

THE MURMURING MUSE: THREE WOMEN POETS IN TAIWAN

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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?"<sup>1</sup> 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" 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  
Is 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



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

**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 . . . . .<sup>9</sup>

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 goddess of decorum.<sup>10</sup>

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 bondage.  
Shaken by sweeping wind, or roaring thunder.  
Arms broken, heart stricken, love shoots nipped --  
The fla<sup>y</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

The spirit of rebellion demonstrated in this poem is seen in **Hu** Fin-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.

the old calcium;  
 Consume me --  
 the old calcium;  
 nurture **me**

with your youthful blood.  
 I am Sodome by the Dead Sea  
 Let it end in incineration ... 12

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

- <sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (New York: Harcourt, Brace Co., 1929), p. 83.
- <sup>2</sup> Virginia *Wolf*, "Professions for Women," quoted from Literary Women, ed. Ellen Moers (Anchor Book Edition, 1977), p. 20.
- <sup>3</sup> Angela Jung Palandri, ed. and cr., Modern Verse from Taiwan (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), p. 33 with slight revisions.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 30-31.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 193.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 197.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 198.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 199.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 200.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 201.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 15.
- <sup>12</sup> Hu Pitt-cuing, Meng Chih hua ("Dream's Flower" Taipei: Shui-fu-jung, 1978), p. 197.