Half a century ago, Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own_, asked, "who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and entangled in a woman's body?"¹ A poet who happened to be a woman was indeed at a great disadvantage, because literary critics were usually men who looked upon women writers with condescension. In order to be heard, a woman poet must either use "all the arts and wiles of her sex "² to appeal to the male ego or to arouse his pity; or else she must disguise her natural pitch to assume the masculine voice. With the rise of Women's Studies in the West in recent years, there has been growing awareness, among literary critics, of the distinct differences between male and female sensibilities. Nurtured and conditioned by different sets of experiences, women poets invariably develop different aesthetic visions and use different verbal expressions. Once allowances are made for such differences, women poets, in America at least, will have thrown down their masks and resumed their own natural voice. But what about the women poets in China?

China, as we know, has had a long and uninterrupted poetic tradition. And poems attributed to women were included in the *Shih-ching*, the time-honored poetry anthology dated from 11th to 7th Century B.C. Considering the long history of Chinese literature, one is surprised to find that women poets who achieved personal recognition, such as Li Ch'ing-chao (c. 1084-1151) of the Sung Dynasty, are exceedingly rare. This is not because Chinese women lacked poetic imagination or that they were less favored by the Muse. A male-dominated, oppressive society which had devised such tortures for its women, such as the bound feet to limit their physical freedom of movement, certainly did not lack the means of restricting women's Intellectual growth.

The twentieth century has witnessed social and political changes in China. Among the changes was women's emancipation. Some women with vision had the courage to invade the literary world, which prior to the May Fourth Movement of 1919 belonged exclusively to men. While there were a few women writers who have gained a nodding approval, Ping Hsin (1902- ) was probably the only woman generally recognized as a poet a few decades ago. For it was common for Chinese women writers to write anonymously or to conceal their true identity by using the name of a man, as George Eliot or George Sand did in 19th-Century Europe. And since the 1949 Revolution, if there have been women poets on the mainland, they must have used their poetic energy to sing work songs along with their male colleagues. Consequently, no distinct individual female voice could be detected in the proletarian chorus.

The literary situation in Taiwan, however, is quite different. While true sexual equality is still a thing of the distant future, the murmur of the Muse is plainly audible there. And practically all women writers strive to write poetry, even though few can be labeled as career poets. In this paper I shall confine my discussion to three women poets. Although they are not representative of all the women poets in Taiwan today, they do represent a developing trend, and the changing sensibilities that are characteristic of women poets in Taiwan.

Chang Hsiu-ya (1919- ) is a professor of Chinese literature at the Fu Jen University in Taipei. She is perhaps better known for her prose works (personal essays (san-wen) and works in translation) rather than for her poetry. Nevertheless, she is an accomplished poet in her own right. And few Chinese poets writing today share her meticulous concern for the beauty of rhythm and structure in versification. The pervading mood of her poems is one of melancholy, because her personal life is a sad one. Indeed, she fits the classical role—frequently sung by poets of all ages—of a deserted wife. Yet personal tragedy has never reduced her to despair. Perhaps her strong Catholic faith and her love for her children helped to mitigate the bitterness against the husband who betrayed her. Only a person with extraordinary religious faith could endure the "tiresome life" of middle-age alone and seek consolation in the ancient church which advocates love and forgiveness. Her emotional struggle and triumph are best described in "Forgetting":

I've sworn to forget you
And bury everything in time's dark valley.
The fragrance of spring roses has faded;
Last night's starlights also died in dawn's blue wind.
And the present
Is the tiresome midday of life.
Every time I tell myself to forget you
Is another time of remembering you.
Behind the clouds woven with forgetfulness
In your shadow bright like the white moon
Slowly sinking
Slowly rising.
How can the lake erase reflections?
Being limpid and sky-bright.
The white rocks on the bank hear night-long sighs
The oak tree gently sways its melancholy shade.
Oh, listen
The ancient church
Again rings out
The bell of Recollection.

With the strength derived from her religious faith she could overcome any destructive passions of wrath or hate. And out of her faith grow hope and love, and even gratitude for the new life—seen in her children. In the following poem, "Rising from Illness," she tells in symbolic terms of her coming to terms with her lot; only then is she able to tune in with nature and to thank God for her spiritual rebirth:

With the morning sky as my scarf
And the dawning sunlight my garment
I kneel upon the fresh green lawn
Giving thanks for a new day of love.

Suddenly across the sparse fence
A rosy little face is smiling at me
Ah, from the withered bush on parched ground
Struggling into bloom is
A tiny rose.

Yung-tzu (1927–) is perhaps the only professional woman poet in Taiwan. She left her government job a couple of years ago so that she could devote her time exclusively to writing. She is editor of Blue Stars, a poetry quarterly, and she has authored at least half a dozen books of poetry. She is married to a fellow-poet, Lomen, and the two are frequently labeled by others in the literary circle as the Brownings of Taiwan. Yet Yung-tzu's poems reflect certain conflict in her roles of wife and poet. Her poetic visions, symbolized by mirror, glass, window, or dream are frequently shattered, broken, and fragmented. She seems to be caught between idealistic dreams and the cruel reality. In "March Without Poetry," for instance, there is fear of hunger and starvation—not so much in the material sense as on the spiritual or intellectual level. And there are poetic images hinting at violence and intrusion, such as "the waves snap the shore," the oars strike the water, and such lines as:

the sun's shadow and dream compete in a race
dream allows life to go ahead
turn to red dust for salvation
and pass through the blast furnace into steel.

"The Broken Mirror" is another poem which symbolizes her conflicting emotions, her fragmented world and the death of poetic vision:

Oh! from shattered calm
dismembered trivia?
How many seas in the city, drowning colors and images!

Always zero, always minus numbers,
Always sailing against the head wind;
Continuously dying . . .
This continued death enfeebles me.

In a poem titled "The Triangular Window," we find a similar disillusionment of Yung-tzu's world, a world that is divided and polarized by opposing forces, a world in which the poet is victimized, sick, and lost:

A crystal drop on my left shoulder on my right the misty sea
I lie in the influenza-infested hot wind twisting and turning
sea gulf sea gulf is not a harbor (my head heavy like a lead hull)
my left shoulder a chick my right jungle's lion-roar
a tiny mustard seed gives dizziness its infinite potential incites fear."

Later in the same poem she speaks of searching for herself, if she is able to walk. But, she tells of her present predicament:

(but I am fastened here in the sea gulf of disease
I cannot walk to the seashore of the past).

The sea usually represents liberation and freedom. If the sea-shore means freedom for Yung-tzu, then the past does not necessarily mean the historical past, but rather the days prior to her marriage, when she was free from trivia and the marriage ties, which tied her down "in the gulf of disease." This same idea is carried over and further elaborated in another poem, namely, "Dream's Wilderness." Here she is easily identified with the protagonist, the Greek Goddess of love who was "born of the Aegean Sea foam on the early summer gloom":

17
Because the wind carried me away --
A grain of drifting sand, (a sprig of jade lotus.)
From here to the land
Lies the tragedy.8

**Tragedy for Yung-tzu is** not unrequited love or desertion, but the restrictiveness of being a passive love-object which causes her suffering:

Deep suffering like deep love has no voice
(How fearful to love!)
Sitting here I am not an adored goddess,
Nor a blessed wife
Nor a maid free to come and go.
I am one with no rights
But a completely mute statue

The world may envy my lotus throne
Not knowing I often walk on thorns
With no shoes on my feet . .9

Love has made her vulnerable, and for the sake of decorum she has to endure her mate suffering:

I sit quietly here weighed down by melancholy
Let the eagle perch on my broken arm,
and dust cover my splendor.
I cannot change this sitting pose
Because I am a goddes of decorum.10

Compared with poet Chang Hsiu-ya, Yung-tzu has gone one step further in not accepting her lot or resting content in her socially prescribed role. But she has not raised the flag of open rebellion, because she is restricted by the decorum ascribed to her by society. Still, she is conscious of her conditions and her pre-conditioning, and she is aware of the conflict and yearns for her liberation. In this respect, unlike the mute statue that she envisions herself, she is not completely mute, because she has found her own voice.

A more audible voice is that of another woman poet, Hu Pin-thing (1920- ), who has freed herself from several traditional fetters that bound the women to their prescribed role. At an early age she defied social convention and family disapproval by marrying a Frenchman. Shortly afterwards, she left her husband in France and went to Taiwan in search of a romantic dream, which eluded her. She is now head of the **Department of French** at the College of Chinese Culture in Taipei. In her poem entitled "Supplication," she describes Polyhymnia, the Muse of Sacred Poetry, which in many respects is also a self-image. In the poem she speaks in an accent similar to that of Yung-tzu, except that her voice is remarkably bolder, and her tone more rebellious. I quote the poem here in part:

Do you admire her godly elegance?
Adore her grace and serenity?
But see the heavy shadow in her eyes,
Zeus's daughter is stifled in the dust and din.
The daughter of a god who sings of freedom
Is imprisoned in a cell.
Her luster grows dim, her inspiration in boundage.
Shaken by sweeping wind, or roaring thunder.
Arms broken, heart stricken, love shoots nipped --
The flame of Greek tragedy.

Beyond the veranda is a season of brightness;
The crimson roses in flame,
The cool foliage bent low.
But she is humbly seated at a corner by the wall
Like a mountain of silence
Like a frosted ice block;
But the glowing flame
Kindling in her bosom
Is the flame of rage, the flame of passion.
She desires to raise the torch of rebellion
Toward Zeus.

Rebellion is the attribute of the gods.11

The spirit of rebellion demonstrated in this poem is seen in Hu Pin-th'ing's personal life, in her defiance of convention. For a middle-aged woman to form certain romantic attachments with younger men could very well be a form of rebellion. It is this kind of open defiance of convention that makes her poetry rather unpopular. Here is a sample of one of her confessional poems which speaks of her consciousness of the public censor:
Since you opened toward me
Your soul's crystal window
On its glass is reflected an odd mixture
My countenance and consternation

............... 

I am the fading rose of autumn.
Let its fragrant petals
in the fire of your eye
be brewed into the splendor of spring sun.

Before long I shall return
to the element
and return to dust.

Consume me --
the old calcium;
nurture me
with your youthful blood.
I am Sodome by the Dead Sea
Let it end in incineration ...

The few poems considered here are not light verses of moonlight and breezes, or conventional, plaintive songs of women in love or damsels in distress. Nor are they curses of Cassandra or feminists' public addresses. They are undisguised murmurs of the oppressed striving to be heard. These poets speak straight from their hearts, and with their special sensitivity for words they express their personal feelings and experiences, the experiences of being women, without affectation, without masks, and above all, without self-consciousness and without rancor.

Notes


5 Ibid., p. 193.

6 Ibid., p. 197.

7 Ibid., p. 198.

8 Ibid., p. 199.

9 Ibid., p. 200.

10 Ibid., p. 201.

11 Ibid., p. 197.