

INTRODUCTION

From Textuality to Historicity: Issues and Concepts

One of the objectives of literary criticism is to relate literary facts to history within a transcultural framework. How does reception take place in terms of writers, editors, translators and critics? How does the “self” perceive itself from the perspective of the “other,” when the “self” is not at home?

Contemporary literary criticism goes from one trend to the next, following the rhythm of the history of theory, but not that of theory alone. Attention should be paid to the interaction between literary criticism, literary works and the reality of contemporary China. While Russian formalism and futurism form the foundation of twentieth-century literary criticism, it is French surrealism, the Nouveau Roman, stylistics, structuralist semantics and narratology that have introduced and punctuated literary criticism and literature in China. Nevertheless, at the same time, literary criticism never really deviated from traditional sociological and historical approaches.

Since the 1980s, the tendency has been to take equally into account not only the text but its context. For some, this trend constitutes a return of History. I see it as a shift from textuality to historicity. The present work, far from taking a position, tends to ask questions rather than offer solutions, and I hope it helps to open up questions relating to contemporary Chinese literary history, in cultural and transcultural literary historical context.

The texts and literary facts studied here are all representative of the theses and hypotheses related to contemporary Chinese writing. My textual and paratextual analysis (on the basis of external, intertextual and intercultural data) aims at placing itself in a turbulent Chinese literary history that has been in constant movement since the early twentieth century. Is it a history open to all genres, as a testimony to the porous border between poet, novelist, and playwright as shown by Umberto Eco in *The Open Work* (1965)? Bei Dao 北島 (1949–) is

currently going through such a mutation. The genre of his work is ambiguous: Do his writings belong to mainstream poetry? Do they pertain rather to philosophical poetry? Or perhaps lyrical or total poetry? Or do they belong to the genre of the novel, of prose, autobiography, testimonial or to “total” literature (witness for example his latest work *Chenmen kai* 城門開 [*City Gate, Open Up*. Beijing: Sanlian; Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 2010])? Many Chinese writers live on this porous border between novel, drama, poetry, painting, music, cinema, and calligraphy (Ouyang Jianghe 歐陽江河 [1956–], Liu Suola 劉索拉, Gao Xingjian 高行健, Zhang Wei 張煒, Hu Dong 胡冬, Dai Sijie 戴思傑). The idea that only the work matters is gaining momentum in literary China. The interaction between author and reader/viewer/translator creates a fertile terrain for the open work (Li Jinfa 李金髮, Mu Dan 穆旦, Bei Dao, Duo Duo 多多, Gao Xingjian, Shu Cai 樹才, Meng Min 孟民). Many literary works unclassifiable under any classical genre, such as Wang Xiaobo 王小波 (1952–1997), Can Xue 殘雪, Lin Bai 林白 (1958–), and Zhang Wei’s poetic narrative, or Hai Zi 海子 (1964–1989)’s epic tale represent a new intertextual, hybrid literary genre. For contemporary Chinese literature, transgression of literary genres marks a major breakthrough of modernity.

In the 1980s, just like the advocates of “New Chinese Literature” of sixty years before, Chinese critics, fascinated by Western critical thought, proceeded once again to apply Western literary theory to Chinese texts, hoping to find new critical tools to free themselves from their own critical apparatus deemed too old and irrelevant for the study of “modern” literature.

In this context, numerous French critical works were introduced and translated in China to be used as guiding lights by critics of “modern” literature. The modernity and postmodernity of this reception is to be found in an attachment to Western critical writing in its “academic” sense and in “practice.”

Most theoretical schools were invoked: psychoanalysis, structuralism, semiology, stylistics, Saussure’s structural linguistics, and hermeneutics as well as works by Paul de Man, Martin Heidegger, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Gérard Genette, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu and many more. Towards the end of the 1980s, “French thought” was dominant in the discourse of Chinese literary critics. Structuralism and “deconstructionism,” attributed to French intellectuals by Chinese critics, dominated.

The application of these theories to Chinese literary texts seemed to slip easily into the Chinese field of experimentation in which literary critique aims

not so much at catching up than designing a new Chinese model of analysis and interaction between the academic and the imaginary, especially since the broad lines of traditional Chinese literary criticism had been laid down some two thousand years previously. Because of its fragmentary, impressionistic and poetic methods, reinforced through a commitment to intuition and imagination, in which analyses were produced without real continuity, traditional literary criticism could no longer serve as an interpretative model.

Reception, however, can only be operative if there exists between the imported theories and traditional Chinese literary criticism some core of common reference, in other words the focus on the text or textual study. It was with this in mind that structuralist, semantic, hermeneutic, stylistic, semiologic and psychoanalytic methods were introduced, accepted and applied to Chinese criticism.

Poststructuralism and deconstruction theory did however disrupt the world of literary criticism in China. For years, Chinese critics who had been striving to set up a system of exegesis and commentaries found themselves confronted with another type of critical thought which no longer took the text as the object of its analysis. Zheng Min 鄭敏 (1920–), a female poet belonging to the Nine Leaves School and a professor of literary criticism at Beijing Normal University stated very rightly:

對於長期被傳統的古典主義、浪漫主義和前期現代主義（包括新批評、結構主義）所佔領的大陸文評界，後結構主義的這種立論所造成的災難幾乎是一場地震。¹

The catastrophic impact caused by the arguments of poststructuralism was felt like an earthquake in the literary criticism circles in China, long dominated by traditional classicism and romanticism as well as modernism, including new criticism and structuralism.

This earthquake did not limit itself to continental China however, it affected equally Hong Kong and Taiwan, two places often considered to be more open and better disposed toward Western thought.

Which brings us precisely to the main point of my argument: What prevented postmodern theory, that of French deconstructionism for instance, from being applied to the textual studies of Chinese literary critics, whereas new criticism and structuralism had been massively adopted without much difficulty?

Between 1984 and 2003, some 1,649 publications (essays or dissertations) were published on one central theme: postmodernism (*houxiandai* 後現代).

None of these publications could calm the non understanding of the moral criticism or formalist criticism. Chinese critics, staunch advocates of Boileau's "Whatever we conceive well we express clearly" seemed totally lost when confronted with a new logic of discourse where presence, being and logos are *a-topos*, where no place is secure in discourse, where no text is ever defined, and all reading is an interaction between the text and its reader.

My reflection in this context attempts to delineate fundamental differences in language through textual study in which the research method is continually confronted with these two different ways of thinking. Two important articles were published on this topic: one in 1998, "Ershishiji Zhongguo wenxue pinglun yu xifang jiegou siwei de zhuangji" 二十世紀中國文學評論與西方解構思維的撞擊 (Twentieth-century Chinese literary criticism and the shock of Western structuralist thought) by Zheng Min, and the other by Yu Jian 于堅 (1954–) in 2004, "Chuanyue hanyu de shige zhiguang" 穿越漢語的詩歌之光 (The light of poetry, cutting through the Chinese language).

Zheng Min, well-known in the 1940s as a modernist woman poet belonging to the Nine Leaves School, works both as a critic of and researcher in Western literary thought. Yu Jian is considered by critics as a rebel poet from the "new generation" (*xinshengdai* 新生代) for the revolutionary stance he adopted towards the dominant language—*putonghua*, and his controversial poem *Lingdang'an* 檔案 (*File Zero*, 1994).

Language—and especially poetic production—is a constant object of his critique, strongly influenced by the notion of "pure poetry" known and practiced widely in literary circles in China in the 1920s. Yu Jian aims at applying this form of critical thinking to an object outside Western cultural context and logic—Chinese poetry.

Yu Jian writes under the shadows of both Chinese and French critical thought, through explicit reference to poetical and critical works and the type of questions raised in his writing. "Chuanyue hanyu de shige zhiguang" is a good example of the product of a reflection on the problem of language and a negativity resulted from an extremely severe confrontation between Chinese writers.

Tension arises from the attitude expressed towards poetic language. For some (Hai Zi, Zhu Zhu 朱朱 [1969–] and Yu Jian), poetic language cannot be anything but itself; for others however, language is not neutral or solitary, but represents the main criterion for poetry, a cultural and educational aspect (Bei Dao, Ouyang Jianghe, and Zang Di 臧棣 [1964–]).

Yu Jian takes a strong stand for poetry to be nothing but itself:

詩歌就是詩歌，它是獨立的，自在的，它的目的是重建漢語自從1840年以來幾近喪失的尊嚴，使現代漢語重新獲得漢語在歷史上，在唐詩和宋詞曾有過的那種光榮。²

Poetry is just poetry, it is independent and free. Its aim is to regain the dignity Chinese language has almost completely lost since 1840, so that modern Chinese language can regain the glory it used to enjoy in history, under the Tang and the Song dynasties.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Chinese symbolists thought of “pure poetry” as the writing of silence and mystery; nowadays, Yu Jian, as many poets from his generation, is keen to stress “poetry’s independent spirit” (*shige de duli jingshen* 詩歌的獨立精神). According to Yu Jian, it is this spirit that enables poetry to achieve its goal in regaining its place of honour it enjoyed historically.

Nowadays this new awareness of poetic language is to be found particularly amongst young Chinese women writers. Because of it, most trends of Western literary theory issued from the science of language have been introduced in China without necessarily being all understood. This consciousness of language marked by Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida (all translated and studied in China) provides a completely new hub of thoughts or of confrontation of thoughts causing angst and misunderstanding among Chinese critics, *vis à vis* their own discourse and language. Yu Jian finds himself precisely in this predicament.

As far as he is concerned the role of poetry is not to express feelings from the heart, nor is it to enrich or drive criticism, but only to discover the existence of language. But to which extent can we tell if that awareness of language occupies an ontological and philological space located beyond the alternating order of discourse and anti-order of discourse?

Thus Yu Jian notes that:

20世紀的知識給我們介紹來自西方的各種圖紙，它從不說中國過去也有一份圖紙，關於一個由詩歌之神守護的世界樂園的圖紙。而這份圖紙其實並沒有在世界上施工過。³

Twentieth-century knowledge introduces us to all sorts of plans from the West without ever mentioning the plan China had in the past, that of a universal paradise protected by the god of poetry. Yet this plan has never been applied on a global scale.

Beyond this somewhat resentful nostalgia, arises a more concrete question: How does poetry protect in the quest for a universal paradise? According to Yu Jian it can only be an existential assurance, since it constitutes a permanent return to the absolute truth of existence and therefore, moves away from what old Chinese critics call *wen* 文:

詩歌的價值在於，它總是使人們重新回到開始，領悟到存在的本真。詩歌永遠是「在路上」的，詩歌是穿越遺忘返回存在之鄉的語言運動。⁴

The value of poetry is to enable people to come back to the beginning, to understand the absolute existential truth. Poetry is constantly “on the move,” it is a movement of language to get back, through oblivion, to the territories of its being.

In his essay, Yu Jian elaborates further the idea of a poetry constantly “on the move”:

詩歌的「在途中」，指的是說話的方法。詩歌是穿越知識的謊言回到真理的語言活動。詩歌的語感，來自生命。沒有語感的東西乃是知識。⁵

Poetry “on the move” is a manner of speech. Poetry is the way language breaks through the lie of knowledge to arrive at the truth. The meaning of poetic language comes from life. Thus anything lacking this meaning is knowledge.

For Yu Jian, the true meaning of language is the opposite of knowledge, a concept quite similar to classical Chinese criticism in which the meaning of language depends also on life. This is reminiscent of the traditional concept of moral criticism concerning the good (and therefore beautiful), life, truth, and being (*cunzai* 存在).⁶

There is a tendency to denounce the decadence of Chinese literature. The work is seen as an immediate and definite unity. The idea of continuity, close to the notion of tradition, origin, and transmission, implies that the discourse about the text is practically fixed in advance, since the text follows a temporal status, a series of successive and analogous phenomena, making the texts clear and coherent.

Moreover, in the name of some orthodox truth, the positive aspect of the imaginary is regarded rather as ramblings. The imaginary and the real are not considered as two paths leading to literature. Literature needs ethics and should not exceed the norm (*li* 理). While the writer can exaggerate, he should adhere to reality. Thus Wang Chong 王充 (27–97) denounces the extraordinary, the supernatural which leads to mystification, like a bottomless jade vase, useless whatever its price.

Yu Jian's consciousness of poetic language is in the continuity of the existential reality, which can be problematic in terms of understanding French critics' consciousness of language termed deconstructionist or postmodern.

Yet in the West, nowadays, literary analysis is no longer done through the sensibility of a period, tradition, or continuity. The question is: What is a text? Regardless of it telling the truth or not, it is about its expressive value. It is about isolating its components, regrouping them, finding their relationship in order to turn them into moving images. The study of discontinuity, of the moments of disruption of a causal argument becomes the positive analysis of a text. Discontinuity is not a negative element. The unity of a text is variable and relative. It should not be assumed to have a definite form of expression. Even if a series of texts can be given a name (novel, story and so on) and defined by some form of expression, there remains always something hidden and latent. A text is never homogenous. It is not a quiet place from which to ask further questions.

Misunderstanding is thus unavoidable and may result in withdrawal into oneself:

對於詩人寫作來說，我們時代最可怕的就是「知識分子寫作」鼓吹的漢語詩人應該在西方獲得語言資源。⁷

For poets' writing, the most appalling thing in this period of time is "intellectual writing" which demands that Chinese language poets find linguistic resources in the West.

Once again Yu Jian turns to his forebears:

我以為，詩歌的標準許多已在中國六七世紀全球詩歌的黃金時代中被唐詩和宋詞所確立。這種黃金時代的詩歌甚至為我們創造了一個詩的國家，詩歌成為人們生活的普遍的日常經驗，成為教養。⁸

I believe that many poetic criteria were established in China through the poems of the Tang and Song dynasties in the sixth and seventh centuries, the golden age of poetry around the world. These golden age poems created for us a land of poetry where poetry embodied a general existential experience of human life and was an indication of high culture.

It is only with this in mind that:

詩人應該懷疑每一個詞。⁹

The poet must question every word.

In his essay Yu Jian condemns “the literary criticism of compromise”:

新潮詩歌批評從八十年代到今天可以看出一種不斷地向「知識分子」妥協的過程，批評家不是為詩人服務的，但是批評家的職業道德乃是面對具體的文本，而不是面對「主義」、「傾向」、「分子」、「圈子」和知識。新潮詩歌批評的先天不足（在普通話的權威中建立批評話語，缺乏獨立的真知灼見）導致它只向「知識分子」獲取理論資源，最終喪失了批評的獨立立場。¹⁰

The poetics of the new wave seem to indicate a process of compromise which “intellectuals” renewed constantly from the 1980s until today. A critic is not intended to serve poets. What the critic, professionally and morally, is confronted with is a concrete text, and not an “ism,” a “trend,” an “ist,” nor is it a circle or knowledge. The innate failings of the new wave of poetic criticism (the discourse of the critic shaped under the authority of *putonghua*—mandarin Chinese and the lack of relevant ideas and independent views) force it to seek inspiration exclusively from “intellectuals” as the representative of theoretical resources, and deprive it of its independent critical position.

Zheng Min thus notes with some pertinence:

大陸的批評家一向以賞析、闡釋文本為己任，對任何不能用於分析文本，以揭示其意義與藝術的文學理論，都認為脫離文論的功能。於是，一方面對解構文論深感好奇，一方面又因為無法以它為作品服務而不滿。對於大陸文評家，文學評論應當和作品同等有創造性、獨立性的說法很難被接受。¹¹

Mainland Chinese critics always see themselves as missionaries in charge of analysing and commenting texts; they consider any literary theory which cannot be applied to textual analysis to highlight meaning and art as drifting away from the function of literary criticism. Therefore, they feel both attracted to deconstructionist theories and frustrated by the fact that they cannot apply them to the text. It is difficult for them to accept that literary criticism should be as creative and independent as the works.

然而引進結構主義比介紹後結構主義顯然要容易得多。因為40年代的中國大陸曾盛行過新批評學說 (New Criticism)，種下了對文本進行科學的非印象式的欣賞的種子，在此基礎上，符號學、風格學、心理分析學、結構語言學都很容易作為一種處理文本的新的手段而被吸收。但後結構主義卻用其結構說根本動搖了文本分析的真、全、準等標準。¹²

It is however obviously easier to introduce structuralism than to decipher deconstructionism. Indeed, the theory of New Criticism, widely used during the 1940s in mainland China, had generated a non-impressionist scientific

textual criticism; and from then on, every theory such as semiology, stylistics, psychoanalysis and structuralist linguistics have been apprehended very easily as new methods of textual study. Postculturalism with its structural theory, has completely undermined the system of criteria of textual criticism based on standards of truth, perfection and accuracy.

Although Chinese critics reject postmodern theory, the word “postmodern” has been introduced in China and is currently in use nowadays. In the future, it remains to be seen how Chinese literary criticism based on the language of continuity (coherence, evocation of words) is able to coexist with another type of criticism in which some discontinuity in the analysis of a text is not necessarily a negative element.

Let us end our reflexion with the following statement from Zhu Zhu:

詞語們同源於所有語種那背後的
寂靜，而那寂靜是一種聲音，授權給我們。

——《信號·合譯》³

Words come from the silence beyond
any language, this silence is a voice entrusting us with a right.

—*Sign: Correspondence and Interpretation*

A literary critic deals with the relation of representations in discourse. His work can be seen as a literary critique and a theory. He is also involved in philosophy, linguistics, and logic. More often than philosophers or linguists, he looks at the deployment of imagination in texts.

A literary critic and philologist studies the didactic, rhetorical, and (good or bad) mimetic functions, functions of the imagination in texts. He tries to keep a certain neutrality. He looks for a place between verbal confusion and the silence of words, since silence itself can generate verbal confusion. The philologist reflects on the choice of the written word in order to produce silence. Thus an author's writing is silence inside agonised writing. (S)he intends to strip the opacity of meaning. (S)he intends to prevent the amusement of language, including its flourishes.

This notion already appeared in *Wenxin diaolong* 文心雕龍 (*The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, chap. XXXV, *Lici* 麗辭) by Liu Xie 劉勰 (c. 465–521). According to the author, the text with its variations will be forever new, similar to nature, always being renewed:

造化賦形，支體必雙；神理為用，事不孤立。夫心生文辭，運裁百慮，高下相須，自然成對。（文心雕龍·麗辭）

Nature, creating living beings, endows them with limbs in pairs. The Divine Reason operates in such a way that nothing stands alone. The mind creates literary language, and in doing this it organizes and shapes one hundred different thoughts, making what is high supplement what is low, spontaneously producing linguistic parallelism.¹⁴

Chinese critics intend to use Western deconstructionist thought to describe discourses, to expose the condition of their occurrence, the forms of their combination and sequence, the rules of their transformations, and the discontinuities that punctuate them. Is such a mission possible for the Chinese language? What would be the impact of the newly emerged trend in literary China of moving from textuality to historicity? Only history can provide the answer.

Contemporary Chinese writers are faced with a desperately longed for *I*. An *I* that can be rhythmical and modulated according to the circumstances of the moment. Should the *I*, in its writing, be active, should it reveal secret intentionalities specific to the *self*? There is the fear and the seduction of an *I* in perpetual decay and reincarnation, forever inhaling and exhaling history.

First the *I* subjectivises writing and eventually fades from writing. Selfhood becomes a problem. Is becoming *I* possible? Is such an *I* reliable? Does it truly represent the transcendent force of literature? Literature today finds itself in a unprecedented state: Is not the sovereignty of the subject the very purpose of writing, listening and reading?

At the end of the twentieth century, Chinese literature appears well-experimented in subjectivity, which enables us to follow in the footsteps of the *I* as “the other.”

Does the traditional question surrounding the *I* tend to emphasise its essential substance? To secure a place belonging exclusively to the *I*? To find a life for the *I* outside of the collective narcissism—the “we”? The writing of the *I* intending to distinguish itself from the narrative art of Antiquity, procuring a space to introduce the immeasurable universe of the writer, to create primarily an autonomous reality, through a series of unfinished recordings of successive events.

Writing becomes an anchor for the *I*. It represents one of the ways in which the *I* descends to where it is a stranger to itself, in the words of Julia Kristeva. This descent into the depths of the *self* is expressed in Chinese thought by the

following expression: reflection of light-reverting light (*fanzhao huiguang* 返照回光). Here light means wisdom. With the help of wisdom, man can escape from illusions or delusions and return his heart to its pure, calm and impartial state. Writing in search of the *self* does not necessarily seek this state, since it does not intend to move away from the delusional state, and instead wishes to go through every meander of sensations. Yet it shows the same aspiration to get closer to the *self*, to reflect and meditate on it, even though the consequences may be completely different.

Who is this *I*? What does “being oneself” mean? Is it real or does it mean rather a relation of *I* as a subjective substance with an objective substance? Is this substance an individual, a soul, or conversely the universal *self*, an absolute consciousness—a transcendental or even transcendent impersonality reached when man pushes his individuality into the background? Isn't the knowledge contained in the sensitivity, the intelligence and the understanding of the *I* mere illusion? Is the writing of the *I* an opportunity for the *self* to search and scrutinise its own depths? What is then the meaning of that “search” if not a search for illusions? When one descends to the depths of the *self* that is foreign to itself, is the stranger me or the other? What is the true nature of the *self*? The writing of the *I* is confronted with these questions, it would therefore be difficult to work on this writing without being tormented by these questions.

The subjectivity of *I* becomes impermanent. It is subject to the future and to termination, subject to birth, change and decay—all things, sometimes brought together in the vocabulary of the Western philosophical tradition under the term “finiteness.” The *I* is a “not-having-been” after being. Being is a process, and so is the universe. The universe, in its infinite variety, is perceived. Its operation depends on the law of cause and effect. The *I*, whose consciousness is forever changing, depends on its unstable nature. It is not unlike a bubble on the surface of the water, in a perpetual state of transitivity; the revival of all things are like bubbles on the surface of the water.

The problem of the *I* arises in the most acute fashion. Subject to change, pain and dissatisfaction, is this *I* the real me? Is it the real mine? Such subjectivity lies in a mind that lives itself in a body full of a variety of solid and liquid foods. Considering the fragile, perishable and impermanent nature of the body, how could the consciousness of the *I* linked to this state not be dependent on it? Does the *I* know, in its transitional state, the truth? Where is the ultimate truth? Is it the same that arises in literary writing in China today?

The literary *I* refuses to follow the thought of others, while at the same time trying to remember its own past lives and those of others. Surviving in memory with or without remembering. The *I* tries to deliver its sensations in view of its release. It calls on the night in its world, a night destructive and reborn. In contemporary Chinese writing, there seems to be a perpetual quest for the *I*. Yet when the *I* lives in a body that is subject to the destruction of the present (death, for instance), to suffering and dependency, is it really the *self* of the *I*?

“Death” is everywhere in contemporary Chinese writing. For Mu Dan and Hai Zi it is a path to the supreme being, the non-*self*. It is not just a union with eternity, but a survival that allows all things and phenomena to disperse. It destroys impurities and causes destruction, fragmentation and release between discontinuity and survival. It suppresses the attachment of the *I* to the *self*, causing the detachment that destroys the very name of the *self* and introducing the non-*self* in the thought of the *I*. With death, the insubstantiality of all existence is replaced by substantiality. Death achieves the continuity of existence. Being is a series of states of consciousness, the moment of death or the last moment of consciousness is the first instant of another existence. It is a continuation of being, the non-being lying inside it. Death severs the components of personality.

Another question then, arises: If death announces the non-*self*, what exactly does it revive? A new appearance of the disappearing? Death opens the door of immortality. Death and undeath are indistinguishable. One causes the other. We are dealing here with a transcendental state. The *I*, by and through death, finds itself in that transcendental state which is the non-*I*, the non-*self* of the *I*. The non-*self* surpassing, overcoming all dialectic opposition enters immortality.

Writing is a survival, rebirth even. The *I* enters then an unbroken, but forever changing, series. Only the non-*self* is absolute, fundamental, immutable, infinite, transcendent and beyond causality. *I* is in a series of *différance*, not transformation. It is born, disappears and therefore, differs from the previous moment. Yet each moment is without duration. It is born (begins), it dies (ends) at the same time. Every moment, as time, knows strictly no transformation. This series of dead moments, having perished, causes a substance which is the *différance*. Where does the idea of *différance* come from? Everything that exists is momentary. Moments come and go. Each moment arises in another place. Every moment, a new moment arises which “differs” from the previous one. The *I* of this moment is not that of the previous one.

In such a *différance*, the *I* is the other, to quote Arthur Rimbaud. The impermanent *I*, in a state of perpetual transitivity has only one reality which is the non-*self*. Where is then the identity of this permanent *I*? Where is the *I* as an individual? Does the becoming *I* really possess its own “individual” identity? No state can extend into another appearance. A flame cannot go from one wick to another. The same person does not come from a past life and go to another existence. This is Hai Zi’s fire.

There arises one fundamental question about the *I*: if the *I*, in its sensation, perception, mental forms, and consciousness is contingent, changing and impermanent, can there be an “I am”? In this unbroken series of interrupted moments, the *I* recognises that this is not *I*, that I am not this, this is not me.

Dependence and release are also contingent. If the *I* does not exist, who is exactly prey to illusion, who is released? Isn’t there an *I* in the *self* itself, the *I* being just a shape in a series of items ending as soon as they appear? Every form arises from the non-form, the formless, the shapeless. The formless is filled with life. In the West, it is important to note, amongst others, Christoph Harbmeier’s thoughts on this issue. He has published a text, “Xunzi and the Problem of Impersonal First Person Pronouns,” *Early China* (No 22, 1997, pp. 181–220), in which he tries to give a distinctive definition of the *I* according to the character *wo* 我 or *wu* 吾 he found in canonical texts. It would be important to continue this study in a specific dimension (literature) in a given area (present day) to see how this collective voice imposes itself and how it is challenged with much suffering by the voice of the *I*.

A question arises here: When modern Chinese, based on *baihua* (spoken Chinese) chose the (more collective and extrovert) *wo* to refer to *I*, leaving *wu* (a more internal and substantial *me*) aside, it might have been to convey the message that collectivism was paramount. Thus we can better understand the historical course of the crushing *we* for over thirty years in China. We can also understand why Chinese people chose Communism instead of other systems based on individualism. An issue not ideological but, paradoxically, cultural. A topic which remains to be further investigated through our study of literary subjectivity.

When the *I* is studied, analyzed, dissolved in and by writing, it disappears. Naming or marking it is meaningless; this is consistent, with one major difference however, with the reflection of Chinese nominalists (The Logicians or School of Names) from the third and fourth centuries BC; as illustrated by the reflection

of Gongsun Long 公孫龍 (370–300 BC). Once the *I* disappears, the knowledge to analyse the empirical nature of the individual also loses all meaning. There are four types of knowledge according to Buddhism, namely: direct, inductive, analytical and discursive. As far as the empirical individual is concerned, fifty-two distinct “concomitant consciousnesses” appear in human existence. Does the *I* of each empirical individual have the ability to transmigrate from the present life into the future, from this world into another, from this body into another? This subject, originating in the belief of the Aryans from ancient India, gave rise in China to controversial philosophical and literary debates from the Han (206–220) to the modern times. Since this *I* is temporary and is made of a series of impermanent elements, one can also question the meaning of the search for the *I* (*xunzhao ziwo* 尋找自我) and that of the subjectivity of *I* (*ziwo de zhutixing* 自我的主體性) that twentieth-century literature, especially since the 1970s, engaged in tirelessly.

Literature never predicts in which direction human society will evolve. Yet it projects itself, with the audacity of the imaginary, in and out of itself. All literary and social changes are recorded in a continuous process consisting of discontinuities. These changes are not the product of some genius inspired by Heaven. Literature is a place both ritual and transcendent, without which the human world loses, in terms of writing, an important support for its imaginary. It ritualises the imaginary, while defying the standards of fixed and socially conventional language.

Thus, literature is a system both autonomous and dependent. Autonomous, because it lives of and in itself, since its evolution extends over a specific subjective time dimension, sometimes as fast as lightning and sometimes as slow as the life of jade. Dependent, because this system of thought and sensibility establishes a perfect record for the “ritual” system (social, cultural, political, ideological and economic). The literary history of China in the twentieth century has drawn a path in that direction.

Through this topic, this subjective writing of the *I* in China, I aim primarily at a constellation of works that emerged from after the Cultural Revolution to the present, without necessarily excluding other works written before this period. The writers discussed in this book were chosen because they reflect a sensitivity close in its inspiration to the subjectivity of the *I*. In their works, they usher subjective writing (*zhuti xiezuo* 主體寫作) in contemporary Chinese literature.

Mu Dan (1918–1977), whose *Shenmo zhizheng* 神魔之爭 (Struggle between God and the Devil) dated from 1945, wrote *Shen de bianxing* 神的變形 (Metamorphosis of the Gods) just before his death in 1976. In his poems, Mu Dan protests against the violent sovereignty of the modern world, the absolute domination of science, economics, and control. Rather than an immanent development, the contemporary world is an imposition where violence is done to the subject. In the mid-1970s, Huang Xiang 黃翔 (1941–) wrote *Duchang* 獨唱 (Singing Alone), where the *I* asks the fundamental question: “Who am I?” At the end of the 1970s, the young poet Bei Dao was engaged in a feverish search for the *self*. In his famous poem *The Answer*, he wrote:

我不相信天是藍的 I do not believe the sky is blue¹⁵

Very soon, however, the *I* in Bei Dao’s writing becomes two-headed: It takes the form of the infinite other.

In 1980, the voice of the *I* resounded in Dai Houying’s 戴厚英 (1938–1996) novel *Ren a ren* 人啊人 (*Stones of the Wall*). I shall also focus on women’s mysterious investigation into the *I* (Zong Pu 宗璞, 1928–) as well as its unveiling (Lin Bai), the lack of personality of an “I-author” (Chi Li 池莉, 1957–), the adventures of the body (Jiu Dan 九丹, 1968–; Hong Ying 虹影, 1962–; Xu Xiaobin 徐小斌, 1951–), the return to the mother, the mirror-reflected fragmented *I* (Chen Ran 陳染, 1962; Lin Bai), the sentimental and sexual initiations shattering social taboos (Hai Nan, 1963; Lin Bai), the experience of the other (Zhai Yongming 翟永明, 1955–).

With Gao Xingjian, the *I* becomes three-headed, with its two figures: *You* and *He*. Between the *you* of the present and the *he/it* of the past, between memories and memory, there is a time-out. The *you* temporarily neutralises its present identity to become an actor looking at the past. This neutralization is made possible in the novel through a monologue. Neutrality allows subjectivity to move from its presence at the time, to its function in life as well as its role in the past. All lines of writing are explored in this free passage. The narrative writing of Gao Xingjian, as well as those of Lin Bai and Chen Ran create an important potential for narrative fiction. The actor *I* and the narrator *I* each play their role more freely, resulting in a real renewal of fiction writing.

The contemporary poet Hai Zi concurs with his ancestors when he speaks of “no form, but the absolute form.” Life and death are one and the same thing. His writings show an imprint of Buddhism. According to Buddhism,

to pursue goals and interests in life is like “hunting on horseback in red dust” (*hongchen* 紅塵), the world of appearances. For Buddhists, the word “dust” refers to adventitious passions. All the shimmering diversity of the world is only the diversity of appearances, illusions. The human being is a single host, ephemeral and transient, *homo viator*, before returning to his death. In Hai Zi’s words: “The blade of the sun” is there. It is like the sword of Damocles, hanging over each head. The sword is nothing compared to the blade of the sun. It consists of rays of light, and its blades are countless. However, rays and fire do not threaten to condemn, on the contrary they play a purifying role. The blade of the sun forms a boundary between the current residence of the horses as hosts of this visible world and the eternal return to death. Hai Zi does not erase. He cannot forget sensible forms. For him, the return that frees human beings from their carnal instincts and brings them back into the great cosmic whole is not the absolute term, the *summum bonum*. Similarly, Hai Zi does not deny the flesh. He does not sacrifice it to join the eternal return. Yet, his attachment to the body is related to transformation. Hai Zi exhausts his innate nature and does not cultivate longevity, as do the Taoists. “He doesn’t dust the mirror.” For Hai Zi, purification by fire aims to revive, like the phoenix rising from its ashes. Transformation is rebirth. The light of the sun turns into fire. Fire, meanwhile, is transformed into blood. Reciprocal transformation. The bloody image of fire assimilated to light is almost ubiquitous in Hai Zi’s writing. Blood-red is the dominant colour of his poems.

Hai Zi does not renounce the present nor the future. He does not leave the phenomenal world, that of Aristotle in the Greek tradition, described as “sublunary.” Whether in heaven, on the equator or on earth, whether he comes in the form of a man, light, fire or a monkey, the poet remains in illusions. He does not leave them. The purifying fire does not abolish, it gives birth. From light comes darkness, from darkness light. Future, for Hai Zi, is reborn from ashes. It is in fire that the *I* reduced to nothing comes to Enlightenment: Everything is nothing, nothing is everything in the words of the poet.

In contemporary Chinese writing, the *I* remains on a “middle path.” The subjectivity of *I* is relative however. It occurs entirely through the following three properties: hiding oneself while throwing at the reader one’s exclusively personal and empirical experiences, speaking in and through the language, ignoring the sacred silence, and immersing oneself in the sensory sphere through tireless writing.

In contemporary Chinese literature we are reminded of the theory of the Middle that rejects boundaries and duality. Take for example the image of the night. Hai Zi, Bei Dao, Bai Lin and Zhai Yongming depict in their writings a time of darkness full of light, a time when the disappearing reappears. Disappearing and appearing are ONE. The one of multiplicity.

It is very telling that the poet Duo Duo should feel the need to date each and every one of his poems. In so doing he challenges any organised system, any collective cause committed writers would be likely to identify to, body and soul. Duo Duo wants to reveal birth and life in a world of atypical personalities. He wants to become an authentic *I*, with its own date and time, which is achieved by means of an absolute break with the present of the established society, where every word to be acceptable must refer back to the collective. The dated poems do not erase the memory of the *I* and its attachment to the ancestors. This need for a permanence of the *I* bears witness to the course followed by Chinese subjective writing in the last thirty years.

Subjective writing shows a fragmentation of the *I* confronted with the misleading occurrences of time. It confronts the figuration and abstraction of the *self*. In Lin Bai's writing, all in parentheses, the *I* is in fragmentation. Similarly, night for Zhai Yongming is the abyss of the *I* facing the *self*—a time of fragmentation or rebirth.

The chronology of the works under discussion is revealing: Writing is subjective, it constitutes a phenomenon not only literary but also cultural and social. I believe that a crucial event in the development of subjective writing was the birth of the magazine *Jintian* 今天 (Today).

Young Chinese writers set off in search of a totally new writing to rediscover subjectivity. Such subjectivity is in no way limited to literature; it also covers areas such as the law, and the expression of the *I* confronted with an overpowering *we*. What we are dealing with here is a claim to subjectivity from the individual against the totalitarian system of the *we*. The *I* refuses to be overwhelmed by the *we*, and to let itself be engulfed in a life devoid of any individuality. The *I* wants to be itself, and asserts itself in this regard.

The problem of the *I* arises constantly in twentieth-century Chinese literature. Writers immerse themselves in writing to seek or express *ziwo* 自我 (*I*), *xiaowo* 小我 (small *I*), *dawo* 大我 (big *I*), *wangwo* 忘我 (*I* to be forgotten), as well as *wuwo* 無我 (no *I*). The “big *I*” and the “*I* to be forgotten” were heavily promoted and applied in writing advocating “art for life,” which reached its

zenith in the 1950s and 1960s. Whereas the *ziwo* and *xiaowo* are both expressions of the “art for art’s sake” and the *ziwo de zhutixing* (the subjectivity of the *I*), movement of the late 1970s.

For Chinese writers, writing is a way of moving towards the discovery of the *I*. The path taken is much more important than the goal which is to access this *I* as object. To them however, there is only a difference of emphasis between path and goal: the release of the *I* through writing, or rather, release through the writing of the *I*.

The aim of this book is to trace this *I* which, nowadays, shatters words pieced back only too quickly by the *we* into conventional clichés through memory and its inner time. It attempts to answer some fundamental questions in the study of Chinese literary history during this period, such as:

How does contemporary Chinese literature go from historical narrative to the narrative of the *I*, where rhythm and epic merge into writing, and where the instinctive load of the rhythm substantiates the epic?

What are the steps and the forms of mediation that allow such a transition?

Is the subject the only agent of the transition? What is its status?

What is the role of poetic language that led to the birth of the subject and which separates it from empiricism?

What are the difficulties faced by Chinese writers nowadays?

Before answering these questions, however, we must face up to the first difficulty: the definition of subjectivity. Is it a subject? The *self*? An individual? The answer is far from obvious. This subject, this *self* may very well be “collectivised,” that is to say, absorbed by *we*. *I* is a *we*, the individual is part of the workings of a huge machine (in Western literature we find two examples: *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell), and as clearly demonstrated in the first three decades of China’s contemporary literature. The identification of the subjective function depends on its relationship with language, through which the notion of subject is defined, and thus that of subjectivity.

In his book *The Conflict of Interpretations*, Paul Ricoeur addresses the question of the *I*. According to him, the *I* is currently caught between two expressions that may be conflicting. On the one hand, the question of the subject involves phenomenology and the position of the *I* in society, and on the other hand, it concerns the expression of the *I*. This double reference of the subject can cause difficulties with respect to its position *vis-à-vis* itself and reality.

John E. Jackson in *La Question du Moi* (The question of the self) deals with

the subject in its historical and literary dimension, and questions the mediating role of language: Is it no longer the pure medium? Jackson stresses the specificity of poetic language concerning the problem of the *I* and of subjectivity: “Literary language, poetry at least, is also ‘what refers to itself in reference to reality.’”¹⁶

This book aims to provide new insights to this problem starting from contemporary Chinese literature as belonging to a specific culture and mentality, quite different from the referents used in the works of Ricœur and Jackson.

More than a medium revealing the ambiguity of the subject, writing gives a formal genesis to this ambiguous subjectivity.

Suffering, desire, loss accumulate in the course to become *I*. The poet will dismiss words, instruments of treachery and, to escape from them, will use apparently indifferent, smooth ones. Poem and poet will escape the reader’s intelligence for the benefit of his sensitivity. Ultimately, the poem will take place when its author has disappeared as subject, so that the words will exalt themselves in multiple figures. A diluted *I* will hope to embrace the whole universe. The poem will want to act on the other and thus the problem of the other will arise from outside and from within. The poem can become vertigo, summoning the mystic. Poets will dream of transparency where acoustic image—psychological sound—meaning and the writing of literary expression come together in virtual imitation, the *I*’s other. Others will think up places where signs merge with things.

Chinese ideograms circulate in an associative derivation, because of their graphics, unlike the alphabet which is linear. Chinese characters are hidden and apparent in their design, their multiple signifiers, and often shun consistency. Hence, the slippery, blurry, fluid, or evanescent *I* in a game of multiple codes.

In China the ideogram is strongly rooted in the social. It is preserved, hence the tendency to a sociological historicism. The *I* may become judgemental. Literature is meaning, meaning of good and bad, since the *I* enters into the secrets of the workings of the social. The becoming-*I* is a becoming-*we*.

In classical Chinese, the *I* is mainly expressed by two characters: *wu* and *wo*. In modern Chinese only *wo* remains in use. It calls to mind the problem of the distinction between *wu* and *wo* and that of the impact on the evolution of Chinese mentality in the twentieth century.

Wu and *wo* do not share the same disposition of soul and body, which in a sense, saves the distinction of thought. *Wo* allows the knowledge of *wu*. There is a small mirror. Between the two a dynamic of the subject is created.

According to the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, *wu* means protection. This is the way the *I* refers to itself. The character five *wu* 五 has two horizontal lines symbolizing heaven and earth. *Wu* refers to the subjectivity of an important person such as the King of the Western Zhou dynasty. It also implies resistance, opposition. The *wu I* is thus the permanence of humanity in particular human beings. Such *I* is a density, the engine of a particular act of becoming *I*. Doubled, this character means to “keep a certain distance,” avoid familiarity, as in the expression *zhizhiwuwu* 支支吾吾. Individualism associated with plurality. This *I* is more internal, it is ONE inside plurality. It is a distanced *I*, psychological and internal which, associated with the number five, enters the inner workings of the universe.

Wo is as old a character as *wu*. Both appeared on oracle bones. *Wo* consists of two spears or one spear and a hand—an old script that suggests killing, or more specifically sacrificing a victim with a weapon. During the Shang dynasty, *wo* meant a *we*, a group of people led by the king to battle, hunt, or perform a ritual. By extension, it may take the meaning of “territory” and imply favourable circumstances in the fight against others through favours granted by ancestors or protective gods.

In this *I*, there is really a sense of *we*, as in *wo guo* (我國 our country), *wo tu* (我土 our territory), *wo jia* (我家 our ancestral temple, the ancestral temple of the king), *wo jia nei wai* (我家內外 inside and outside our royal household), *wo bang wo jia* (我邦我家 my country and my royal house). The *wo* appears to be recognised. It bows and kowtows for the same purpose.

The double-speared *I* expresses more the external and ephemeral individual. While *wu*, with the meeting of its five mouths is based on the constancy of humanity in individuals, on the substantialization of the subject. The five-mouthed *I* differs from the *I* through the struggle of two spears. The external *wo* in a group of warriors is more physical.

Therefore, it becomes clear why, in Chinese Buddhism, there exists a person composed of five perishable aggregates (Pañcaskandhas, *wuyun* 五蘊). These five aggregates—material body, feeling, perception, mental formations, acts of consciousness—make a conventional and illusory *self*, and give the illusion of a permanent *self*; that is to say a *self* that imagines and feels itself in an illusory way, as the source of truth. It is a selfhood which moves in the wheels of existence without seeing and therefore without the means to reach enlightenment.

Tampalawela Dhammaratana in *Quelques Aspects de la doctrine d'Anattā (non-soi) dans le canon pali* (Some aspects of the doctrine of anattā (non-self) in the pali canon) (PhD diss., University of Sorbonne, Paris IV, 1994), and Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, in his book *L'Ātman-Brahman dans le bouddhisme ancien* (The Ātman-Brahman in Ancient Buddhism) (Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1973) conducted an in-depth study of the problem of the *I*.

They wonder if the *I*, in sensation, perception, mental forms and consciousness, is contingent, being changing and impermanent, can there be an "I am"? In this consecutive series of changes over endless moments, the *I* recognises that this is not me, I am not this, this is not myself.

Dependence and release are also contingent. If the *self* does not exist, who precisely is prey to illusion, who is released? Is there no *me* in the *self* itself, the *I* being just a series of elements disappearing as soon as they appear? In this impermanence, material form is not the *self*, feeling is not the *self*, perception is not the *self*, habits are not the *self*, consciousness is not the *self*. Any conditioning is permanent, all things are insubstantial. Is the *self* material, since it is sensation, perception, habits, consciousness, like a tree, like plants that cannot live or grow without the help of the earth? Buddha classifies this material *self* in *me*: a material form that is *me*. This material and impermanent *me* is the ephemeral Chinese *wo*, external and fighting.