used a woman's feelings of herself and of others' to write." (Hai, 1998) Therefore the poet Yi Lei wrote in her poems "When a weak name / branded on my forehead / I frantically yelled: No! / Then I day and night, day and night / tearing desperate remorse" (Yi Lei *Water willow in woman's eyes*). Zhai Yongming

also declared "I was more interested in expanding my mind: the simplest and most subtle feeling that is my view of 'emininity'.....at the same time, to leave the truth uncovered with great courage" (Zhai, 1993). Why is confessional mode of discourse favored by female poet? On the one hand, it fitted female poet to express the need for mental loneliness, On the other hand it facilitated the female poet to mine and develops the inner subconscious. They advocated "My Hand, My Heart" and gave an expression in the form of series of poems and the leaping structure. They described women's unique individual life experience. In their poems, confessional discourse does not mean monologue show. In fact, there exists the latent dialogue and the communicated perspective.

1. UNDERLYING CAUSES TO ACCEPT CONFESSIONAL DISCOURSE

1.1 Female Poet's Solitude Contemplation

Loneliness may be an innate human experience, which completely shows human's individuality as one of the phenomena of life. Loneliness also drives people longing for time's depth and puts human's life in an uninterminated pursuit. To forget the loneliness, female poet has been seeking a soul mate. They are excited for love. They want to exile and stay away from loneliness completely during the strong amphoteric experience, for all beautiful love constitutes women's beauty. Once love means no longer suffering and slavery for a woman and it will bring women the experience of wisdom, strength and the enthusiasm of creativity. In this case love is a daily experience, warm and melancholy. Love, in essence, is not the whole story but the strength and courage which make life to go on. When a man and a woman are capable of mutual respect, concern and appreciation, their life is harmonious and happy. But true love is always late or melancholy and sometimes it came and quickly ended, leaving sadness.

"Everyone's heart is a 'lonely hunter', writer's heart is definitely more loneliness" (Hong & Cui, 2000). There is a lonely lion lived in each person's heart. The lonely meditation is often exposed in the monologue form by female poet. When the female poet switched from hopeless love and loneliness of spirit to introspection, they took poetry as self-awareness and self-life experience, at the same time as observation and reflection the demeanor, thus confessions are invariably favored by female poets.

Poetry led me step by step toward the reflection, I saw my situation, the nation's situation and the contemporary human condition. My age and experience make me feel, first of all, a moral oppression. But the deepest moral oppression is love. Lost the freedom to love, we will lose all freedom. The trial to love of two thousand years should be ended in this generation.

To inspire human's live vitality and creativity with love. Save our poor and weak nation rather than cast love into all kinds of strange cross to back heavily! (Yi, 1989)

Due to the lack of love resonance, the poetess often felt life lonely. In Yi Lei's 14 series poems *Single woman's bedroom*, every end of sentence is a chant "Will not you come to cohabitate with me." "I wait for you with despair hope every night". The "you" did not come. Female poet couldn't help wondering

Will World War happen if you came / Will Yellow River burst if you came / Will bad weather be if you came / Will the wheat harvest be affected if you came / Faced with all the hate all I can do is nothing / The most I hate is myself / Will not you come to cohabitate with me. (*Despair hope*)

To live by oneself means to soliloquize. She could do nothing but to touch, soothe and believe in herself. When the hope of love becomes desperation, the loneliness of love has been indeed immersed in the bone, which shows single woman's longing for love. "Unfortunately, the youth is shorter than the candle / flame would extinguish / This is my own pain / You do not come and live with me" (*Birthday Candles*). Seeing time rush, young women are always in anxiety that the youth is short. So when they are in the prime of life, just like flowers flourish in the height of summer, but without appreciation. They could not help sighing. Then, when they are in youthful beauty with no cheers they appreciate themselves. "I am my own model / I created art, art created me" (*Turkish bath*)

No one accompany me on Sunday picnic / park scariest, I'm not interested / I dug out all existing songbook / wandering in the Turkish bath / singing from breakfast to dusk/ hair sung into do/ eye sung re/ ear sung me / nose sung fa/ face sung so / mouth sung la/ all body sung si music make the pain bearable / loneliness is great (I do not need being great) (*Sunday solo*).

The mode of discourse as confession and shouting put female "I" always at the center of poetry. When it is hard to find life confidant the strong emotions of poetess can only be paid in the monologue poetry.

1.2 Needs of the Mining Subconscious

There are two traditional poetic theories in China. One is that poetry is bale to express human's will. Poets take poetry as personal emotional tool and they needn't contact with others. The other is that writing poetry can play a role in the social relations. Poets are taking their main responsibility for society with writing poetry. It is said that poetry can "xing", "guan", "qun" and "yuan". In other words, by the Poems you can stir, by them you can observe, by them you can have fellowship, by them you can express reproach (Norton, 1996). The tendency of poetry expressing makes people play down the communication function of the poem and take the poem as a tool of self-emotional expression of the heart. Female poets not only unfold the individual life consciousness, but to exploit people's subconscious in the real level and transfer the inherent vitality surging into certain language form. In their poets poetesses fully demonstrate the female secrets of the heart and life of many potential, convey female dark and irrational experiences which are life instinct proar and shy to show in the past

Wang Xiaoni said very bluntly “I don’t want to talk with people, even more don’t want to talk about the poem. The poem is more pure personal activity. Does someone want to listen to the whole world to say about himself?” (Wang, 1996) “I write poetry because I fantasy life quietly.” Poets of the own heart oriented make poetesses prefer confessions discourse pattern (Wang, 1989).

“Women living in the imagination of the ocean, being in the lazy sleep, cannot tell the difference between reality and illusion, like a fish cannot distinguish clouds and water.” (Tang, 1997) Tang Yaping said so. Women are closer to the poetry from the essence. They are natural emotional animal. Confession discourse is closer to the essence of them.

My life is more and more like just a mood. I am so nothing in life, nothing to pursue, just let unspeakable mood guide. I am so afraid of any one specific event. So go on living day by day with nothing to do. All things of life in the future are so unreal. (Xiao, 1989)

Women’s comfortable posture with doing nothing makes them willing to indulge in the inner life and digging deep subconscious mind. Zhai Yongming has made it clear that why she has a special liking to Sylvia Plath confessional style—

At that time I am in the social and personal contradictions and my soul is suffered heavily which made me despair for everything. When I read Sylvia Plath “Your body/Hurts me as the world hurts God”, I was shocked from head to toe. My injured heart beat with their verses tune. From then on I never get rid of profound impact of the confessional poetry. (Zhai, 1997)

This kind of confessional style fit the poetesses’ mind, so it had a profound impact on their writing creation.

2. EXTERNAL MANIFESTATION OF CONFESSIONAL DISCOURSE IN POETRY

Because confessional discourses are more individual and emotional self-communication, so there is a great freedom in the form of poetry. The external form sometimes is short and a single article. Mostly it is larger in capacity and rich in information as a complex of poems. Sometimes the poetry is easily understood, sometimes hesitant and subtle and difficult. The poetess can explore both ancient and modern, shuttle freely in space and time, combine myth and Reality. But confessional poetry does not mean monologue show. In fact, there exist the implicit or explicit latent dialogue and the perspective of communication.

2.1 Series of Poems

Confessional Poetry is poetesses’ most favored form. Zhai Yongming in the mid-1980s at an annual rate of poems, created 20 Poems of series of “*woman*” (1984), “*Jing’an Zhuang*” (1985) and “*Life*” (1986). Yi Lei wrote series of poems such as “*Lover dance*” (16 poems), “*Single woman’s bedroom*” (14 poems), “*Besieged*” (12 poems) and the “*hands of rebel*”, “*Female*” and so

on. Tang Yaping wrote “*Pastorale*”, “*Bow plateau*”, “*May the Lake*”, “*Black Desert*”, “*Housewife mentality recorded*”, “*Bronze mirror and zipper —ABC Love Song*”, “*Metaphysical landscape*” and other series of poems. Li Xiaoyu wrote the series of poems “*Orient Light*”, including “*pots —Banpo one*”, “*Forever Fish Patterns — Banpo two*”, “*sharp end of the bottle — Banpo three*.” Poetesses wrote series of poems because of its large capacity and free-form and they can better give voice to their emotion not only twists and turns, but also leaps and bounds. In addition, the form of series of poems better fits the female mind. As a result series of poems have been widely accepted and applied to the poetess poetry creation.

2.2 Incoherent Structure

The series of poems written by poetesses are mostly in an incoherent structure. They just wrote in forms whatever they wanted. This is fully lyrical way that “My Hand, My Heart” sometimes resulted in reading obstacles for readers, because there is no time or space constraint within the poems. Sometimes they lack the internal logic correlation between poems, even mutually contradictory. Take “*Bronze mirror and zipper—ABC Love Song*” which were written by Tang Yaping as example, it is a long series of poems composed by one hundred sections. Each section is an intermittent short chapter. There is no continuity between the mutually sections. As described in Chapter 4, “Come here to swim / whoever unable to escape the survival benefits / brother, I really want to invite you to drink / somehow intoxicated / singing with a tipsy feeling—great meat grinder”. Drinking, meat grinder, sometimes poetess’s thoughts are so ups and downs that readers can’t understand. In chapter 14, “smelly socks that night / I no longer waved goodbye to you / Wandering arrogant and greedy Plaza / to peddle passion and delusion / dead of night / eyelid drooped the bashful crotch”. There is not tracked and documented trail between poems. Sometimes the poet just spliced her complex psychology and thoughtful debris. This caused strong discontinuity between chapters and set up barriers for the reader to understand. But the freedom, autonomy, openness, and fantastical imagination in confessional discourse are in keeping with female poets

3. INTERNAL MANIFESTATIONS OF CONFESSIONAL DISCOURSE

Confessional means self-confession. The emergence of confessional poetry has considerable relevance with poetesses’ character and fate. These poems are often produced in the poet emotional shock or restless soul occasion. They need to find an emotional breakthrough and poetry has just become her vent means of inner pain. Writing poetry turned their rich emotional world of self-description into words. They pulled their look from the outside world back to review their soul. Confessional Poetry does not need the writer to pass information to

the reader, at the same time the reader does not need to intervene. Poetesses are talking to themselves. Here, the creation becomes a purely personal and private-oriented behavior. "Because it is a self-display and self-appreciation, so there are many spiritual dialogues. Of course, she would set a different role as a potential target for dialogue in writing." (Dai, 2003) But the confessional doesn't mean just telling their personal stories.

To make a comprehensive survey for women writing since the 17th century, mostly are in the form of dialogue or latent dialogue. One kind of dialogue is to talk with the outside world and the object is male subject "you", which is called outward-type writing. The other one is self-talking, self-speech, usually in the form of epistolary, diary, autobiographical or psychological novels. Judging by appearance it is women's monologue, but the fact is also a latent dialogue. This particular dialogue is a text strategy. The poetesses convey the real experience of the female through writing themselves. "let the body be heard" and the object of conversation is still a male-dominated world. These two dialogue forms are the existence of female writing. Since the 20th century the narrative that both sexes were present is gradually erasing. The subject of male is absent while a single gender narrative is present. But latent dialogues are strengthened. Female writing theory systematically put forward real women writing ideas, emphasizing the relationship between women and the body, refusing to be separated from the body and the thought or let the body succumb to ideology..... Their creative activities cannot be a narcissistic, self-enclosed (Chen, 2002).

In contrast to the dialogue, confessions cancel dialogue context, but often have one or more potential objects to talk to, and sometimes these interlocutors appear vague and unclear. There are several potential dialog objects in the confessional poetry as the following categories:

Firstly, it's I or She. "I" in the poem is often caused by fission of another mirrored image. And the talk is mostly taken place between the "I" and "Alter Ego", which commonly used to show the narrator's self-contradictory state of mind. Sometimes "I" is absent, while the mirror image of the "I" is present. The "Alter Ego" in the female poems mostly appears as the mirror of "she" or "I". "I" and "Alter Ego" played at the same time in the mind of self-dialogue, which describes that the author was in the contradictory state of mind. "Guess who I know / She is the one, and also the many she is me in a mirror / The rest singular/ the whole world is divided by two /A freely moveable singular (Yi Lei *Single woman's bedroom*).

The female "I" is always in the center of the poetry. "Spectacular I am/ Uncertain like the weather/ A drizzle is impervious heart / A white fungus grows in the armpit" (Tang Yaping *On the weather*), "smashing me to pieces/ my soul does not come loose" (Yi Lei *Huangguoshu Great Waterfall*), while the plural bisexual "we" contained of men and women in the female's past love poets has been split into I and you. "Please squint eyes/ and then

go away forever / I would also like to write poetry / I am a stubborn maker/ in my narrow room" (Wang Xiaoni *Should be a producer*). These few lines can be regarded as a perfect expulsion to men in the poetesses' poetry.

Under normal circumstances, the "I" and "Alter Ego" and "she" may be a symbol—an iconic object. Mostly it's in "I" or "she" just in the mirror. "The mirror is at the mercy of me/ Me is at the mercy of mirror" (Tang Yaping *Mirror I*). "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size." (Woolf, 1957) Now the mirror is another "I", no longer is the mirror of patriarchal, but female self-realization and traceability. In poetesses' poetry, such as Tang Yaping *Mirror II*, series of poems *Chat Mirror* (including *Mirror game*, *Mirror and Pen*, *Mirror and Flowers*), Yi Lei's *Mirror's Magic*, the interior mirror means not only the premise and possibility of self-writing, but also the way of self-identity, self-imagine, and the poet's Alter Ego. The meaning of the mirror imagine comes from the immature stage or a particular life situation, more often is a kind of self-identify.

Secondly, it's you or he. This "you" is sometimes used as opposite sexual man, also known as "he." As written in Zhai Yongming's *Monologue*, in fact it is not a person's monologue, the man "you" has always appeared in the poem.

I was the most gentle and most sensible woman
See through everything but willing to share everything
Long for a winter, a huge night
By the heart, I want to hold your hand
But in front of you my profile is a fiasco

When you go, my pain
Take my heart out of the mouth
Kill you with love, who is this taboo?
The sun rises for the world! I just for you
Concentrate on your whole body in the most hatred
filled with tenderness
From the feet to the top, I have my way

Her monologue likes the god who created the world at prayers contributed to those men. Gentle woman, as long as in love, will be able to accommodate the entire world. But even "the most gentle and sensible woman", the last position is still "a defeat", "The sun rises for the world! I do just for you". The deeper the love is, the more hatred to the bone.

"When he said: You lack sharpness/ Even you say a lot, just one word/ gives one depression" (Zhai Yong-ming *Life*). The "he" here is the man who wanted a woman to produce offspring. The former "you" is a man talking to the woman. The latter "you" is the poetess herself for her resignation helplessly.

Thirdly, the communication between women. Most of the time the object of the communication is the mother. As in Zhai Yongming's poetry, there is communicating

with women. In the series of poem *Woman* and *Jing'an Zhuang*, she self-communicated in fantasy and later had an important communication with her mother. The theme is about love, death and growth. "The place unable to reach is too much, the feet are paining, mother, you haven't have/ taught me to contract an ancient sorrow of the greed of rosy dawn. My heart just likes you/ You are my mother, I was given birth even in your blood flowing at dawn/ You are surprised to see yourself in blood, you make me wake up" and "Times put me in the grind mill, I saw that I was crushed personally/ oh, mother, whether you rejoice when I finally become you in silent" (Zhai Yongming *Mother*). The "mother" is no longer just the image of a traditional mother, and is also the other woman who is used to self-inspect as an objective reference. Years smooth the edges, crush "my" beliefs and pursuit. "I", in the end, become silent in the river of time from a chatterbox. Is this meaning growing up? If yes, to grow means so much pain. "I have seen through the eyes of mother/ the end of the soul, you go your separate ways" (Zhai Yongming "*the pattern of death*"). Communication with mother focused on the female personal growth with all secrets and the pain, the poetess was aware of her own destiny after she was disillusioned to search for answers from her mother. This is a kind of reincarnation meaning the repetition of female fate. Women through their bodies, from mother to daughter, are in the continuation of life. Women's historical situation: Loneliness, death and birth, separation and so on will rehearse over and over.

CONCLUSION

Confession, as a kind of discourse expression, for the development of China's "women's poetry", can be called a booster dose. But in fact, the word confessional discourse also became a defective description gradually as in the female poetry criticism in China. For women of confessional discourse style of poetry, Poetry Zang Di pointed out that poetesses are paranoid to use confessional discourse. "Poetry is turned into a kind of self-knowledge tool, a kind of inductive lexical compiling methods of the female self-consciousness.....Confessional discourses turned into feminist consciousness discourse, and soon shrunk into a sexual discourse." (Zang, 1995) Luo Zhenya also thought female poets favored confessional discourse to the degree of preference to the paranoid. Zhengmin criticized "our Plathes had only focused on female neuroticism and boudoir's complaints... favored the women's effeminate, expressing grief and resentment." And she also pointed out that "To the best, the anger and hatred can only achieve to fan tore." (Zheng, 1998) Zhengmin raised expectations and requirements from the perspective of the whole poetry development. She said female poets not only can write good poems in their youth, should be able to write even better than before. Female poets, not limited to the tiny little world and the boudoir's complaints, should be able to stretch their tentacles to the vast earth.

In the 1980's, feminist poetries expressed the true individual life back to their own experience. Through the female body writing, poetesses established their own words and tried to make their writing connected with female body and female desire, to enter the women's unique world.

When the wheel traveled to the era of the nineties, the majority of poetess was aware of the limitations of the feminist poetry. They began to consciously surmount themselves unceasingly. They are no longer like during the mid-1980s that fierce mood to blame the discrimination and oppression against women of patriarchal society. When the gender awareness retreated, then the dignity of human rose, poetesses took things philosophically, that is a kind of broad perspective to life.

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