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American and Chinese Confessional Poetry: A Case of Cross-Cultural Intertextuality

Western confessional literature has a history of more than 1,500 years. It registers the trail of Western civilization from the religious rule to secularization and to modernity. The flooding of Western literature into China in the early twentieth century inspired a confessional mode of literary expression that had been subdued or laid dormant in indigenous Chinese cultural tradition. History repeated itself in the 1980s in the aftermath of Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Almost 25 years after the critical "discovery" of the American confessional school of poetry, this form also emerged in contemporary China. In 1981 two of Robert Lowell's poems appeared in the Chinese authoritative journal *Poetry* (*Shikari*). Large-scale introduction and translation of American confessional poetry followed in the official and unofficial circuits, especially in China's southwest Sichuan province. Plath's poetry has been singled out in this cross-cultural literary communication as an eye-opener for Chinese poets who were then still struggling to divest themselves of ideological baggage. Sichuan-based Zhai Yongming created her groundbreaking poem series "Woman" (*Niireri*) under the spell of Plath. The official publication of Zhai Yongming's "Woman" in 1986 attracted crowds of imitators, thus sparking the phenomenon of the "Plath tornado." Afterwards, Chinese critics indiscriminately imposed the tag of "confessional" on women poets, which has belittled their creativity. This paper submits a quick historical survey of the emergence of the American confessional poetry school and treats of its reception in contemporary China. I am particularly interested in how individual preferences have occasioned the formation of a Chinese confessional poetics. I do not restrict myself to

women's poetry that has been labeled "confessional" (*zibai*), but address also male-authored Chinese poetry with a distinctive confessional edge.

The received view of confessional literature is to see it as artefacts of lived experience disclosed in an exhibitionist way. I depart from this mainstream reading by shifting attention to the poetry itself. I employ a combined approach of textual and intertextual readings to dig into the aesthetic potentials of American and Chinese confessional poetry.

Historical and Aesthetic Reflections on Confessional Literature

The desire to "get it out" links secularized and institutionalized confession. By "institutionalized," I mean church-based confessions marked by the hierarchical, manipulative relationship between addressees (i.e., church fathers) and confessors (i.e., believers). By "secularized," I mean the individual-based outpouring of personal feelings, frustrations, anguish, fears, failures, and a sense of guilt into the public arena. Renaissance and Enlightenment are two significant points of reference when it comes to the advance towards secularization. The Renaissance in the fifteenth century signaled the end of the Middle Ages when the Catholic Church possessed supreme power over sovereign states and individuals. The Renaissance played a key role in separating the Protestant Church from Roman Catholicism and state from church. Three hundred years later, Enlightenment thinkers and activists took a big step forward in promoting the emancipation of individual selves from higher authorities by means of individual judgment and ideals. Western secularization is a long, complex process involving all social and cultural discursive practices. This would carry too far to explain and is beyond the scope of my study.

The harbinger of Western confessional literature dates back to 397 CE, when St. Augustine addressed his spiritual wanderings, or in Robert O'Connell's words the "odyssey of soul"—along adolescent mischief and sexual adventures, the theosophy of Mani, endeavor for secular successes, and diving into the Neoplatonic mysticism — towards the soul's union with God (O'Connell 1969). Augustine's "I"-speaker confesses his sins before the one and only addressee — God, who is "my source of sweet delight, my glory, and my confidence" (Augustine 23). If Augustine's confessions aim at the purification and salvation of the soul, eighteenth-century French philosopher and educator Jean-Jacques Rousseau operated his confessions as part and parcel of his philosophical project. Rousseau revealed things "inside and under

the skin" to reflect upon universal problems and conflicts of human nature. His *Confessions* is a master copy of autobiographies that inspire, engage, bite, and slander readers and writers of later generations.¹

Tides of confession ebb and flow, but all the time it remains a mode of literary expression in the West. According to Liu Zaifu and Lin Gang (60-82), confessional literature, by and large, takes on four forms: (1) autobiographies where the author is the confessing speaker, e.g., Alfred de Musset's *Confessions of a Child of the Century* (*La Confession dun enfant du siecle*, 1836); (2) biographical novels, poetry and dramas with authors confessing in the name of protagonists, e.g., James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914); (3) non-autobiographies with confessional protagonists, e.g., Emile Zola's *Confessions of Claude* (*La Confession de Claude*, 1865); (4) works without a confessional theme or speaker but with confessional feelings or a sense of guilt, e.g., some passages from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1868-69).

Confession is much less prominent or even lacking in pre-modern Chinese literature. Comparatively deprived Chinese confessional literature results from a cultural tradition that is "short of soul-questioning resources" (Liu and Lin 2). Confucianism and Daoism as the bedrock of the Chinese cultural tradition both are semi-religious, semi-philosophical by nature, and both attach great importance to life here and now rather than afterlife. Confucianism advocates moral and ethical excellence, social and political commitment, through self-cultivation and self-discipline. Resultant literature is imbued with political aspirations and social awareness. For example, "A Song about My Thatched Cottage Destroyed by West Wind" ("Maowu wei qiufeng suo po ge") by Tang poet Du Fu (712-70) gives vent to social critiques by depicting the miseries of a downtrodden poet-official. Daoism articulates strong skepticism of all effects and meanings of being (e.g., reputation, social status, power, fortune and misfortune, good and evil). Literature in line with Daoism is pastoral, reclusive, and unfettered, as manifest in the poetry of Tao Yuanming (365-427).

Central to traditional Chinese poetics is the equation of literature with the vehicle of the Way (*wen ji %udao*), be it collective responsibilities in

1 According to Christopher Kelley, the term "autobiography" entered the European languages around 1800 and gained popular currency in the wake of Rousseau's *Confessions*. More importantly, Kelley's book-length study casts light on Rousseau's use of confessions as political philosophy. See Kelley.

Confucianism or nature in Daoism. Literature is supposed to abide by social, political, moral mandates or nature's call. This poetics largely dismisses confession as a relevant mode of literary expression. Consequently, confessional literature either assumed a low profile or laid dormant in pre-modern China. Only under the huge impact of Western literature did tides of confession surface in modern Chinese works of literature, as in Lu Xun's "Diary of a Madman" (*Kuangren riji*, 1918), Yu Dafu's "Sinking" (*Cbenltm*, 1921), Ding Ling's "Ms. Sophie's Diary" (*Shafei niishi de riji*, 1928), and Mao Dun's *Rainbow* (*Hong*, 1929), all professing aspirations to modernize the individual selves. In particular, Yu Dafu's "Sinking" triggered off the so-called "Yu Dafu phenomenon," reminiscent of the sensation provoked by Rousseau's confessions (Liu and Lin 282). Yet once again, modern Chinese writers' yearnings for individuality and modernity were subject to the larger agenda of nation-building and national salvation, which makes some of their confessions look affected and half-hearted. The confessional passage at the close of Yu Dafu's "Sinking" is exemplary. The "I"-narrator, a Chinese visitor to an uninterested Japanese prostitute, claims not to love any woman any longer but to love his motherland (Yu 1921).

Surging confessional consciousness subsided in the 1930s when leftist literature became a dominant mode of literary production. Leftist literature soon evolved into socialist realism in Maoist times. Contemporary confessional writing and self-portrayal can be considered a backlash to orthodox socialist realism and to the old collective-oriented literary tradition, a point I will return to below. Infamous examples are the labeled or self-labeled "glamour writers" (*meinü zuojia*) who have scandalized all Chinese literary circles by blatantly portraying minute details of private life for commercial gains. For instance, Wei Hui's *Shanghai Babe* (*Shanghai baobei*, 1999), Mian Mian's *Candy* (*Tang*, 2000), and Chun Shu's *Beijing Doll* (*Beijing wawa*, 2002).

American confessional poetry is a distinctive voice among the currents and crosscurrents of literary confession from various cultural-linguistic backgrounds. M. L. Rosenthal (23) is the first American critic who employs the term "confessional poetry" in a review of Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959). Lowell's lyrical speaker in *Life Studies* assumes a bolder, more tormented personal voice than those of the *Land of Unlikeness* (1944), *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946), and *The Mills of the Kavanagh's* (1951). In *Life Studies* Lowell treats of deaths and failures in his family, of his imprisonment during World War II, and of his mental illness and institutionalization. Similar subjects informed the

writing of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton after the two women poets had attended the Boston poetry workshop instructed by Lowell in the late 1950s. The three poets' shared preference for the same or similar subject matter is a major justification for American critics to lump them together as "confessional poets." Additionally, both Lowell and Sexton credit W. D. Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle* (1959) as a source of inspiration and Snodgrass himself as an influencer. Theodore Roethke and John Berryman also have their names associated with the group, through *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948) and *Dream Songs* (1969) respectively.

Robert Phillips scrutinizes American confessional poetry against the backdrop of the Western literary tradition of using "the Self as primary subject, the Self treated with the utmost frankness and lack of restraint" (4). He makes a long list of Western poets whose work more or less fits into the confessional mode: Sappho, Catullus, De Quincey, Musset, Wordsworth, Byron, Rilke, Baudelaire, and Whitman. In particular, he sees American confessional poetry as a poetic engagement with the "shattered heritage of overoptimistic and overheated romanticism," and as devoid of romanticist idealism (8). By joining the self-centric romanticist tradition, these so-called American confessional poets absorb senses and sensibilities into the "I" lyrical speaker. Their confessional poetics also unmistakably targets high modernism, as represented by T. S. Eliot's "objective correlative" and Ezra Pound's imagism. In their battle against impersonal, objective modernist poetry, these post-War poets write "balanced narrative poems with unbalanced or afflicted protagonists," in an iconoclastic, ironic, egocentric manner, for therapeutic and purgative purposes (16-17). In a similar vein, Billy Collins observes, "Lowell, Sexton, Plath, and other poets made to huddle under the 'confessional' umbrella will drop the masks of Yeats, the personae of Pound, and the impersonality recommended by Eliot to achieve a more direct, less mediated form of personal revelation, often with wiggly psychiatric effects" (qtd. in Sontag and Graham 84).

Following this line of argument, I identify the following thematic and stylistic similarities and differences between American confessional poetry and earlier confessional literature. First, American confessional poetry shares with previous confessional literature a desire for naked "truths"; it continues to draw on the material of private life, but much of its subject matter concerns mental disorder and psychosis. Second, the tone of American confessional poetry is often hard-edged as opposed to much of soft-spoken previous confessional literature. Third, American confessional poetry does not take

upon itself religious, social or political commitment, but works primarily as self-therapy. Incidentally, among the concerned poets, Lowell suffered from a long-term depression and died in a car accident, and Plath, Sexton, and Berryman all committed suicide.

American confessional poetry, written often in the first person, can be read as autobiographical to a large extent. It draws as much praise as criticism. Lowell, Roethke, Sexton, Snodgrass, and Berryman are all Pulitzer recipients, and in some cases on more than one occasion, for volumes that fall within the category of confessional poetry (Phillips 1). The high degree of social acceptance of confessional poetry attracts a mixed crowd of sympathizers, admirers, skeptics, and opponents. The debate springs from different aesthetic and ethic responses to confessional poets. The key critical terms (which form the core of conventional poetry criticism) are paired off: form and experience, fact and fiction, and aesthetics and ethics. Noteworthy, less sympathetic critics reduce confessional poetry to unmediated autobiography, and belittle confessional poetry as falsified self-presentation to manipulate readers into believing in the authenticity of unclothed personal experience. Sexton is widely criticized for her "naked suffering" and "crude exhibitionism," and Lowell for his "immoral" appropriation and editing of private letters in *The Dolphin* (1972) (McClatchy 140).

In my view, the labeling of a poet as "confessional" is questionable. Much lyrical poetry can be considered utterances of a strong and assertive "I," in Northrop Frye's definition of poetry as the "overheard lyric" (249). Poetry with a first-person speaker is mostly about "my" awareness, "my" perspectives, "my" feelings, and "my" views. It follows that all poetry with a first-person speaker is "confessional" to a lesser or greater degree, as confessions may be located in much poetry which is not labeled confessional. Let us play out confessional elements along a spectrum: on the one end stand the so-called "confessional poets"; on the other end there are overtly objective, non-confessional poets like T. S. Eliot; the middle ground occupants may approximate either the confessional end or the non-confessional one, or stand right in the centre. Sexton, the most "confessional" among the group, often fabricates and distorts her personal experience, because she is aware of the impossibility of letting the lyrical self speak out all "truths" about the empirical self. Her 1971 collection *Transformations* that contains rewritings of Grimm's fairy tales appears in no way blatantly confessional. Roethke, Lowell, Plath, Snodgrass, and Berryman, are poets of versatility, however successful they are in confession. On the other hand, the

non-confessional poet T. S. Eliot spells out his nightmarish memory about his mad wife in *The Waste Land* (Larrissy 64). "Beat" poet Allen Ginsberg's lyrical speaker in "Howl" (1956) and William Carlos Williams's in "Paterson" (1951) are no less confessional, say, than Robert Lowell and John Berryman, although Ginsberg and Williams write in more free verse. Ginsberg's subjects (e.g., homosexuality, madness, and drug use) are not that different from those of "confessional poets."

In the context of individual oeuvres, not all poems by confessional poets conveniently fit into the categorization; and not all poems by non-confessional poets resist a confessional reading. It is not without reason that a poet who excels at confession is called "confessional." Nevertheless, I find it more plausible to speak of confessional poetry than of confessional poets. A text-based approach will move us beyond the (often prejudiced) search for autobiographical reportage on real events of a poet's life into the aesthetic potentialities of a confessional poem. My proposal bespeaks a departure from the canonized Western or Chinese understanding of "confession" as a matter of self-disclosure, and notably of "secrets" and "sins." Instead of reading poems simply as artefacts of lived experience, I approach poems (and other works of art) as lived experience themselves, as part of the constructive/reconstructive process of making a life. In so doing, I ask what the poem does and what the poet does in/with it. Neither the poem nor the poet is the passive object of some historical process. Both are actively engaged in the process as subjects, not as objects.²

Chinese Reception of American Confessional Poetry

The Cultural Revolution is a watershed in contemporary Chinese literary history. The dominant mode of literary production was "socialist realism" (*shehui zhuyi xianshi zhuyi*) during the entire Maoist regime, which combined revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism.³ Exemplary literature

2 My argument here has been inspired by Steven Schroeder's observations of the many dimensions of the Western confessional tradition.

3 It is generally believed that "socialist realism," a term borrowed from Soviet literary theory and criticism, was first advanced by Mao Zedong at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art in 1942. As a matter of fact, Mao then spoke of "proletarian realism" (*wuchan jieji xianshi zhuyi*), which in later editions of the Yan'an Talks in the 1950s was changed to "socialist realism." The full-fledged practice of socialist realism in literature

was political in nature, and literary subject matter was highly politicized with revolutionary zeal. The "I" speaker in socialist realism often features as an index of class, politics, and the discourse of nation building. Take Li Ji's "Black Eyes" (*Hei yanjing*, 1954) for example:

Dear big and bright black eyes
Please don't look around in my direction again
If you truly love paraffin and petrol
We welcome you to visit our refinery (Bian and Niu 87)

The poem is at its best a veiled expression of love and at its worst slavishly complicit with the dominant literary discourse. Chinese confessional poetry of the 1980s had a veil-lifting effect when it exposed private experience to readers. Paradoxically, however, it is through the mode of confession that a historical link can be established between the Maoist and post-Maoist eras. Confessions in the form of "criticism" (*piping*) and "self-criticism" (*wo piping*) took place at various public gatherings where politically incorrect people (e.g., rightists, capitalists, and morally corrupted prostitutes) were forced to confess their wrongdoing and to have it corrected under the surveillance of the masses. A morbid synthesis of asceticism and eroticism emerged when the alleged convicts were forced to detail privacies. This poetically enforced confessional discourse turned into voluntary, purposeful confessions in contemporary Chinese literature, as gestures of resistance and subversion.

Contemporary Chinese confessional poetry arises from a need to revive selfhood, gender the self, and articulate the silenced self. The self-absorbed, confessional "I" speaker articulates to reconstruct individual selves by deconstructing the class-based revolutionary "I" in socialist realism and the collective, morally privileged "I" in much of traditional Chinese literature. This simultaneous process of deconstruction and reconstruction requires points of reference. Like their modern predecessors, contemporary Chinese poets again turned to the West for role models to facilitate alternative self-expression.

Translation as a significant medium in cross-cultural literary communication works to surmount cultural-linguistic barriers. Translations of recent Western poetry and new translations of Western classics began to flood China's bookstores and establishment literary journals in the 1980s. Official

and art was under way in the 1950s, propelled by its major exponent Zhou Yang, vice-director of the Propaganda Department (1949-1966). See Fokkema 3-11.

journals and publishers were engaged in (re-)introducing Western poetry to aspiring Chinese readers, including American confessional poetry. The June 1981 issue of the Chinese journal *Poetry* published Yuan Kejia's translation of Lowell's "For the Union Dead" and "Skunk Hour" as well as some biographical notes about the poet. Sexton's "Man and Wife" and Plath's "Morning Song" and "Letter in November" appeared in the *Poetry* issues of September 1985 and May 1986 respectively. It is also noteworthy that Zhao Qiong and Daozi of Xi'an embarked on the translation of American confessional poetry in the early 1980s. Their commitment led to the publication of *Selected Poetry of the American Confessional School* (*Meiguo zibai pai shixuan*) by Lijiang Press in 1987 and of Plath's poetry collection entitled *Witch Burning* (*Ranshao de nuwu*) in Hong Kong in 1992. Some of their work, including a translation of Ginsberg's "Howl," was first published in unofficial poetry journals in Sichuan: *Modern Poetry Materials for Internal Circulation* (*Xiandai shi neibu jiaoliu sdiao*) and *Chinese Contemporary Experimental Poetry* (*Zhongguo dangdai shiyan sbige*), both in 1985.

All sorts of unofficial and semi-official poetry journals (e.g., campus journals sponsored by university students) rivaled official publications in this endeavor. The irregularity of unofficial publication and distribution makes it impossible to trace down relevant literature systematically. Still, my recent survey shows that the works of Lowell, Plath, and Sexton occur and recur in unofficial and semi-official journals, e.g., *Sound* (*Shengyiri*), *Continent* (*D alii*), *The 1990s* (*Jiushi niandai*), and *Peking University Graduate Student Journal* (*Beijing daxue yanjiu sheng xue^hi*).⁴ Apart from the two aforesaid Sichuan-based unofficial poetry journals, another Sichuan-based unofficial poetry journal — *Chinese Poetry* (*Han shi*) — spurred on the "Plath tornado" in the wake of an overwhelming nationwide response to the official publication of Zhai Yongming's poem series "Woman" in 1986.⁵ "Woman" is a dialogic product manifesting rich intertextual relations with the works of Plath, Eliot, Jeffers, Yang Lian, Ma Song, and others, which I have discussed elsewhere (Zhang).

4 All the abovementioned journals are kept in Prof. Maghiel van Crevel's personal archives in Leiden.

5 A number of Zhai's poems from this 20-poem series were first unofficially published in Sichuan, Shanghai, and Beijing in 1985. *Chinese Poetry*, published in early 1987, featured new confessional poetry by Zhai and a critical essay by Ouyang Jianghe on Plath and confessional poetry. Zhai is a native of Sichuan.

Plath has grown into a dramatic presence in the Chinese cultural landscape. Her elevated status as a dual symbol of poetry and death has informed Chinese poets' quest for the creative freedom denied by modern Chinese politics. In the Chinese reception context and beyond, Plath's *Ariel* poems are famous for absurd, dark imagery, for the motifs of darkness, fear, and death, and for their disquieting poetic tone (Mo). To paraphrase Ouyang Jianghe's essay, Plath's "metaphysics of death" transforms into an access route to the realization of integrated, independent selves (Ouyang).

The great popularity of Plath-in-Chinese and Zhai Yongming's works has propelled the formation of a discourse of Chinese women's poetry. Under Plath's influence, "night consciousness" (*heiye yistn*) and "death complex" (*siwang qingjie*) have developed into a shared mode of expression in Chinese women's poetry. Explicit and implicit references to Plath's poetry are scattered in the oeuvres of Zhai Yongming, Yi Lei, Lu Yimin, Tang Yaping, and Hai Nan. For example, Lu Yimin pays homage to Plath:

. . . She talked loudly about death and thought quietly about it
I see a gleam of purple evening clouds
Recalling that they died perchance
Her shadow is so clear
And it slowly approaches my body (Cui 20-21)

Death and dark scenarios loom large in contemporary Chinese women's poetry. Three of Zhai Yongming's poem series, i.e., "Woman", "Jing'an Village" (*Jing'an zhuang*, 1986), and "Death's Design" (*Siwangtu'an*, 1988), are all structured upon the conflict between art, womanhood, life, and death. Hai Nan's many death-related poems voice an obsession with her dead father and with death as a source of creativity. Wang Xiaoni's poetry on death often manifests a self-willed exile into the inner self against the clamor of a predominantly materialistic society like Shenzhen, where the poet has been living since 1985. Death under Lu Yimin's pen takes on a tender, stylish, and feminine look, e.g., "American Women's Magazine" (*Meiguo funü zazhi*), "Death Is a Ball-Shaped Candy" (*Sitwang shi yizhong qiuxing tangguo*), "Die Softly in the City" (*Wenrou di si zai bencheng*), and "Die If You Can" (*Keyi siji siqu*), all of which were written in the mid-1980s.

Chinese women's poetry of the 1980s has been characterized as a collective plunge into the "error zone of confession" (Zang). I challenge this gender-based characterization by drawing attention to a multitude of male-authored Chinese poems that carry confessional overtones, through the

rendering of such subjects as drinking, brawling, sex, darkness, and death. For instance, "Chinese Department" (*Zhonggivetixi*, 1984) by the "boor-ist" (*manghan yhui*) poet Li Yawei is illustrative of a confessional narrative in which the third-person narrator called "Yawei" gives an ironical account of his lived experience together with his fellow poets as students of a Chinese department.⁶ In "We Have Been Talking about Death the Whole Afternoon" (*Zhengge xiaowu dou tandao si*), Liu Manliu, Lu Yimin's fellow male poet affiliated with the "on the sea" group (*haishangpai*), writes about how the male "I" narrator is touched by a woman's self-destructive creative impulse. This unspecified woman is presumably Plath, given her sweeping impact on Lu Yimin and other "on the sea" members. In retrospect, I think that the Chinese critical practice of imposing the tag of "confession" exclusively on women poets is unwarranted.

Intertextual Manifestations

The emergence of Chinese confessional poetry in the 1980s stemmed from the great popularity of the poetry of Plath, Lowell, and Sexton. American confessional poetry provided a significant frame of reference for Chinese poets to seek a fresh, powerful language to speak of individuality and sexuality. The emulation of American confessional poetry leads to an intertextual network of preferred topics and forms, where source and influence cannot always be disentangled. This network does not follow a one-to-one pattern in traditional influence criticism, but one-to-many, many-to-one, or many-to-many patterns. Meanwhile, this network works to counter the validity of traditional source and influence study, because it subsumes anonymous, unidentifiable, and banal sources (cf. Culler 114). The multi-dimensional links illustrate a polyphonic nature of literary production. Textual practices of this kind direct critical attention to a notion of intertextuality, both intercultural and intra-cultural.

The mid-1980s saw an exciting phase of Chinese Experimental poetry, with various labeled or self-labeled poetry movements across the country, such as "colloquial poetry" (*kouyu shi*) advocated by the influential unofficial poetry journal *Them* (*Tamen*) in Nanjing, the "on the sea" group (*haishangpai*) and the "coquettish" group (*sajiao pai*) in Shanghai, the "nay nay-ism" (*feifei zhubuyi*) and "boor-ism" (*manghan zhuyi*) from Sichuan, and the "neo-classicism" (*xingudian yhui*) or "neo-romanticism" (*xin langmati zhuyi*) of certain Beijing groups. See Xu et al. 1988.

Li Zhen reiterates the impact of American confessional poetry on Chinese women poets in his comparative study of poetry by Plath, Sexton, Zhai Yongming, Tang Yaping, and Yi Lei (182-200). His study yields some interesting intertextual findings, for instance, Zhai Yongming's expansion of Plath's "I am seven, I knew nothing" from "Little Fugue" into "I am nineteen, I knew nothing, and I am by nature just a woman" in "Ninth Month" (*Dijiu jue*) from the poem series "Jing'an Village"; and Tang Yaping's borrowings of the imagery of "black caves," "bats," and "stalactites" from Plath's "Nick and the Candlestick" (195). Nevertheless, some of his generalizations are open to question, notably his assertion that Chinese women poets are superior to American confessional women poets in terms of aesthetic means and modes of living. He goes as far as to conclude that the success of Chinese women poets is beyond that of Plath and her peers, because Chinese-style confession is "not American-style, hysteric self-negation" (200).

True, confession formed the core of a Chinese women's poetics of the 1980s. Nevertheless, not a few Chinese male poets partook in the confessional tide, though confession does not develop into a collective mode in male-authored poetry. Male poet Jing Bute, the penname of Fengjun who initially called himself "Jing Te," is clearly inspired by Berryman's "Dream Songs" for the creation of "Mr. Jing Te" (*Jing Te xiansheng*, 1986).⁷ Berryman invents a Henry who speaks alternatively in the first, second and third person, and has a friend who also calls him "Mr. Bones."⁸ In a similar vein, Jing Bute fabricates an imaginary dialogue between the third person Mr. Jing Te (the poet of yesterday) and the "you"-narrator (identifiable with the poet now known as Jing Bute). "Mr. Jing Te" can thus be interpreted as a dialogue within the same personality split between past and present. Mr. Jing Te is a bizarre daydreamer, night-dreamer, killer, cancer patient, and self-willed transformer (into another Mr. Jing Te and a bat). The combined imagery of "dream" and "violin" refers to the title of Berryman's poems (Cf. Xu et al. 178-79). If Berryman's Henry features mainly as a sufferer and loser, Jing Bute's Mr. Jing Te appears both surrealistic and violent. Woman poet Lin Xue (135, 138, 139) also weaves references to Berryman's "Dream Songs" into her three poems titled "Songs"

7 Fengjun renamed himself when the "coquettish" group got into trouble with the local law-enforcement bodies. Feng now lives in Denmark.

8 Thirteen of Berryman's "Dream Songs" are included in the abovementioned official publication *Selected Poetry of the American Confessional School*.

(Ge, 1992) with recurrent images like dream, music, and darkness. Nevertheless, textual evidence shows that Lin Xue clearly attributes a feminine edge to the images reworked on the basis of Berryman's "Dream Songs."

Yi Lei's self-articulation is very close to that of Sexton. In the mid-1980s, Yi Lei singled herself out among Chinese women poets through her use of shockingly personal subject matter. The female body is a prominent signifier of femaleness and femininity in her two poetry collections *Rebel Hands* (*Panni de shou*, 1990) and *The Age of Womanhood* (*Nüxing nianling*, 1990). Yi Lei transforms the stereotyped desire-free female into a woman with strong self-awareness and desires. Her long poems, such as "Wandering Star" (*Liulang de hengxing*), "The Bedroom of a Single Woman" (*Dushen nuren de wosbi*, 1986), and "Black Hair" (*Hei toufa*), are in many respects reminiscent of Sexton's "In Celebration of My Uterus": the self-celebratory "I"-speaker, long stanzas, a bouncy voice, abundant parallelism and antithesis. Yi Lei's stylistic preference is combined with her selective use of Plath's images. For instance, in "Winter Jasmine" (*Yingchun hua*):

Winter jasmines, you are as pure and fresh
As my body
Obsolete hands touch you like the blaspheming of God (Yi 4)

The speaker addresses the winter jasmine as her alter ego. The subject matter appears to be no different from the traditional Chinese association of women with fragile flowers and willow leaves. Nevertheless, Yi Lei's treatment of her subject bears more affinity with Plath than with traditional Chinese poetics. Throughout "Winter Jasmines," textual elements, such as "hell," "dog," "tongue," "bed sheet," "night skirt," and "pure and fresh [female] body," are all resonant of Plath's poem "Fever 103°." Yi's lines quoted above are a rewriting of Plath's well-known statement from that poem:

I am too pure for you or anyone.
Your body
Hurts me as the world hurts God. I am a lantern—. (Plath 59)

But Yi Lei raises a rebellious voice by changing the verb "hurt" (*shanghai*) in the pre-text into "blaspheme" (*xiedu*). Interestingly, Zhai Yongming also uses the line—"Your body / hurts me as the world hurts God"—as an epigraph beneath the heading of her poem series "Woman" in her official 1997 collection *Call It Everything* (*Cheng zhi wei yiqie*). Arguably, contemporary

Chinese poets, men and women alike, share common textual sources and a preference for certain imagery and style, but the dealings of preferred themes and styles carry gendered marks. Plath provides contemporary Chinese women poets with a darkened, powerful language to speak of womanhood and female sexuality.

In "Winter Jasmines" Yi Lei re-models her central figure on the female image depicted in Plath's "Fever 103°": naked, perverted, and near-hysterical. Apart from the above quotation, there is another explicit reference to "Fever 103°." Let us first read Yi Lei's lines:

My black hair covers my youthful age
Like covering a little dog
Which lets fall its dull tongue in the dark (Yi 1)

Then, Plath's:

Tongues of dull, fat Cerberus
Who wheezes at the gate. Incapable
Of licking clean (Plath 58; Cf. Zhao and Daozi 58)

In Greek mythology "Cerberus" is the three-headed guardian dog of the nether world. The Chinese text renders it *santiao sbouhu mifu de gou* (three guardian dogs of the netherworld). Nonetheless, the translation error does no harm to the resonant effect of the two texts. Yi Lei's association of black hair with the dog's falling tongue is a clear rewriting of Plath's verse. Yi incorporates scraps of Plath's poem into the new fabric of "Winter Jasmine." An awareness of the pre-text by Plath can help the reader better interpret the obscure imagery of Yi's poem (e.g., hair dropping like the dog's tongue) and its fluctuating tone (now fierce, now fantastic, and then helpless). More importantly, Plath's text offers interpretative clues to Yi's ambivalent attitude towards femaleness. The naked body in both poems does not bring the female subject closer to the self, or to power. Rather, it is yet another barrier between the self and the world, or between the authorial self and the persona it inscribes.

American and Chinese confessional poetry emerge in different cultural, temporal and spatial domains. American confessional poetry initially posed as a poetic revolution against overheated, overoptimistic romanticism and detached modernism. As a product of cross-cultural intertextuality, Chinese confessional poetry in the 1980s worked to shake off the yoke of revolutionary

romanticist poetics and traditional Chinese poetics. Since that time, Chinese poets have attributed positive readings into the ostensibly dark, highly personal subjects of American confessional poetry. Various rewritings are actualized through the emulation of role models like Lowell, Sexton, Berryman, and notably Plath. Certain confessional thematic and stylistic features reoccur in the selection process, e.g., "night consciousness," "death complex," and the omnipresence of the "I"-pattern. The sharing of textual sources by Chinese poets leads to poetic confessions, across gender, geographies, and poetry groups. Chinese women poets' collective predilection for the confessional mode of self-expression somewhat obscures the presence of confessional texts written by their male colleagues. Still, I find it restrictive to call a poet "confessional," especially so in the Chinese context when the label is indiscriminately imposed on women poets alone. A text-based approach turns out to be less prejudicial and more productive.

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