Introduction: A Historical Perspective

Angela Jung Palandri

The idea for a study of Chinese women authors originated in my classroom in response to the queries of inquisitive students who, having taken courses in both Asian literature and Women's Studies, wanted to know if present-day China had produced any outstanding women writers comparable to those they had learned about in Japan or in the West. Indeed, despite a growing interest in China and an increasing number of translations of Chinese literary works in recent years, Western critics have given little attention to this aspect of Chinese literature.[1] I am grateful, therefore, to the Asian Studies Committee of the University of Oregon for its decision to devote the present volume of its Publications to Chinese women writers. The writers discussed in the following essays are by no means the only representatives of twentieth-century Chinese women writers. They are, however, representative of their generations and of their social milieux crucial to modern Chinese history. To better understand their literary endeavors and the special problems their gender has imposed upon them, it is necessary to view them within that historical context, as well as in the broader context of the historical evolution of Chinese women.

I

A most remarkable phenomenon in twentieth-century China is the unprecendented large number of women writers. Moreover, their literary output easily exceeds quantitatively that of their counterparts in any bygone century. In fact, it is reasonable to suggest that their writings could easily surpass the entire corpus left by their female predecessors during the last three thousand years.[2] This is not to say that Chinese women in the past lacked literary imagination or a creative impulse; rather it is to recognize that, because of social constrictions, they had little opportunity to develop their native talent.

In the male-dominated, traditional Chinese society, women were regarded as inferior beings and treated as commodities in all social strata. This deep-rooted sex bias had been justified by the _yin-yang_ principle, according to which the male was associated with the cosmological force of _yang_, symbolized by the sun, signifying all that was bright, positive, good, and strong; whereas the female was relegated to the _yin_ element of the universe, symbolized by the moon, and equated to everything that was dark, negative, evil, and weak. This ancient attitude was reinforced later by the Confucianists.[3] Consequently, throughout Chinese history women were blamed for the ruin of family fortunes and the downfall of empires. In order not to succumb to their "evil" influence, men had to keep women in subjugation. To accomplish this, the ancients in their "wisdom" contrived means to keep them in ignorance. Education remained the exclusive reserve of male children, even among the privileged classes. If women were taught at all, their first required reading was invariably in Pan Chao's _Nü Chieh_ (Admonitions for Women), which codified moral conduct for women. And most parents took to heart the adage that "The absence of [literary] talent in a woman is a virtue." Under such circumstances, small wonder that women could do little more than rear children and perform

domestic duties. Occasionally, however, some gifted women of royal birth or of prestigious family background were encouraged to read and write by their unconventional and indulgent parents, and from time to time exceptional women became known for their literary accomplishments. Still, without the sanction of their male critics, women writers had no means to achieve literary fame, regardless of the quantity or quality of their works. Given these constraints, it is not surprising that so few masterpieces from women's hands have come down to us, despite China's rich literary tradition.

II

Twentieth-century Chinese women have, to an appreciable degree, freed themselves from the fetters of tradition. No longer are they confined to their boudoirs, or restricted solely to performing household duties and raising children. Instead, because of the educational and occupational opportunities available to them, they have achieved relative independence, both economically and socially. In (the People's Republic of) China (as well as in Taiwan), they have made inroads into all walks of life. Even though the number of women in highly specialized fields and top-ranking positions is still small, the amount of literary output by women writers during the last three decades is comparable to that of their male counterparts.

Chinese women of today could not have found the path to social and economic independence had it not been for the avant-garde feminists, both men and women of foresight, who paved the way. Among the Ch'ing novelists, for instance, Ts'ao Hsüeh-ch'in (d. 1768) affirmed that women had superior intelligence in his Hung-lou meng (Dream of the Red Chamber, or The Story of the Stone), at a time when women were still regarded as innately inferior to men. And by depicting tragedies resulting from arranged marriages, concubinage, and slavery, he exposed the injustice women suffered in an

oppressive, feudalistic society. Li Ju-chen (1763-1830) in Ching Hua-yüan (Flowers in the Mirror) satirically reflected men's cruelty to women; he drove home the lesson by reversing sex roles in his imaginary Nü-er-kuo (Women's Kingdom), where women subjected men to slavery, concubinage, and the cruel custom of foot-binding.[4]

Pro-feminist literature of this kind effected gradual changes of attitude toward women among the elite. When Yüan Mei (1716-1798) opened his doors to admit female students to study poetry, he promoted the spread of literacy among women. Feminism also found strong supporters in intellectual leaders of the 1898 Reform Movement. Inspired by the Western liberalism, K'ang Yu-wei (1858-1927) advocated the equality of men and women in his projected "Great Community"; Liang Ch'i-ch'ao (1873-1929), K'ang's disciple, in an essay "Lun nü-hsüeh" (On Women's Education) (1897), pointed out that women's education was a prerequisite to China's survival. To these intellectuals, sexual inequity was linked to all the other problems that confronted the corrupt Manchu regime. They contended that one could not address China's political problems without first rectifying the wrongs committed against the female sex. Later reformers and revolutionaries also believed that, in order for China to emerge from feudalism, the oppression of women had to be eliminated. But deep-rooted customs and centuries-old prejudices could not be eradicated swiftly; the attitudes of both men and women could be changed only through the process of education. Once educated, women could join the ranks of reformers in the cause of national and racial survival.

In addition to male supporters and sympathizers, twentieth-century Chinese women were able to boast of a role model from among their own sex in the feminist-activist Ch'iu Chin (1877-1907).[5] A woman of unusual literary talent and of indomitable spirit, Ch'iu Chin broke with the traditional bonds of marriage and dedicated her life both to the emancipation of women and to the national salvation of China. Deeply committed to feminism as well as patriotism,

she founded the Chinese Women's Journal (1907), which became a leading advocate of women's rights to education and to economic independence. As a precursor of Chinese feminist-activist writers, Ch'iu Chin wrote both verse and prose in the traditional classical style, but she deliberately used common expressions that could be easily understood by the masses, so that she could effectively disseminate her feminist ideals. Constantly in flight from government persecution because of her activism, she formed the habit of destroying her writings. As a result, of her prodigious literary output, only 130 poems, thirteen essays, and two installments of an unfinished romance, Ching-wei-shih (Stones of the Ching-wei Bird), have survived to attest to her literary merit and her feminist-patriotic spirit.[6]

III

The May Fourth Movement was a watershed in China's history, and the turning point for Chinese literature as well as for Chinese women writers. It began on that fateful day, May fourth, 1919, as a patriotic gesture by students demonstrating in Peking to protest against their government's acquiescence to the inequities of the Treaty of Versailles. The Chinese government's acquiescence in allowing the Japanese to assume territorial jurisdiction of Shantung was construed by the Chinese people not only as a diplomatic failure but as downright treason. The demonstration protesting the Japanese government's "Twenty-one Demands" on China erupted in violence. And after the police fired upon and arrested some of the demonstrating students, the entire nation reacted in outrage. Further demonstrations, strikes, and boycotts of foreign goods, swept across China, involving workers and intellectuals alike. When the Language Reform Movement, advocated by Hu Shih since 1917, added its support, the struggle assumed a broad cultural front.[7] The result was a new national

literature in the vernacular, which was to accelerate the process of social and political reform by disseminating new ideas and raising the consciousness of the people.

"This cultural movement," states Merle Goldman in Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era, "culminated in the early decades of the twentieth century in a literary flowering that was one of the most creative and brilliant episodes in modern Chinese history."[8] Several women writers contributed their share to that literary flowering. They emerged at a historical moment when iconoclasm was the order of the day, precipitated by China's continual political upheavals, and when traditional values seemed to have lost their credibility because of foreign impact. Benefiting from the modicum of formal education available to women of the elite class (although not without some personal struggles in most cases), these women were acutely conscious of their privileged intellectual role in a society where illiteracy still prevailed and where the majority of both men and women were not receptive to the concept of women's emancipation. To make an impact, they found it necessary to translate their personal experiences, feelings, and observations into writing. Fiction, which, along with drama, had traditionally been scorned as a form of light entertainment, now gained respect as a legitimate literary genre and came to be widely adopted as the art form most suited for the purpose of elevating the social and political consciousness of the Chinese people.

IV

Few, if any writers of importance during the 1920's could remain aloof from the May Fourth spirit of social commitment or the concomitant romantic idealism it inspired. Women were no exception, although their major concern was to be, in varying degrees, with the conditions of women in China. Of the five women writers discussed in the following essays, three grew up during the May Fourth era. Ping Hsin (1900-), the most conservative of the

group, made her literary debut in 1919, the very year of the May Fourth Movement, whereas Ling Shu-hua (1900-) and Ting Ling (1907-) had their first books published in 1928. Literary historians tend to link Ping Hsin and Ling Shu-hua together, because of their similar educational and socio-economic backgrounds. In contrast to their relatively mild concern for the problems faced by women of their generation, Ting Ling, whose mother had already struggled for personal emancipation and gained economic independence, began her literary career as a outright activist-feminist. Having undergone dramatic changes throughout an eventful and colorful personal life, she wrote at first semi-autobiographical short stories depicting individual heroines striving against an inimical society (as in "Meng K'o"), or against inner, psychological turmoil (as in "Diary of Miss Sophia"). Then, she turned to stories of conflict between love and political commitment (as in "Shanghai, Spring of 1930"; and "Wei-Hu"). Still later as she became a full-fledged Communist writer, she wrote a full-length novel on land reform: Tai-yang chao-tzai Sang-kan-ho shang (The Sun Shines Over the Sang-kan River). Despite her own political evolution from what may be described as an egocentric anarchist to a proletarian Marxist, she has never lost sight of the feminist perception for which she paid dearly.[9] Though her art suffered when she was forced to toe the party line after Mao Tse-tung's talks at the Yenan Forum on literature and art in 1942, Ting Ling has remained the best-known Communist woman writer in the People's Republic of China.

At the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, 1937-1945, the burgeoning new Chinese literature, like every cultural development since the May Fourth Movement, was interrupted. Established writers fled either to the Nationalist-held hinterland around the wartime capital of Chungking, or the Communist capital of Yenan. But most of them contributed their literary talents to the war effort by producing a more urgent "literature of national resistance." Of the writings produced during this period, only a few

had more than just the ephemeral value of arousing patriotism and promoting political fervor. However, as the conflict dragged on, some literary activity gradually returned to Shanghai, which was governed by the Japanese-sponsored puppet regime of Wang Ching-wei. Writers who remained in occupied areas understandably restricted themselves to non-political themes (with the exceptions of underground resistance literature and of course the pro-Japanese propaganda promoting the Greater Asian Alliance). Popular literary production in Shanghai was the province of the "Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies" school, whose writers sought to procure their livelihood by entertaining the public with themes of love and romance in the traditional mode. There was, however, a handful of outstanding new writers who were able to set themselves apart from this literary stagnation, and who in retrospect appear to tower above the prevailing mediocrity. One of them was Eileen Chang (or Chang Ai-lin), whom C.T. Hsia has hailed in his History of Chinese Fiction as "the greatest Chinese writer since the May Fourth Movement . . . the most gifted Chinese writer to emerge in the forties, and certainly the most important."[10]

After China's political split in 1949, modern Chinese literature diverged even more conspicuously. On the mainland, the political harness imposed on literature, after Mao's talks during the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art in 1942, resulted in a proletarian literature with little or no individuality. Many veteran writers, having undergone several purges during the anti-right campaigns following the "Hundred Flowers" Movement and during the reign of the "gang of four," are still quite suspicious of the so-called "freedom of expression." By comparison, the writers who fled with the Nationalist government to Taiwan have enjoyed greater freedom, albeit a freedom with defined limits. They are free to uphold any philosophical theory and experiment with any literary technique, provided they do not have leftist inclinations and are not critical of the Nationalist government. Consequently, a variety

of literary phenomena and tendencies exist side by side. While militant, anti-Communist themes are sanctioned by the government, escapist literature of love and romance is popular among the general public who seek entertainment and temporary relief from humdrum reality. Experimental literature with a Western orientation is confined to the academic and intellectual community. The regional literature of the "native Taiwanese," characterized by its realism and focus on the problems of the local inhabitants, is more or less tolerated, at least for the time being.[11] Prominent in Taiwan's literary community (both native Taiwanese and those immigrated from the mainland) are a number of women who have, during the last three decades, made an indelible impression on every genre of modern Chinese literature. Although over the years, such distinguished novelists as Ch'en Jo-hsi and Yu Li-hua have emigrated from the island, there still remain numerous writers whose literary achievements deserve undivided critical attention.[12] Suffice it here to introduce a representative woman poet, Yungtzu (pen name of Wang Jung-shih), the first woman whose poetry has won public recognition in Taiwan. One of the founding members of the influential Blue Stars Poetry Association, Yungtzu was for several decades editor of the Blue Stars Poetry Magazine, a major contribution to the development of modern poetry on the island. She has received international recognition and several literary honors, including the Korat Award from the United Poets Laureate International. Distinctively marked by feminine perception and modern sensibility, Yungtzu's poetry shows traces of the classical lyrical tradition.

V

The five women writers discussed in this volume illustrate the wide diversity in Chinese attitudes toward the role of women and toward women writers in particular. Though having the same

roots and sharing the experience of a society undergoing social and political revolution, these women, because of different circumstances and personal histories, do not have the same philosophical outlook and political persuasion. In age, Ping Hsin, Ling Shu-hua, and Tina Ling are of an older generation, whereas Eileen Chang and Yungtzu belong to two separate later decades. Geographically, three of them have drifted to different parts of the world, with only Ping Hsin and Ting Ling remaining on their native soil. Having gone with the Nationalists to Taiwan in 1949, Yungtzu has established herself as an eminent literary figure. Ling Shu-hua, who traveled and taught in Europe and in Southeast Asia after World War II, is now retired and living in London. Eileen Chang, who left China in 1952, has become an expatriate, leading the life of a recluse in California.

The diverse personalities and family backgrounds of these writers invariably conditioned their ideological beliefs and feminist perceptions. While all of them have shown concern for women (in Yungtzu's case, her own voice represents those of many women), there are marked differences in their intensity. Similarly, among the five contributors whose essays are collected in this volume, there is also a clear diversity in their thematic emphases and methods of approach to their subjects. Besides some subtle differences in tone and style, these essays also express different points of view, ranging from feminist perspectives to aesthetic considerations. This broad spectrum provides the reader with a rich bill of fare rarely matched by a collection of this size.

Gloria Bien's essay on Ping Hsin, generally acclaimed as a poet (because she was the first woman who wrote poems in the new mode and her lyrical quality permeates practically all of her writings), focuses on an aspect of Ping Hsin's works that has not yet been fully explored. After scrutinizing ten of Ping Hsin's short stories written at different times, and a volume of her essays titled Kuan-yü nü-jen (About Women), Bien presents Ping

Hsin's ideal image of woman in terms of a feminist perspective.

To counter some male preconception that women usually write autobiographically, or limit their themes to those of love and romance derived from personal experiences, Clara Cuadrado analyzes and interprets three of Ling Shu-hua's short stories in terms of their realism (as in "Seeing the Train Off"), symbolism (as in "Phoenix"), and aesthetics (as in "A Poet Goes Mad"). In contradistinction to the general critical opinion that Ling Shu-hua is a prime example of the Kui-hsiu wen hsueh (Literature of the Genteel Ladies), Cuadrado points out that the versatile novelist deals with a wide variety of subject matter and penetrates into the philosophical as well as psychological depths of human nature.

Since Ting Ling is the most complex and prodigious of China's living women writers, it is fitting that Tani Barlow's essay should tackle the problematic issue of the author's artistic distance from, and personal identification with, the female characters in her early short stories. The "consciousness" and the "will" of Ting Ling's characters explored in this essay should vindicate Ting Ling the feminist, if not Ting Ling the Marxist.

While the first three contributors all concentrate on short fiction, Hsin-sheng Kao's critique focuses on one of Eileen Chang's major novels, The Rouge of the North (1966). Kao perceives in the author's use of the mirror image not only a device to symbolize illusion versus the reality of the material world in the philosophical sense, but a structural device underlying the entire thematic development. As the two lozenge-shaped diagrams appended to the essay suggest, Kao's demonstration of the aesthetic structure of the novel is as ingenious and intriguing as the narrative itself.

A poet in her own right, Julia Lin in her essay offers a number of new translations of Yungtzu's poems. Her evaluation of Yungtzu is, for the most part, positive and insightful. However, although she appreciates her "classical strain," Lin does find Yung Tzu's modern and realistic imagery "ridiculous." If her

attitude toward Yungtzu's poetry seems somewhat ambivalent, it may be a reflection of Yungtzu's own ambivalence toward her surroundings and environment, and the resulting conflict between her roles as poet and as woman. As reflected in many of her poems, Yung Tzu's poetic vision is frequently blurred by the brutal reality of her immediate, material surroundings. The conflict she experiences between dream and reality, between the world of the imagination and the world of frustrating existence, is perhaps shared by all men and women (especially women) of our times.

Literary impulse is inherent in Chinese women as in women everywhere. Despite the political circumstances and social limitations which have conspired against them, twentieth-century Chinese women have achieved a degree of maturity in their art while showing concern for their fellow men and women. These essays present only a small sample of what Chinese women have accomplished in the literary field in the last few decades. Through the efforts illustrated here, it is hoped that more interest and critical attention will be drawn to this subject in the future, and that English readers will acquaint themselves with many of the other women writers China has produced. Only by the concerted efforts of such sensitive critics as those represented in this volume can definitive appraisals be advanced for twentieth-century literature by Chinese women.

NOTES

[1] Among recent critical works in English on Chinese women writers, two articles of special interest are by Yi-Tsi Feuerwerker: "Women Writers in the 1920's and 1930's," in Women in Chinese Society, eds. Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke (Stanford, 1975), pp. 143-168; and "The Changing Relationship between Literature and Life: Aspects of Writer's Role in Ding Ling," in Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era, ed. Merle Goldman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; 1977), pp. 281-307.

[2] Considering the length of China's literary history, and its rich legacy, the literary works by women handed down to us are dismally few. For example, of the 48,900 poems collected in the Ch'üan T'ang Shih (Complete collection of T'ang Poetry), fewer than 400 are by women poets.

[3] In the Analects of Confucius, the Master is quoted as saying, "Women like hsiao-jen (the petty or mean men) are hard to deal with. If you are familiar with them, they become disrespectful; if you maintain a distance from them, they harbor resentment" (Book XVII.25). But it was not until the rise of Neo-Confucianism during the Sung that the cults of chastity and virginity were instituted, and that it was deemed dishonor for widows to remarry.

[4] Cf. Flowers in the Mirror, trans. Lin Tai-yi (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), pp. 107-114, passim.

[5] For a comprehensive discussion of Ch'iu Chin, see Yu Chao-i, Ch'iu Chin, Hong Kong, 1956; and Mary Backus Rankin, "The Emergence of Women at the End of the Ch'ing: The Case of Ch'iu Chin," in Women in Chinese Society, pp. 39-66.

[6] See Ch'iu Chin chi, Peking: Chung-hua, 1960.

[7] Although the need for a new literary language to replace the antiquated wen-yen style was recognized toward the end of the nineteenth century, it was not until the appearance of Hu Shih's concrete proposals for language reform in the Hsin ch'ing-nien (New Youth) in 1917 that the "Literary Revolution" formally began.

Under the editorship of Ch'en Tu-hsiu, New Youth became the official organ of the movement. When the May Fourth Movement erupted, hundreds of small magazines mushroomed on high school and university campuses. They were instrumental in establishing the vernacular language in place of the classical. By 1921, the Ministry of Education proclaimed that grade school textbooks would be written in the vernacular.

[8] Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era, op. cit., p. 1.

[9] Ting Ling's early empathy for the plight of women continued in her writings during the Yenan period until 1942, when she was censored and deprived of her position as literary editor of the Liberation Daily. Her article in question, "Thoughts on March Eighth," published in 1942, deploring the situation of women in Yenan in the context of International Women's Day, was ill-received by Mao Tse-tung, who a few days later answered her criticism with rebuke in one of his talks during the Yenan Forum on Literature and Arts, May 2-23, 1942. She also came under severe criticism because of her short stories, "When I was in Hsia Village" (translated by T. Feuerwerker in Signs, 2:1 [1976]), and "In the Hospital." Both focus on the status of women in a presumably liberated area under Communist control. She was identified with the protagonists in these stories during the "rectification campaign," and was removed from the Yenan literary scene for two years. During the anti-rightist campaign in 1957-58, following the "Hundred Flowers," she was purged and sent to hard labor in Heilungchiang. Her crime? She had been identified by her accusors with those "egocentric, immoral, corrupt bourgeois" characters she portrayed. Now, having been "rehabilitated," and with her highest political status restored to her since 1979, she shows her continuing concern for women.

[10] C.T. Hsia, A History of Chinese Fiction, 1917-1957 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 389.

[11] For current trends in Taiwan fiction, see Chinese Fiction from Taiwan, ed. Janet Faurot, Bloomington: Indiana University

Press, 1980.

[12] A volume of critical studies on Taiwan women writers is being prepared by Angela Jung Palandri.

Glossary of Chinese Names and Terms

Chang Ai-ling (Eileen Chang) 張愛玲

Ch'en Jo-hsi 陳若曦

Ching Hua-yüan 鏡花緣

Ching-wei-shih 精衛石

Ch'iu Chin 秋瑾

Ch'uan T'ang shih 全唐詩

Chung-kuo nu-pao 中國女報

hsiao-jen 小人

Hung-lou meng 紅樓夢

K'ang Yu-wei 康有為

Kuan-yü nü-jen 關於女人

Kui-hsiu wen hsüeh 閨秀文學

Liang Ch'i-ch'ao 梁啟超

Ling Shu-hua 凌叔華

Lun nü-hsueh	論女學
Meng K'o	夢珂
Nü chieh	女誡
Nü-er-kuo	女兒國
Pan Chao	班昭
Ping Hsin	冰心
Yi-chiu-san-ling-nien ch'un Shanghai	一九三零年春上海
Tai-yang ch'ao-tzai Sang-kan-ho shang	太陽照在桑乾河上
Ting Ling	丁玲
Wang Jung-chih	王蓉芷
Wei Hu	韋護
Yin-yang	陰陽
Yü Li-hua	於梨華
Yuan mei	袁枚
Yungtzu (Jung Tzu)	蓉子