

Foreword

It seems to me that the status of women writers in China, as well as in a significant portion of the rest of the world, has reached the point where men no longer enjoy the authority to pronounce their verdicts on the accomplishments of women writers in the oracular terms of the past, but have become observers and students of the female muse. What was once a gesture of defiance (by women) or condescension (by men)—the anthologizing of women writers—has now been made necessary not as an act of patronage, but as a result of the sheer quantity of output and undeniable success of women writers. (If the contributors to this issue were to pool their literary prizes, they would fill a very large mantelpiece.) These anthologies have become showcases of excellence, not freak shows. Most readers now openly acknowledge that literary depictions of the human condition have been impoverished historically by the absence of feminine participation—for whatever reasons—to the same degree that they are enriched by works such as those that appear in the following pages.

Although two of the contributors to this collection belong to an earlier generation—Eileen Chang and Lin Haiyin are, in fact, two of the most prominent representatives of that generation—a decidedly contemporary tone characterizes this Special Issue. There is a very “modern” feel to the majority of the stories and poems, whether originating in China, Taiwan or Hong Kong. We are also in the presence of pioneers when we read the works of many of these authors: the horrors of the Cultural Revolution first came to the attention of the world outside China through the short stories of Chen Ruoxi; the phenomenon of *menglong* (misty) poetry owes much of its “visibility” and success to the highly imaginative and evocative poems of Shu Ting; Xi Xi has almost single-handedly put contemporary Hong Kong on the “fiction map”; and Yuan Qiongqiong has breathed new life into the sub-genre of very short fiction, whatever name it is given in Chinese (*jidianpian* 極短篇, *xiaoxiaoshuo* 小小說, or *weixing xiaoshuo* 微型小說). Qualities normally (perhaps stereotypically and often unfairly) associated with “women’s writing”—lyricism, keen and frequently microscopic observations, emotionalism—are present in some of the works included here; but so, too, are boldness (witness Li Ang’s unconventional and controversial stories), experimentation, and a highly developed concern with Man and society.

It is, I reckon, particularly difficult to be a woman and a writer—more difficult, say, than to be a man and a writer. Social and familial roles, expectations (of society and self), and simple economics seem to conspire to intensify the usual problems associated with a literary career. This can certainly be no less true for Chinese women than for their sisters in other cultures; and I suspect it is, rather, even more true. That so many women have progressed so far in overcoming these difficulties, and in such spectacular fashion, is, to say the least, encouraging.

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