REJECTION OF POSTMODERN ABANDON: ZHU TIANWEN’S FIN-DE-SIÈCLE SPLENDOR

SHU-CHEN CHIANG

National Chiao Tung University

Why and how gendering becomes an issue in the history of Taiwan literature is a vastly interesting question from which to approach women’s literature. It is no coincidence that a male writer, Lu Xun, has been promoted as a literary father in China, with a rise of his reputation along with each political movement during the past forty years, whereas a woman writer, Zhang Ailing, was chosen to represent the literary achievements in Taiwan¹ (D. Wang 1993). It has been noted that Zhang was set up as the literary mother, representing a literary trend of the lyrical and sentimental strain in opposition to Lu Xun’s school (D. Wang 1988: 186). Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang uses the term ‘The Eileen Zhang (Zhang Ailing) phenomenon’ (1988: 203) to evince the growing popularity of Zhang’s fiction in Taiwan between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s.² Among Zhang’s followers,³ Zhu Tianwen (b. 1956) is probably the most well-known woman writer who has gone through rather different stages to achieve her popularity. Unlike other Taiwanese women writers, she never enacts familiar feminist motifs such as selfhood, economic autonomy, sexual awakening, patriarchal

¹Many scholars have pointed out that Lu Xun’s work poses a question of taking writing as a service of the powerless: if writing has always been the possession of the educated classes, how might it be justified for social revolution? Writing eventually becomes a self-defeating process. In contrast, literature for Zhang Ailing is a kind of leisure that would allow it to be read as the resistance-in-silence that literature theoretically provides. See Chow, Woman and Chinese Modernity, 112–20.

²There is a detailed analysis of Zhang Ailing’s literary influence over Taiwan’s women’s literature in Chapter Two of my unpublished dissertation. See Chiang.

³See David Der-wei Wang, 1993, 337–41. In the article, Wang gives a long list of ‘Zhang Style’ authors, including male writers (Bai Xianyong, Guo Chiangsheng, Lin Junyong, Lin Yuyi) and women writers (Shi Shuching, Zhu Tianwen, Zhu Tienxin, Zhong Xiaoyang, Su Weizhen, Yuan Qiongqiong, San Mao). In his ‘The Modern “Ghost” Stories of Women Writers’ (1988) he includes Li Ang, Xi Xi, and Li Li.
domination, motherhood, or sisterhood. These issues for her are no longer problems as they are already subsumed under the spectacular decadence termed as ‘postmodern’ by the writer herself.\(^4\) In Taiwan, Zhu is one of the writers who are concerned with a new global epoch of postmodernity, as her critics have pointed out. However, I will argue in this chapter that her critics, in supporting the agendas of modernity, misrecognize Zhu’s resistance to Western hegemonies as well as her efforts to establish a common ground for the construction of empathy among people of different classes, gender, and ethnic backgrounds. Because of their failure to see how she brings the repressed voices of history back into the historical agenda, they hold a pessimistic conclusion of Zhu’s notion of ‘postmodern’ Taiwan. My discussion will proceed from tracing the drastic change in Zhu’s writing career to contending with Zhu’s critics about the writer’s concern with Taiwan’s contemporary society.

**From Neo-Traditionalist to Neo-Nativist**

Until the publication of *Fin-de-Siècle Splendor* (1990), Zhu was a fairly obscure object of acclaim, both in and out of the academy. Although from a literary family with her father Zhu Xining, a famous veteran writer and editor of the Sansan Bookshop, promoting her books, she had been considered ‘narcissist,’\(^5\) ‘nostalgic’ for the glories of old China,\(^6\) and therefore ‘a neo-traditionalist’\(^7\) against the Nativist literary movement in the 1970s. What is characteristic about her early books, aside from their contemporary subjects, is their irredeemably lyrical texture that stood in sharp contrast to the angrier, realist works of other women writers such as Li Ang, Liao Hui-ying, Xiao Sa, and even the sarcastic Yuan Qiongqiong. Sung-sheng Yvonne Chang in her study of Zhu attributes her sino-centric cultural views to an influence from Hu Lancheng, former husband of Zhang Ailing. Calling Hu ‘grandpa’ or ‘Master Lan,’ Zhu showed her admiration for his teaching of ‘authentic Chinese writing’ (*Hanwenzhang*) (Chang 1992: 64). S. Chang comments that ‘[h]er belief that one could attain the intangible “true color,” or “true essence,” of Chinese culture through individual literary style is pronouncedly idealist. Her ensuing endeavor to master the traditionalist language style has undoubtedly benefited her art after years of practice’ (64).

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\(^4\) Zhu’s reference to a ‘postmodern’ style can be found in ‘Take Me with You, Moonlight’ and ‘Fin-de-siècle Splendor’ in *Fin-de-siècle Splendor* (Taipei: Sansan, 1990; Yuanliu, 1992), 77, 187.

\(^5\) This is Yuan Qiongqiong’s comment on her in Yuan’s interview with Chien Ying-ying. See Chien.


\(^7\) *Ibid.*