

Three Interviews: Wang Anyi, Zhu Lin, Dai Qing

Wang Zheng

Introduction

I interviewed three Chinese women writers in the late summer and early fall of 1988 as I travelled in Shanghai and Beijing. Wang Anyi I contacted through Ru Zhijuan, who is her mother. Wang has no phone but does live close by her mother's place. Wang Anyi's husband called me to say that the writer would be delighted to have me visit her and set the date. When I met with her Wang Anyi explained that she'd asked him to call so that she would not have to go out looking for a phone booth. Zhu Lin I contacted by mail. She called, obviously from a phone booth, right after getting my letter. Dai Qing, who did have a home phone, and the other writers all demonstrated their eagerness to talk with me by their prompt responses and welcome. As I was totally unknown to them I can only attribute this warm reception to the fact that I was a Chinese scholar studying abroad in the U.S.A. and that the interviews were to be published here.

I interviewed Wang Anyi at her home. Dressed simply in a white blouse and flowered skirt, she looked very young, younger than I expected. Her two-room apartment would be the envy of many young Shanghai couples and was small, but quite neat. We started talking at the dinner table in the bedroom. I liked her instantly. She was frank, outgoing and sincere, and she talked in such a fresh way that it reminded me of my innocent years as a young student. She hadn't a bit of worldliness at all. I felt it difficult to connect all the influential novels Wang has produced with the young student-like writer before me.

As Zhu Lin lives outside Shanghai, she decided to come to my residence for the interview when she had other errands to run in the city. I was quite surprised when she appeared with a man whom she introduced as her friend and former editor. She explained that they had some other appointments together and that she had brought him along. As it turned out Zhao Yuanzhen is virtually her spokesman. I would ask a question, Zhu Lin would pause, and Zhao Yuanzhen would offer his answer. I tried hard to engage Zhu Lin in conversation and to hint that I was more interested in what she had to say and not really in his responses. But the man obviously felt he was speaking on her behalf and that he could get her ideas across better than she could. It both frustrated me and piqued my curiosity. Why did she grant him such a superior position? Didn't she feel that by relying on a man in this interview she was sending mixed messages? She seemed

to me to trust him as a close friend in spite of the fact that he boasted constantly about his contributions to her success. But he thwarted my every plan and the interview includes him; it is thus a three-way and not a two-way conversation.

I met Dai Qing at her office at the Guangming Newspaper Building where she works as a professional journalist. She shares her rather small office with several others who drifted in and out during the interview. Dai Qing did not mind at all and probably even welcomed their knowing all about her interviewer from America and the American who'd come along to take pictures of her. In her early forties, and thus older than both Wang Anyi or Zhu Lin, Dai Qing was courageous, upright, extroverted, and very articulate. She spoke exuberantly and, I felt, with a strong sense of mission. She attracted me very much, and the impression she made on me was of a revolutionary rather than a writer. Certainly she is both.

I will leave it to readers to interpret the similarities and differences separating the three writers whose conversations appear here. Suffice it to say that I enjoyed meeting with each of these various but equally strong-willed women.

INTERVIEW WITH WANG ANYI, August 1, 1988

- W.Z. Do you write about female life experience and female psychology consciously or do you not consider the fact of gender in your work?
- W.A. I think this is quite a complicated question. Maybe I write about gender unconsciously.
- W.Z. When you are composing your stories, do you think that because you are a woman you want to express things "from a woman's perspective" or experience?
- W.A. No. Maybe when I experience things I already do that from a female perspective. But I do not consciously think that since I'm a woman I should write any special way. Nonetheless, I am actually very interested in women. Perhaps I am putting myself in a position that angers both men and women. That is, I do not feel excessive sympathy with women nor do I feel that they are particularly unfortunate. I am interested in women's weaknesses and strengths. I think that women play a great role in determining their own fate and actually that women are more worth studying than men.
- W.Z. Why is that?
- W.A. It's very complicated. Perhaps in China it is particularly complicated. In China, women always appear in an image of weakness, obeying the will of another person. In fact, women are strong and

use this means of obedience to reach an end that involves conquest. We can see the point in our literary images. Pan Jinlian exemplifies the contradiction and tragedy of Chinese women. She used obedience as a means to reach her end, which was possession. But in her possession of Ximen Qing she actually failed. To possess him she played endless tricks. On the other hand, Pan Jinlian also endured humiliation. She possessed Ximen Qing yet lost him in the end. The fate of Chinese women is very strange. I don't quite believe that women totally sacrifice themselves for men. When women sacrifice themselves for men they already have some cherished utilitarian aim. Most women's life scope is very narrow. If they want to consolidate their position in society, or gain something socially, they must rely on men. That is the torturous offense to society.

W.Z. What do you think of contemporary women?

W.A. I have come into contact with two kinds of women in the main: intellectual women and so-called "indecent" women—women who have no decent jobs, who stand around in front of hotels and fool with men or prostitute themselves. Don't feel contempt for them. Most have ideals in life and dream of something higher than the sky. Last month, I went to a female prisoner's reformatory farm. Most of the women there are imprisoned for prostitution. Lots of them did it to secure a happy life.

W.Z. Not for money?

W.A. Money was one element. Without money you cannot live that kind of life. It's complicated. They simply do not want to fall into the fate of common female factory workers, crushed each day on the bus, with a tiny little pay packet every month and then to make everything worse, getting saddled with a baby. They don't want their lives to fall that low and that I think is very normal. Many of them are the most ambitious among us.

W.Z. How old are they?

W.A. Between twenty-five and thirty-five.

W.Z. So you think they just made a choice about how to live?

W.A. Yes, I think so. Certainly some women become prostitutes because of personal experiences.

W.Z. What do you think of intellectual women?

- W.A. Intellectual women have already acquired a tool. They may attack society on their own and they already have an established place in society. But most women do not have the opportunity to confront society directly, so often they use roundabout means, such as conquering men. I think that women who sacrifice themselves serving their men so they can concentrate on passing graduate examinations is a rather ugly sight. It isn't base, certainly. Such women aren't really committed to the men but just use them to get to their own goals in a rather tortuous and roundabout way. Of course, another factor is women's feelings. But I think that most women love in a utilitarian way. Maybe it's because women have fewer opportunities for social achievement, to compete and make career choices. Anyway, I think that women are worth studying. When there are only two people, a man and a woman, Chinese men actually seem very weak. In fact the Chinese man is passive but likes to think of himself as aggressive.
- W.Z. Could you give me a concrete example?
- W.A. When a woman treats a man extremely nicely, the man becomes complacent. He hasn't the vaguest suspicion that he has already become her tool.
- W.Z. It would appear that you regard women as objects for study. As a woman yourself would you say you have any "gender consciousness"?
- W.A. I don't often think of my gender. The profession I chose suits me well. Perhaps this choice was conditioned by my gender. This profession provides freedom as it does not have strict time regulation, something I don't like. I have never lived that kind of life except in elementary school since right after the Cultural Revolution began. I don't like living a nine-to-five work life. I think it is inhuman, particularly for women. Going to work at eight o'clock, and leaving work at five, crushes imagination. My profession is free, which suits my temperament. I can freely arrange my time and imagine freely. My home can be my front. I like family life. It's peaceful.
- W.Z. Do you write at home?
- W.A. I always write at home. Sometimes the Writers Association arranges trips, places for me to visit and stay. But once out, my imagination vanishes. Then I must return home to write.
- W.Z. You lived with your parents before your husband was transferred to Shanghai?

- W.A. Yes. I like both big family life and nuclear family life. I always want to go home. Perhaps this represents a great inertia in me.
- W.Z. Are you burdened by family? Here I'm thinking of housework.
- W.A. Now in my nuclear family I do housework. I like it.
- W.Z. How do you two share the housework?
- W.A. I do most of it. He rides a bike so he is responsible for shopping and for washing clothes. But nothing seems to get clean when he does it because he doesn't wash thoroughly. I do the cooking and cleaning since I work at home.
- W.Z. You don't have children, which makes a big difference in terms of housework. Don't you want a child? What does he think?
- W.A. Neither of us wants children. We are one on this point. We are used to the life of two. Adding a third would make us uncomfortable. Probably I lack femininity. I don't like to waste my time and energy on others. Perhaps when it is your own child you don't think this way. But if I did have a child, I am sure I'd feel a lot of grievances. I think I can develop myself now. Plus my present life is free from care. I don't like cares and worries. Too much emotion is a burden. Emotional life is already a burden for me. Father, mother and others, although they don't pressure me directly, still their emotion itself is burdensome. Suppose you are alone, then you can go wherever you want. Of course, I don't go anywhere now, but the reason is that I cannot leave this home.
- W.Z. Were you to have a chance to go abroad for six months, what would you do?
- W.A. I would feel very hesitant. Last time I went to the United States for six months I felt miserable and homesick. And then I was there with my mother!
- W.Z. You don't want children. But do you like children?
- W.A. When I see kids, I like them very much. I just don't want to serve them. Maybe I am really selfish or at the least individualistic. These days my sister's child has been staying with us. It is a rather unaccustomed experience for the two of us. Usually when we come home, we do our own things first, like drinking a glass of water or washing up and so on. But now I have to help the child to a drink and wash-up first. She becomes number one. We are used to regarding ourselves as the center attractions. It is hard for us when there are others involved.

W.Z. When unpleasant things happen to you, do you see them as related to your gender?

W.A. Sometimes. I should expand the range of my activities. I have many plans and I want to do some surveying and research. But I simply cannot leave home. My husband would be alone. He'd be too lonely and would have to eat at my mother's. So I reached an agreement with him. He lets me go when there is an opportunity to visit a foreign country because such opportunities are rare. But activities at home, such as conferences, I give up if I can. So this year I have been abroad several times but I have not been to places I want to visit at home. I've never even been to Xi'an. No one believes it. I have only just recently been to Beijing. This is virtually a restriction and it is related to my personality structure. I like quiet and always long for home. If I were a man, I could go freely. But I don't like to move. Even when it is a nearby place, I have to pluck up my courage to make a decision. It's really bad. I know that if I went out more, I'd definitely write better. I think it's because my life scope is basically urban.

W.Z. Have you any plans to write a novel about women?

W.A. My work usually has female characters. In my recently published collection, I write about female love and psychology. In a novelette published this year, I tell a story about a couple and my focus is on the woman. In this world, when a story happens, there are usually two protagonists, a man and a woman. There are maybe exceptions. Both men and women have unavoidable responsibilities. I am more concerned with the responsibilities on the woman's part. Perhaps I do this unconsciously. Because I am a woman, it is easy for me to understand.

W.Z. Do you treat women with sympathy or comment on them objectively.

W.A. I neither sympathize nor comment on them. I just try my best to analyze them. I feel that sympathy is cheap. I used to have sympathy in my work but in retrospect I find those works rather petit bourgeois.

W.Z. In view of your contact with and analysis of women, what do you think is the prominent problem facing Chinese women?

W.A. Foreigners and people in Hong Kong have often asked me if I am a feminist. When I say no, they get angry. Have you any idea what feminism is, they say? Perhaps they thought that I was denying point-blank because I did not actually know if I was a feminist. It

appears that they would very much like me to be a feminist. But I really am not. According to their understanding, one of the premises of feminism is to deny the distinction between men and women. They think that women and men are the same. Women can do whatever men are able to do. Difference is entirely socially constructed. I even heard about a theory that in ancient times men and women had the same physical strength.

I think China is tragic. In China women are only now beginning to have the right, the luxury to talk about the differences between men and women, to enjoy something that distinguishes women from men. That is the reason I absolutely deny that I am a feminist. I have a great aversion to that sort of feminism.

W.Z. You mean the theory that denies the distinction between men and women?

W.A. Right. I think it's unnatural. People who hold such views will certainly taste bitter fruit soon.

W.Z. Where did you get this understanding of feminism?

W.A. The people who questioned me about my being a feminist told me about it.

W.Z. Have you ever read any books on this topic?

W.A. I don't read much in translation. I don't know any foreign languages and there is always a distance between the original and translations.

W.Z. So your understanding of feminism is derived mainly from the talk of other people?

W.A. Yes. Also I met some western feminists. In 1983, I met a delegation of American women writers. The group was full of feminists. I found it scary. They always emphasized women's rights and women's liberation. They kept asking me, what problems have you women had? How have men oppressed you? Probably feminism occurs in higher-level societies. In our country, now the problems men and women face together are very grave and they cover many petty problems.

W.Z. I agree. In our country the problems men and women confront in common are much graver than the problems between women and men.

W.A. Besides, I think that some of the problems that appear to involve contradictions between men and women are in essence common problems. For instance, the American feminists often asked why

we only want boys and not girls. As a matter of fact, the preference is far less acute in big cities like Shanghai. Only places that have a very backward level of production have this sort of situation. It is related to the mode of production, which is a problem shared by both men and women. What is more, we have just encountered differences between men and women; we lived without such a difference for such a long time.

W.Z. You mean that after Liberation the differences between men and women were simply not mentioned?

W.A. Yes.

W.Z. You look with favor on sexual difference, then?

W.A. I think things move in waves. We are riding a brand new wave now. For example, now we have cosmetics. If you were to say that women shouldn't wear make-up and should be the same as men, that just wouldn't do now. They should let us Chinese have this period of recognizing sex differences, let women enjoy their cosmetics. Later we may abandon such things. Although the feminism of Americans is surging, in ten or twenty years they will come together with the rest. That is the history of human development. We Chinese always seem to diverge from the others.

W.Z. We promoted sex equality after Liberation. Western feminists admire this very much.

W.A. But that brought us many problems. Such as equal opportunity in employment. Now women and men are on the job together so they get crushed together on the buses. I think this is very unnatural. Who will educate children? Children in the nursery school are pitiable enough, and there aren't even enough nursery schools. How can children get on without their mother's education? Parents are crushed on the bus holding their children every morning. Female factory workers do the same physical labor as male workers. Now many women have difficult labors and few have milk. Women are tremendously fatigued.

W.Z. How do you propose to solve these problems?

W.A. I think the problem is equal opportunity of employment. In fact, many female workers would like to stay at home and do the housework if their husbands made higher salaries. And the men would have backing when they got home. I think work in the kitchen is quite suitable for ordinary women. Certainly women have

the same abilities as men. But I think you should let women choose. Sometimes we are deprived of our choices.

W.Z. I agree with you that not all women want to be career women and quite a few would like to live comfortable family lives. But now the situation abroad is that many housewives have revolted. They feel they lost economic status and independence, that they have become appendages to their husbands.

W.A. That's quite true. But now with equal employment, the problem is that women's health is deteriorating. Women are so tired. So, when they come home they are foul-tempered and mistreat the children; children don't get an adequate education. This is particularly the case among female workers on the assembly line.

W.Z. How did you feel when you were questioned by the Western feminists?

W.A. I just told them what I thought. I felt their sense of urgency, so the problem must be quite strong and very real. But our society is different, very different indeed. Even the problems we feel are different. I think that in order to feel sexual inequality, to feel that women are the appendages of men, you must have leisure time. We don't have that leisure, and we are very, very tired. Our women do not have the time to feel these subtle feelings.

W.Z. In many cases, men and women shoulder the burden of life together.

W.A. Yes, this is another strange phenomenon. If women leave the stove only to draw both men and women back to it in the end, life becomes very tiresome for both sexes. Foreign feminists never experience such fatigue. They have energy and nowhere to let it go, while our energy has been totally exhausted.

W.Z. Do many of the women's delegations visiting China hold feminist views?

W.A. I think that many women studying Chinese female writers do so because they are feminists. They are interested in you from "a feminist perspective."

W.Z. Probably many of them are trying to prove that their feminism is universal by studying Chinese female writers.

W.A. I would not like it if they were just interested in me simply because of that. I want equality. I hope they regard me as a real writer. Foreign feminists may think that we have had to struggle hard

against men to get what we have achieved today. Actually there is a strange phenomenon in China. Because of the emphasis on sexual equality, women get treated with special favors. Sometimes I feel that there is too much of this favoritism. Such as in the People's Congress, there have to be seats set aside for women. Just because you are a woman writer, people overpraise you. It's such a nuisance.

W.Z. Is that still the tendency now? Isn't it true that the mechanism of competition in the economic reforms has driven a lot of women out of their leading positions?

W.A. That's true. It must follow the law of productivity development. Still, I think it is easier for a woman to succeed, easier than for a man.

W.Z. Do you think women get special favors?

W.A. Yes. Being a female writer means getting special favors. But I will offend many female writers by saying this.

W.Z. But I think you are being very honest. After all, you are a female writer yourself and you are admitting to receiving favors. Have you ever experienced any obstacles in the way of your advancement?

W.A. I haven't felt any. I think that the obstacles for me are not exterior but interior. If you really have gifts then you can do what men do.

W.Z. In your life have you ever run into an experience where men make trouble for you deliberately just because you are a woman?

W.A. I can't think of such a situation. Perhaps you feel the same as I do.

W.Z. I've never encountered that sort of thing, either. Our generation is not consciously aware of our own gender. When we think, we are sexually neutral. We don't distinguish separate spheres, male and female.

W.A. Right. I am the same way. But this is very bad. Maybe we do distinguish but aren't aware that we do. In China today we have things hundreds of times more significant than gender confronting us. Dai Qing is trying to write about a hundred women to demonstrate that Chinese women live particularly hard lives. But I think, were I to go out and interview people, I'd find a thousand men living the same hard life. Some hardships are due not to sex but because so many things remain unsatisfactorily resolved in the process of social development. It's because of poverty, backwardness and stupidity, not just an issue of sex.

- W.Z. Don't you think that Dai Qing has represented problems that are particularly related to women?
- W.A. I really don't think so. For instance, she writes about a few female bigamists. That is, they got married but their first marriages were unhappy and their husbands refused to allow a divorce. So they lived with other men before their marriages were legally dissolved. We call it bigamy. Dai blames the situation on men, pointing out how bad the men were. Actually this was not a problem of men, but a problem of our unsound legal system. She also wrote about the relationship, a sexual affair, between a woman in military service and a man; but I feel the man she describes is a far more tragic figure than the woman.
- W.Z. So the social bondage doesn't just tie the women down, but men, too.
- W.A. The common yoke.
- W.Z. But do you think that Chinese women endure more suffering or not?
- W.A. Yes. I think women's ability to endure is stronger than that of men. Especially Chinese women. Western women agitate for reform but they actually suffer less than Chinese women. Perhaps their endurance is not so great as that of Oriental women. Oriental women have tremendous endurance, particularly Japanese women.
- W.Z. Then you do think Chinese women bear extra burdens.
- W.A. Women probably do since men cannot replace women at certain things, like having babies. But I really think that in spite of our many efforts to eliminate sexual inequality, women's burdens have actually increased; the example is the female factory workers I just mentioned. On the one hand they have to work like men, on the other they cannot abandon the burden that their sex saddles them with. You may sacrifice this part and not have a baby, or maybe you don't do housework and let men do it. Men in Shanghai have been very well trained by women. They wash clothes, wash diapers; they do all kinds of things. But the women of Shanghai have begun to be concerned about manhood. They feel that Shanghai men lack masculinity. What to do? You trained this generation of men yourselves! Having trained the men to be this way now women want masculinity. I wrote an article about women and men where I said at the end: if men are too strong and control everything then Nora leaves home. If men are weak and passively follow orders from women then women look around for manhood. Difficult indeed.

- W.Z. There is a contradiction here. Some women want spiritual independence and equality with men yet go on looking for manhood. How are they defining manhood? It sounds to me as though they still have a traditional concept of masculinity.
- W.A. They have two standards, one aesthetic and the other practical. It is a contradictory concept. But I'm not sure Western women would accept such womanish men, either. Sometimes when I look at Shanghai men from an aesthetic perspective, I feel they really are wimpy. But when I go other places, and compare the men there, I find that men in Shanghai treat women very well indeed. It's hard to say.
- W.Z. Is this call for manhood in men coming from the young intellectual women?
- W.A. Yes. That's where the problem lies. The macho men are the ones who most fear intellectual women. They feel that female factory workers have more endurance. If the man doesn't give a fig about the family, she can bear up under his neglect. These days lots of men hang around all day playing mahjongg outside, or after working hard all day they come home, have some wine and beat their wives. Female factory workers put up with this kind of treatment.
- W.Z. What do you think of the literature describing women's extra burdens?
- W.A. It's not a gender issue. What determines everything is a person's talent. Like Madame Curie. I read her biography when I was a child and it really moved me. She had a baby and felt terribly burdened. The baby cried constantly for milk and she had to feed it frequently. The details were very touching. Nonetheless, they did not prevent her from become a very great person and she achieved an enormous lot. So it's a matter of individual personal talent. I believe that in her time things were more feudal than now. I also think that some feminists have too high an expectation of men; they are dependent, since they depend on men to create conditions for them. I've met some American feminists and I've made a very amazing discovery. Maybe the women I met were not representative. But I found that they could not live without men any better than we non-feminists can.
- W.Z. What gave you that impression?
- W.A. Take sex. We admit that we are women and have sexual needs. It's unbearable for us to live without men in our lives. Couples in China who work in different places bear these separations for years at a

time. But when I was in the United States that time to attend the International Writer's Convention, I found that men and women there couldn't do without each other even temporarily: except for the Chinese, who have a greater ability to endure.

W.Z. That is a very interesting question. What do you think causes this?

W.A. I don't know how to explain except to say that they are different from us. Chinese maintain a morally higher life, though sometimes that sort of life is rather inhuman. Westerners separate their emotions from sex. It's like eating, not because the food is particularly tasty, but simply because when I am hungry I will eat. Chinese women might say, well, I won't eat if it doesn't taste good, and I won't do it if there are no feelings involved. So we will only have sex when our emotions reach a really high level of intensity. That seems to be a really big difference.

W.Z. You observed this matter when you were staying with them?

W.A. It requires very little effort to observe. The Westerners there were all the same and they all had boyfriends or girlfriends. It was all very natural and I did not feel dirtied by it. Very strange, actually. I felt that they were quite healthy. Their crazy and kind of frivolous way of behaving seemed fine to me at the time. But if you were to ask me to act that way, I would not do it. Maybe they thought I was still very young, since Chinese look younger than Americans.

W.Z. Did you discuss the difference between Chinese and Western women's attitudes toward sex with them?

W.A. No. I joked about it sometimes. When they talked about feminism, I would say: it's just because you have such elevated expectations of men. We Chinese don't have so many requirements and just try to make do with what we have. Western women want men to respect and to give them opportunities, and, on top of that, they want the men to make themselves perfect. Comparatively speaking, Chinese men are worse than men of other countries, it's true.

W.Z. What makes you say that? In what respect?

W.A. In every respect. Chinese men have always been pampered; by the society, by women. So they have very weak wills. Certainly this is my personal feeling, and it is true that I have no contact with Western men. Probably Western men are the same as Chinese men. Probably men are just weaker human beings than women are.

W.Z. Is there a gender difference in your relationship to your readers?

W.A. More girls like my early work and the boys who like those works are usually sentimental students. There is some change in the readership for my recent stuff. Men and women are pretty much the same, and now there are even more male readers. I am not really sure about this, but it is the impression I get from readers' letters and reviews. I keep my distance from readers and don't really care much about them. But one thing is certain, and that is that what I give my readers are my genuine feelings. I never give readers artificial things, things that do not belong to me. Actually I get more reader responses to my early work. That's the major pleasure I get from writing. After reading my work lots of old friends and classmates that I'd lost touch with wrote to me. I've also made new friends.

W.Z. What do male readers say to you in their letters?

W.A. Oh, the ones who write are usually similar to me in temperament. One man wrote after he got out of prison and said that my short story had enabled him to have peace in prison and he wrote to thank me because he felt that I had understood his situation.

W.Z. So male readers have no trouble understanding you.

W.A. Of course not. Some of my views may make feminists think that I am tremendously oppressed by men. I actually just hope to eventually become a writer, like a male writer.

W.Z. Why do you say that?

W.A. Perhaps it's because I've seen no ideal female writers.

W.Z. So you would evaluate male writers of Chinese literature more favorably than female writers?

W.A. Actually, I would rank male writers generally higher than female writers in all of world literature. In my view women are fine writers when it comes to delicate things but they don't do so well writing really grand literature. That's because women's literature is less powerful, less expansive in conception. Still there are female writers whose work I do like a lot, including *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. I don't have access to many works in translation.

W.Z. Which female writer has influenced you the most?

W.A. Xiao Hong. She's certainly the Chinese woman writer I like most of all.

W.Z. Why?

- W.A. Because she doesn't feel like a woman writer to me.
- W.Z. You seem to divide writers into male and female, into two categories.
- W.A. Yes, I do. That's why I think a feminist would say that I was deeply oppressed by men.
- W.Z. How do you distinguish male and female categories?
- W.A. Usually female writers' work exhibits a narrowness. This is not always the case. A woman wrote *Wuthering Heights* but it is a powerful, soul-wrenching novel. Usually, however, women find it difficult to write things like that. Xiao Hong did. She accomplished it through her severity.
- W.Z. Well, if Xiao Hong could do it how do you explain your belief that female writers are incapable of writing powerfully?
- W.A. My feeling is that for female writers it is too easy to get buried in personal experience; it's too tempting to huddle up in one's own shell and not stop and think about how pitiful she really is. Female writers are more self-deceiving than male writers, too. She might assume that she is a certain kind of person but actually not be. She might like to play some sort of role but actually is not that sort of person at all. I think we [writers] should give people genuine things. Certainly nobody is going to disagree with that. But women are more histrionic than men. Female writers easily fall prey to the problem of just acting.
- W.Z. Do you think female writers lack talent, then?
- W.A. I'm not certain if this relates to talent or if it is a matter of temperament.
- W.Z. What causes temperamental differences?
- W.A. Maybe this is just the way women are. A woman likes to be pretty. Sure, I like to be pretty, too. Maybe women are more conscious of self-display. Nonetheless, women don't often carry off self-display very well. Take, for example, the fact that the four most famous female character roles (*sida mingdan*) were all played by men and that women do extremely well playing male characters in the Yue opera (*Yueju*). Why don't women play themselves better? Maybe they have deceived themselves. Women always want to seem to be better. Since they don't really know what is really good they then lack the aesthetic capacity [it takes to write well] and just end up

too entranced with their own images. Women love their own images more than men do.

W.Z. Do you see any difference in the way male and female writers select themes?

W.A. Male writers are more engaged in things outside the self, social things. Female writers are concerned with the life of emotions.

W.Z. I read an article in a newspaper somewhere arguing that Chinese women's literature was just a literature of women looking for men.

W.A. Who the hell said that?

W.Z. I can't recall his name. He felt that all women wrote about was feelings, love, trying to find a man, nothing else.

W.A. Then he hasn't read very much. Shen Rong doesn't write about such things.

W.Z. Have you close relationships with other female writers?

W.A. No. Not close. Writers are individual workers. We haven't much contact with each other.

W.Z. Have any circles formed?

W.A. Not in Shanghai. I hear that Beijing writers are all quite close.

W.Z. Do you find that your relationships with writers are the same regardless of sex?

W.A. Yes. I keep my distance from both.

W.Z. What general impression have you formed of contemporary Western literature?

W.A. It penetrates deeper into the unconscious [*shenru ren de neixing*]. That seems to be its general tendency, including the fine arts, since modern art tries to touch that level.

W.Z. What's your opinion of sex in Western literature?

W.A. I think it's inevitable. Sex is important when writing about human beings. I wrote something about sex last year and people criticized me. In my story, "*Xiaocheng zhi lian*" [Love in a small town] I tried to show that guilt and repression are Chinese attitudes toward sex but that sex is an irresistible force. Sex is the struggle between humans and Nature. The two tiny creatures having sex are already social and cultural beings. Writing about sexuality I tried to expose the process, how the social and cultural beings struggled with this

natural drive. The consequence of their struggle was that both suffered.¹

W.Z. Your writing was about Chinese social and cultural pressures repressing sexuality?

W.A. Yes. I think this is something peculiar to China. In the case of two Westerners having sex probably they would simply regard sexual congress as a matter of course, like eating a meal, and not feel particularly guilty about it. Writing about people one must dig into the deepest levels of human behavior, and there you encounter the problem of sex. Writing about Chinese sex brings up lots of questions of Chinese views of sexuality. That's natural, too. I actually think that my description of sex was beautiful. What my readers found unacceptable was that my descriptions of sexuality were no more than that. Maybe your Western readers won't be able to understand this point. In *Half of Man Is Woman*, for instance, Zhang Xianliang uses sexuality to the end of exposing social ills. That's acceptable. What Chinese readers find unacceptable is making sex the end, the theme of the writing. That is what I did in my three short stories.² People say I am making a fuss over something that is not important.

W.Z. Have you gotten any positive reviews?

W.A. Far more than negative ones.

W.Z. What are the reviews saying?

W.A. I've forgotten. But they seem to think I'm quite a good writer. They used fancy new phrases, the kind I don't really understand.

W.Z. You may in fact reflect a specific *Chinese* culture when you write about the conflict between social being and natural being.

W.A. Quite right. There is a group of writers who consciously are taking Chinese culture as the setting. I'm thinking of Zhang Jie's *Fang zhou* [Ark], which I value very highly. I consider it China's only feminist work about Chinese feminists. Of course, you may find that

¹ The story is about a young man and woman, both dancers, who give in to sexual passion during the Cultural Revolution when fornication was a crime. The guilt disrupted their lives. They were caught in a double bind. If they had sex they suffered social, cultural and emotional pressure, but if they did not then they suffered from repression of natural desire.

² *Jinxu Gu zhi lian* [Love in Jinxiu Valley], *Xiaocheng zhi lian* [Love in a small town], and *Huangshan zhi lian* [Love on a barren mountain].

Chinese feminists are full of pain. They find life without men exceedingly painful.

W.Z. Where did you publish *Love in Small Town*?³

W.A. In *Shanghai Literature*, 1986. It's hard to get now. It sold out right after publication. Chinese readers haven't anything sexual to read so they make do with this kind of fiction.

W.Z. How do you describe male and female sexuality? Do you see any difference?

W.A. Not much difference. Once a woman has a baby differences appear. Motherhood and increasing responsibilities repress sexuality. In *Love in a Small Town* the two protagonists share one thing. They feel all along that they are committing a crime, that sex is dirty and they feel like criminals. In another story of mine, I write about female psychology.⁴ A married woman falls in love with another man. Her husband knows her too well. So her feelings for him are stale and she cannot renew the role she plays with him. With her new lover she plays a new role, gives a new performance. Of course she doesn't really love the man but only the self that she becomes when she is with him. She can throw away her old self like she throws away an old coat. What I wanted to say there was that when women are in love not only are they in love with men they are also in love with themselves. They discover a new self in this love and so they change their roles each day, as an actress would. Actually writing novels is another way of regenerating ourselves. I suspect that this is what motivates those [American] feminists who feel so bored at home. [They just want a new role to play.]

W.Z. I think you should be able to understand them.

W.A. I do understand them. I just don't accept their views.

W.Z. If you were interviewing an American woman writer what would you ask her?

W.A. I'd like to know what they are writing about.

W.Z. What standards do you use to evaluate a literary work?

W.A. I like high taste. I don't like low literature. I like high taste [*quwei gao*], high aesthetic values [*shenmei jiazhi*], high temperament

³ Eva Hung, trans., *Love in a Small Town* by Wang Anyi (Hong Kong: Renditions Paperback, 1988). See the review in this volume.

⁴ *Love in Jinxu Valley*.

[*qizhi gao*], and high spirit [*jingjie gao*]. When I say “high taste” I mean taking the high road, the high standpoint. Authors who do not always write about personal affairs. I particularly dislike stories that make little personal affairs into a great tragedy. So I don’t like Liang Xiaosheng’s *Xuecheng* [Snow city]. It’s too sad. Of course such sad things really do occur in life; Shi Tiecheng’s novels, though, take frustration and suffering in personal life very coolly, so I consider that his novels exemplify the higher spiritual standpoint. Also I require the language to be beautiful. Lots of present-day Chinese writers just write terribly; some can’t produce a smooth sentence. They consider language a tool and refuse to see it as an aesthetic object in its own right.

W.Z. What’s your feeling about women’s writing?

W.A. Zhang Jie’s *Ark* made a strong impression. Up to now there have been very few women’s fictions that had the same impact on me. I like it very much even though I don’t agree with her point of view. It contains sharp contradictions and to me its value lies in those very contradictions. For instance, she depicts men as thoroughly mean and bad. There are no good men. Women are all good and they hate the men and want nothing to do with them. Yet when the women leave the men they live extremely sad lives. The power of the story lies right here. It is, in my view, a representative work of Chinese feminism.

W.Z. Then what you disapprove of is that she depicts Chinese men as being rotten?

W.A. Right.

W.Z. Have you ever encountered a Chinese woman in the situation she describes?

W.A. Yes.

W.Z. You just don’t think men are the sole cause?

W.A. No. [They are not.] She also has written about the weakness of women. Her women simply cannot do without men. They long to leave their men but once they do they haven’t the strength to sustain their lives. Even when they manage to endure, they suffer and achieve very little happiness in life. Zhang Jie depicts such experiences and feelings extremely well.

W.Z. The last few years I have been outside China and I’m not clear on the situation now. When I left there were quite a large number of women writers and I actually liked their work better than the men’s.

W.A. Actually, although the female writers of that period were more conspicuous, quite a lot of male writers were also at work. Female writers can make small things seem very interesting. Male writers can't deal with interior matters but do very well with things "beyond the doors," so to speak. Also, female writers usually have a fresher and more beautiful writing style and so their work attracts the literary youth. Generally speaking, more young women than young men dream of getting into literature.

My letter to Wang Anyi

After listening to the tape of our conversation I have some further questions I hope you will answer.

You seem to think that sexual difference should be recognized. You oppose the view that men and women are the same. You advocate that Chinese women enjoy the difference. But when we talk about the difference between female and male writers, you yourself say you want to write "like a man." You base your sense of writing in what male writers do and use that as a measure of value for the female writers you say you like. I think there is a contradiction in your logic. If you admit sexual difference and even advocate taking pleasure in that difference, then why do you want to eliminate that sense of difference in your own work? If you subscribe to the theory that sexual difference is natural, then is it "natural" for you to want the same mentality, temperament and style of a male writer? Perhaps you do not seek difference but rather feel badly about it. Does your sorrow emerge because you have used a male value to measure all of these things? A beautiful woman would not feel badly that her physique does not resemble that of a powerful man. She knows society has "different" standards with which to judge female beauty.

I look forward to your reply.

W.Z.

Wang Anyi's reply

I intend to write works that are as good as those of men, not works that are the same as men's. I do think that there is a point at which women will fall behind men. This has nothing to do with restrictions placed on women's personal conditions. It is simply a question of the quality of women's temperament. I really feel that women writers are too pampered; in our rather exaggerated and pretentious emphasis on women's liberation, female writers have been receivers of tremendous favoritism (this fact reveals inequality in and of itself; it's rather like the way actresses were overpraised in the old society). Female writers frequently start from the self, but they lose the self rather soon. They invent an unreal self that they then enjoy and pity. I just don't want to be that sort of female writer. In the

movie *Death on the Nile*, the detective Poirot says: "Women like others to love them."

I'm actually the same way. But when I sit at my desk alone, facing the blank paper before me, I feel as though I were on a platform without the audience. I cannot be false to myself, no matter how I adore the love of others. At that sacred moment, I must reveal things that do not please others but are nonetheless genuine. I am not sure I've answered your question. If I have not, please write to me again.

INTERVIEW WITH ZHU LIN, October 5, 1988

- W.Z. Do you consciously discuss the problems of women in your novels? Do you think about gender when you write?
- Z.L. I don't very much. Yet most of the protagonists in my novels turn out to be women.
- Z.Y. I think you write mainly about the life and thought of women, particularly young women.
- Z.L. That's right.
- W.Z. But do you consciously choose themes that reflect women's problems?
- Z.Y. That may be the case in her recent work.
- Z.L. Right. I wrote about women's issues quite consciously in my last novel, *Nüxing-ren* [Female-human beings].
- W.Z. What made you start writing consciously about women?
- Z.L. I guess I have been greatly influenced by Chen Yu-shih.⁵ When I began my career, I did not give much thought to the fact that I was writing for women. But later I discovered that all my protagonists were women.
- Z.Y. Well, I'd like to say something about that. It really isn't my place to answer your questions, but I do know Zhu Lin very well and I'm familiar with her work. She worked with me when she started her first novel; I was her editor. Since then I have participated in the process of almost everything she's written. So I know her very well. She writes beautifully but doesn't express herself orally very well. When asked to comment on things, she sometimes doesn't say what she means very distinctively.

⁵ Professor of Chinese literature and author of *Images and Ideas in Chinese Classic Prose* (Stanford, 1988), among others. Chen teaches at the University of Alberta and travels frequently in Chinese literary circles.

- W.Z. Oh, we're just chatting. Never mind.
- Z.Y. As far as I'm aware, her writing is mainly about the lives and pursuits of women. Her first novel, *Shenghuo de lu* [Route of life], describes the experience of a young educated woman living in a rural area.
- Z.L. But I wasn't aware that that was my topic at the time.
- Z.Y. Perhaps you write your own experiences and feelings, as a woman, when you write your novels.
- Z.L. Yes, that's right.
- Z.Y. In fact, when we consider the issue of perspective in literature Zhu Lin really describes and reflects life from a female perspective. There are quite a lot of women writers active these days and some people are even complaining that contemporary Chinese literature has too strongly a feminine tone to it. Of course, some female writers produce things that have no feminine tone to it at all. I'm thinking of Fang Fang in Wuhan, who writes like a man.
- W.Z. What about Zhu Lin? Zhu Lin, do you write from a female standpoint, with a woman's heart and mind?
- Z.L. Yes. Now that you have reminded me, thinking back, I've been writing from a woman's perspective all along. But I wasn't conscious of this until my last novel, *Female-Human Beings*.
- W.Z. What made you decide to write that novel?
- Z.L. Do you mean what was my motive?
- Z.Y. We discussed some things before she wrote this novel. We felt that it was important to portray what the educated young people are up to now that they've returned from the countryside to the cities.
- W.Z. But why did you choose to write from a woman's perspective?
- Z.L. Because I felt that of all the oppressions the most brutal is the oppression of women.
- W.Z. Do you think that writing about women is different from writing about men?
- Z.L. Yes, I do. Actually there are two themes in this novel: one is female oppression and the other is my generation's pursuit of ideals. Many people don't understand my themes. They think I'm calling for humanist or praising communist ideals.
- W.Z. To what extent does your work shape your female identity?

- Z.L. I think my work is a part of me. Writing about women makes me think more about women's situation.
- Z.Y. She has experienced more hardships in her career and in life generally because of being a woman. She and Dai Houying used to live together in the dorms when neither had an apartment. Once Dai told her, "In China being a woman is difficult but being a woman writer is even tougher." They've both learned this from life.
- W.Z. Are you married?
- Z.L. No.
- W.Z. How did you get an apartment then?
- Z.L. I just rent it. The metropolitan Propaganda Bureau assigned it to me as a work place.
- W.Z. What difficulties do you encounter pursuing your career because you are a single woman?
- Z.L. Well, there are some conveniences. Since I don't have the burden of a family I can become completely absorbed in my writing. But people think it's inconceivable that you aren't married and consider you very strange. When I meet people for the first time they usually ask me three questions: One, how old are you? two, are you married? and three, why don't you get married? It's like a trilogy. They never miss a part.
- W.Z. Have you gotten pressure from your family, too?
- Z.L. My parents were divorced when I was a child and I was raised by my grandmother, who has since passed away. I have no brothers and sisters, so there are no family pressures. And now the social pressure is not as bad as it used to be. People seemed to have gotten more used to this kind of situation. I met Li Ziyun once, the associate chief editor of *Shanghai Literature*, a woman in her fifties. She said, "You're in a much better situation than I was when I was your age and people considered me a freak: They'd say, 'You have both eyes and a nose; why are you still single?'" Li is planning to write a review of my novel and she says that she can understand it automatically because she feels the same way, too.
- W.Z. There are quite a lot of single women these days.
- Z.Y. There are objective reasons for her being single.
- Z.L. Historical reasons.

- W.Z. Obviously getting sent down to the countryside is one reason. How many years did you remain in the countryside?
- Z.L. Six years. I was already twenty-six when I returned to Shanghai, past my prime. I was an editor at the Shanghai Children's Publishing House then. People looked down on me because I hadn't published anything significant myself. So I put everything else aside and wrote with all my might. That was in 1976, right after the Gang of Four had been overthrown. I'd just finished the outline for *Route of Life*. I showed it to Zhao Yuanzhen and he was so positive that I went on to write the novel. I showed it to other people, too, but no one else thought I could write. I finished the novel only because of his encouragement. Men Weizai, the editor of Beijing People's Literature Publishing House, decided to publish it. When the senior editors at my publishing house heard about it it made them really uncomfortable: they wanted to know how come all of a sudden this young person was going to get a novel published. So they started organizing criticism meetings, accusing me of being tainted with careerism and so on. I had a very hard time.
- Z.Y. She was even considering suicide. People then were still caught up in the Gang of Four ideology. The rule was that if the head of your work unit expressed an unfavorable opinion toward you personally then you were not likely to get your book published. The publishers would check with the head of the unit before they'd even consider the publication.
- Z.L. Some officials from my unit went over to Beijing Publishing to try and stop them from publishing it by claiming that the novel was harmful. It aroused such a controversy at that level that it was taken up to the next level, to the leading body. Finally Mao Dun heard about the controversy and stepped in to okay publication. It finally came out.
- Z.Y. Even so, our work unit still went on criticizing and making trouble for her. They refused to let her go on living in the dorm, just threw her bedding out. In the end the issue came to the attention of the central government Publishing Bureau and they intervened in the dispute.
- W.Z. Why did your work unit do this? Jealousy?
- Z.Y. They thought she was too young. She was really young, just transferred to the publishing house, and then all of a sudden getting a book published.

- W.Z. If it had been a young man, not a young woman, what would have happened?
- Z.Y. The same jealousy would have been there. It wasn't because of her sex.
- Z.L. Another cause of all this was that the leadership liked people to come by after work and visit, or chat them up during office hours. But I don't like doing that sort of thing. I just do my work when I'm at the work unit and write my novels after work. I saw chatting as a waste of time and seldom joined them. This made them think I was eccentric.
- Z.Y. They also despised her because she'd just transferred in from the country. She'd published a few children's stories when she was there. I was the one who decided to transfer her to our publishing house. I liked her work and felt sympathetic to the educated youths working out there. Because she didn't like talking to people much and seldom speaks up at meetings people at the publishing house began to think that giving her this job had been a mistake.
- W.Z. Have you felt any difficulties that you would attribute specifically to your being a woman?
- Z.L. That is not easy for me to say.
- Z.Y. Let me say something for you, all right? Pressure from our unit leadership eventually focussed on the fact that she is a woman. Because she had no boyfriend they enlisted the help of a real sleazy guy to harass and insult her. The leadership felt that they could take their revenge and intimidate her so that she'd be unable to write anything else. They even circulated a rumor that I had written her novel. Their implied point was that she had had an affair with a male editor who then supported her work. She was under such terrible pressure that she spent a whole night crying in her dorm. I was living in the men's dorm at the time. So a couple of the men and I went over to watch her because we were afraid something terrible might happen. The next day we went to talk to our superior and suggested that he handle the matter very carefully. He said: "Oh? She wants to commit suicide. We saw plenty of that in the Cultural Revolution, it's no big deal. Why should we care!" Since we could do nothing ourselves we tried to dig up some of her female friends to come and help her out. They are the ones she went to the countryside with. They did their best to comfort and encourage her to go on. They read the draft of the novel she wanted, in desperation, to tear up and they told her it was wonderful and that she should never give up. They helped her copy the draft and made

her some clothes since she was so poor at that time. Without the support of those young women she would not be alive today.

- Z.L. The rumors spread all over. First I was angry. Later I didn't care.
- Z.Y. But this rumor is the main factor that makes marriage rather unlikely for her.
- Z.L. The other ridiculous thing people said was that the protagonist of my novel was me. Since she had had affairs in the village then I must have too. It wasn't just ignorant people who thought so, either; it was people in the literary circles and publishing houses—they all believed it. Look, as soon as my new novel *Female-Human Beings* is published, with all the sex in it, people will start gossiping about me all over again.
- Z.Y. But now your capacity to endure it has deepened.
- Z.L. Yeah. Now I don't care. Then I was still young, in my twenties. I thought love was sacred and that I could not allow people to talk as they did. I felt I had to argue with people in order to get the truth out. That was foolish and unnecessary. Who should you argue with? Now, however, society has progressed; people's attitudes toward such things have changed.
- Z.Y. Actually the guys who persecuted her lost the support of lots of other people. A dozen women in the publishing house organized a special support group for her. They argued against the chief editor and some of the senior editors. They even planned to write a *dazibao* to criticize the leadership. The issue spread all over. Lots of women came out to express their support for her.
- W.Z. What's your situation like now?
- Z.L. I've been transferred to the Shanghai Writer's Association. But in fact, I'm pretty much excluded from Shanghai literary circles.
- Z.Y. The literary circles all have lots of factions, each headed by some powerful figure. She has joined none of them so she's excluded by them all. The Association doesn't even contact her about conferences. She doesn't get opportunities to go abroad, either. When foreigners ask to visit her they are often told no such person as Zhu Lin exists.
- W.Z. Do you find it difficult to publish your work?

- Z.L. None of my work has ever been published in Shanghai. This most recent novel is the only exception. *Xiaoshuo jie* [The World of the novel] is going to publish it.⁶
- W.Z. How do you feel about the fact that your literary work has had such an effect on your personal life?
- Z.Y. It's probably best to say that her literary work brought enormous pressure and that that has, in turn, made her tougher and much more determined to continue working.
- Z.L. I feel that my life is very full and I've never felt empty. Lots of my married friends have told me how empty they feel. I said to them, sorry, I've never felt that way.
- W.Z. You've been so busy writing.
- Z.Y. She's published ten books already.
- Z.L. Gossip and rumors have interfered with my work. But I'm not angry about it any more. Long ago I decided that as long as I have the freedom to write, I shall go on writing forever. Now there are fewer interferences. I'm excluded from literary circles which just means I don't have to attend all the meetings and so I have more time to write.
- W.Z. What's your relationship with your readers like?
- Z.L. I get lots of letters from them. Many young women tell me they have experiences similar to those of my protagonists and they tell me about their lives and ask me how to deal with problems in their lives.
- W.Z. Are your readers mostly men or women?
- Z.L. Women, absolutely. It often feels strange that I can move so many women. For instance, I let some women read my most recent novel and got a really strong response. They were all moved to tears. The men who read it respond differently; I think they don't quite get the point of what I wrote.
- Z.Y. I can provide an example that illustrates her relationship to her readers. Once she was doing a survey in Jiading county. It was late and raining and she missed the last bus, so she had to walk home. On the way some young hooligans from the country robbed her. They took everything, including her notebook and umbrella, but fortunately she was not physically hurt. She was in a terrible state

⁶ A Shanghai literary journal.

by then and found a farmer's house in the village and asked to stay there. A young woman let her in and listened to her story. The young woman had no idea who she was. You should be staunch, she said, and don't let such a thing get to you. I recently read some novels by Zhu Lin, she said, and all her protagonists have such strong characters. Later on, after this incident this woman and Zhu Lin became good friends. These are tremendously encouraging things for Zhu Lin. Lots of the younger women in the rural south collect her work.

- W.Z. What do you make of the difference in men's and women's responses to your work?
- Z.L. I haven't thought through this question very well. But it does make me feel strange. Especially this time male and female reader response has been different. Why is that?
- Z.Y. It's because the men did not read it carefully enough. If they had they would have understood it.
- W.Z. Then why did all those women read it so carefully?
- Z.L. Yeah. I've been thinking about this question for some time. It was all men who decided to publish my novel and I don't think they were prejudiced against me. On the contrary, I think they have a very high opinion of me. They read my draft, agreed to publish it and all said it was very creative. But they never understood the novel's themes, while the women readers understand very well.
- W.Z. [addressing Zhao] Do you understand her themes?
- Z.Y. I discussed her themes with her from the very beginning. Certainly I understand them. And I made suggestions to her as she was in the process of writing. I think that Chinese women's burden is very heavy because the women at the bottom have been overtly oppressed by feudalism, or feudalism in the name of communism or socialism. I agree with her on this point. I think men would be able to understand if they read more carefully.
- Z.L. Another reason may be that the women who have read this novel are all friends, so they read out of interest. The men who've read it up to this point are all editors. Editors read like doctors seeing patients; they have different feelings from ordinary readers.
- W.Z. What do you think of Chinese women's current situation?
- Z.L. My work all deals with this topic. I am trying to depict Chinese women at the present time, the present stage. My major objects of

interest are the educated young women in rural areas. I am currently writing a novel called *The Witch*; it's the stories of several generations of women.

W.Z. What are the pressures contemporary Chinese women must bear?

Z.Y. Zhu Lin tries to express the pressure of Chinese traditional culture on Chinese women in her novels. Regardless of their age or education women in the rural areas all experience the tangible and intangible pressures of feudal culture. The mental pressure is tremendous.

Z.L. In one of my novels I tell the story of a young woman who came from real life. This woman had many dreams in life originally and she wanted an ideal love. But when love came suddenly she was at quite a loss. She had a feeling for a classmate in her high school. One day this young man came over to her house looking for her and just jumped over the low wall around her house. She was startled and didn't see him clearly, so she cried for help to catch the intruder. They caught the guy and he was sentenced to several years in prison. The woman regretted what she'd done and decided to wait for him even though her family opposed her decision. As she was waiting another young man with a powerful father wanted to marry her. She refused. When the young man got out of prison, they married, even though she was under tremendous social pressure not to do it. She thought she had gotten her love. But very soon she found that prison life had changed the man's personality and he was not so good at farming under the new responsibility system, so they were hardly making a living. The predicament aged her rapidly. In the meantime the man with the powerful father was still after her and kept showing her around his rich house, telling her about all the great things in the house that he had prepared for her. The woman did not know what to do. There are quite a lot of cases like this in the rural areas now.

W.Z. What do you think of the work of other women writers?

Z.L. I think I've been influenced most by the [Indian poet] Tagore's⁷ work. As to other Chinese women writers, I think Zhang Jie and Shen Rong are quite good.

W.Z. Have you contacts with other female writers?

Z.L. Hardly at all.

⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, 1861-1914.

- W.Z. What would you like to say about their work?
- Z.L. I haven't read much of their work.
- Z.Y. You've certainly read most of them.
- Z.L. Well, I find it difficult to comment on them. I'd better not.
- W.Z. What's your opinion of contemporary Western novels?
- Z.L. I read them only in translation. I've not read many. None of them particularly aroused my interest.
- Z.Y. She continues to write as a realist and is not interested in following the modernist fad.
- W.Z. You mentioned that you've written about sex in your new novel. Why?
- Z.L. I want to explore human nature. I approach sex from the perspective of philosophical thinking on human life. I am interested in Fromm's work.
- W.Z. How much do you know about the Western feminist movement?
- Z.L. Very little. I don't quite agree with the term, feminism.⁸
- W.Z. What is your definition of feminism?
- Z.L. I don't think anybody can do without society or politics. To divide human beings by gender and to focus on women seems to me quite radical. But I've never seen anything written about a definition of feminism.
- W.Z. So where did your concept come from?
- Z.L. I have the impression that feminism wants to place women at the center. In Chinese families it is not likely that two people who are a couple will both be very strong and will both want to develop a career. Usually one does and the woman is usually the one who sacrifices herself for the man. Men sometimes sacrifice for women, though it is not that common in our society. As for me, I would definitely refuse to sacrifice for a man even if he asked me to. I don't know if this is feminism or not. Of course, looking around it seems there is no one who wants to sacrifice for me, either. To grow people need fertilizer. But I don't want to be that fertilizer and I don't think that women ought to be the fertilizer for others. I saw women in my childhood who spent morning till night doing

⁸ *Nüquan zhuyi.*

housework. It scared me to death. That's a horrible life to live. I'd rather work in the country than stay at home. If I took the normal route in life, marriage, babies, I'd never be able to write a thing.

Z.Y. If you stayed home to write, what would the man do? Probably you'd either fight like mad or get a divorce.

Z.L. My luck isn't too good. It takes me ten times the effort to get one achievement. Li Ziyun recently commented on my new novel that 'Zhu Lin has made a breakthrough with this novel; it has a feminist spirit.' I don't know about that.

W.Z. Feminism emphasizes human rights for women.

Z.L. I haven't paid much attention to Western feminism.

Z.Y. But you unconsciously expressed it in your work. You wrote lots of stories about women in rural areas who don't have any human rights.

Z.L. Sure. The situation is really serious in the rural areas. In the villages, say, if a young man is recruited into military service, they feel they must get a match for him, a girlfriend [before he leaves]. The girlfriend is not allowed to change her mind. If she wants to marry somebody else, then she committed a crime, violating military marriage. Lots of young women have committed suicide because of marriage problems.

W.Z. If you were to meet a Western woman writer, what would you like to know about her?

Z.L. About her life. What she is thinking. What impulse drives her to write.

W.Z. What impulse drives you to write?

Z.L. Feelings from life. I want to cry out for women, let people know what women's situation and experience are like.

Z.Y. Not just women. Chinese men and Chinese women are both bound by the yoke of Chinese traditional culture, but women are tied more tightly. Two of my college classmates got married. Now the man is an editor and the woman the chair of a provincial Women's Federation. But at home the woman's status is very low. She cooks all the meals but is not allowed to eat with her husband and his guests at the table. Both have college educations.

Letter from Zhu Lin

1. Short autobiography of Zhu Lin

Zhu Lin, female, native place Wuxin county in Zhejiang province. Born in Shanghai in 1949. 1956 to 1962 attended elementary school. 1962 to 1968 attended high school. Graduate 1968. 1969-1974 resided in Fengyang county, Anhui province. In 1974 she returned to Shanghai. In 1975 transferred to Shanghai Children's Publishing House as an editor. In 1978 published a collection of children's stories. 1979 published the novel *Route of Life* describing the lives of educated youth in the countryside. In 1980 attended the first literary study program in Beijing after the Cultural Revolution. Finished the study at the end of 1980 and went to Jiading county in Shanghai suburbs, where she has lived ever since. During this period she has published five novels and four collections of short stories. All the works were set in the rural south and depict generation after generation of people experiencing cruel political and psychological oppression by powerful feudalism and traditional culture. Intends to explore the road of Chinese mental regeneration and emancipation. These works are particularly concerned with the many emotional wounds and the mental bondage Chinese women experience and with their future fate.

2. My view of the women's problem

I have not had the opportunity to learn about the history and current situation of international feminism. Out of personal travail and my observation of reality, I have become very much concerned with Chinese women's experience and fate.

I was born into a family environment devoid of parental love. Four months after my birth my parents were divorced and I lived with my old grandma after that. Poverty and loneliness were engraved deeply in my heart and shaped my introverted, melancholy personality. I became reticent and inarticulate. During the Cultural Revolution I was sent to one of China's poorest regions, Fengyang county of Anhui province. I worked there for six years and during that time my grandma, my only relative in the world, died. I then returned to the city, as per the policy of the time. Lacking powerful relatives and friends to rely on, I had no hope of going to college and could not find a job. Dragging my horribly fatigued body, striving hard with my fate, I walked the literary road. This road, though, is full of thistles and thorns and has been drenched with my blood and tears. As I have no political or economic support, because I wanted to reach my goal through individual struggle, because I am a very weak woman, I fell subject to endless political persecution, bullying and humiliation by the work-unit power networks. And to continuous jealousy, repression, exclusion and attack by my colleagues and from people in literary circles. At the same

time I bore the slander, libel and insult that inevitably falls on a woman who tries to stand out from others and get to the top of the literary field. As I faced this political and cultural oppression I felt at once perplexed, disappointed; I wavered. I even thought of suicide. How keenly I felt the difficulties ordinary women in China, without power but with self-respect and ideals, feel when they try to pursue goals in life and achieve things in their careers.

Over the course of my long stay in the country I met women of many different stations and I witnessed the spiritual burdens and hardships Chinese women experience in life. Thus, most of my work consciously or unconsciously depicts this situation. My novel, the *Route of Life*, tells a sad story about the educated young woman, Juanjuan; *Kulian shu* [Chinaberry tree] depicts a tragic fate that generations of rural women have been unable to wipe out; the short story *Wang* [Network] shows how feudal fascism in contemporary society has trampled women in the name of communism; the newly completed novel *Female-Human Beings* consciously describes how Chinese women explore our own fate and consider the nation's future.

I strongly desire social transformations that will change the unfortunate lives of Chinese women. I also want, using my pen, to arouse the quest for independence and self-reliance among Chinese women. (This is a very important issue. I think that at present most Chinese women, including some intellectual women, have not yet realized the necessity of an independent identity.) I hope Chinese women [will learn] to live independently in the world as really whole beings so that they may keep up with international culture and civilization and the contemporary feminist movement.

The above are some of my thoughts. If you are interested further, I will provide you with related material.

Zhu Lin

INTERVIEW WITH DAI QING, October 11, 1988

- W.Z. You wrote *A Series of Chinese Females*, which attracted a lot of public attention. How did you get interested in the state of women?
- D.Q. To tell you the truth, I wasn't that interested at first. Others settled on the topic and assigned it to me. I agreed to write on it because I'd had a vague notion that the state of women represented the state of the nation as a whole. At that time my notion was based in instinct and I hadn't made any sort of research or investigation yet. But when I began working I felt my insight had been confirmed. You don't need flowery words. If you want to know how well this country is run all you have to do is look at the women at the bottom of society. Foreign Languages Press and Random House are bringing [a part of] this book out in English under the title *From the*

Bottom of the Well. The title comes from a women's freedom song. [singing] "The dry black well is thousands of feet deep and women are at its bottom."

W.Z. When did you begin writing *A Series of Chinese Females*?

D.Q. The end of last year. I took a co-author because I just didn't have the time. I have many other things to do at the same time as this project. So my co-author and I have divided the work. She always seems to finish her part on time while I always lag behind. My job is to write the prologue to each piece. It's only a few thousand words but I had to read a lot before I started writing. Originally we planned this to be part of a big series and it may take five or ten years to finish [in our original concept]; it's really a pity we don't have time to work on it. So in the end I just decided to publish one volume of six stories. Originally we wrote it for Random House to publish in English. But editors of several periodicals in China pressed me so hard that I had to take these drafts out of my drawer and give them over. The English version will consist of a set divided into three categories. The first is women in different occupations, including traditional professions such as teacher, actress, athlete, cosmetician and so on, and nontraditional occupations like geologist, engineer, truck driver and so on. The second category is married women, including the wife whose husband has a lover, the wife married to a handicapped husband, the divorced woman, the woman who is a married man's lover and so on. The third is special-case women, including prostitutes, women with bound feet, raped women, nuns, female Catholics, and so on.

W.Z. Have you finished them all?

D.Q. Some, but not all. I'm going to continue with the work. Each story has its own object and I've divided each in three. First I introduce the historical and social background in such a way as to explain why this kind of woman has come to exist in China. In the second part I, as the author, describe the woman who is being interviewed. The third part is the woman's own story in her own words. I think the first part is the most important, but the English editor cut it; I don't think they grasp the value of the introduction. When the Chinese version came out readers felt that the introduction was the best part of it and that the book would be nothing but pop literature without it; the addition made the volume very serious in a literary sense. The English-language editor just thought it would be too long.

- W.Z. I think the first section is important, too. It would have helped situate the foreign reader to the stories' backgrounds.
- D.Q. Sure. The editor said they were too difficult to translate and they would have to provide informational notes on every other line because I often twist the meaning of words, and that would make it very hard for foreign readers to grasp.
- W.Z. You mentioned that you read a lot of things in order to write the introductions. Did that include any Western feminist books?
- D.Q. No, almost none. If it is germane to what I am writing I would certainly read it. But I almost never see such books since there are so few of them available in translation. There are no readers for them. To the Chinese mind, feminism conjures up the image of a female tiger. [laughs]
- W.Z. I've seen translations of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in the bookstalls. How are people responding to it?
- D.Q. What readers see is sex not feminism. [laughs] My feeling is that Chinese are quite ignorant about things going on in Western post-industrial societies, things like homosexuality and feminism. Right now we are preparing a set of books for juvenile readers that introduce histories and societies of the developed countries since modern times. I hope one day you will write for us, too. We include stories about Moses' offspring, the Jews, a cultural study of AIDs, international drug smuggling. Also I want to introduce the Greens, but I haven't come across a suitable book yet.
- W.Z. Are you aware of Chinese intellectual women's response to Western feminism?
- D.Q. Yes. It's very cold. Almost no response at all. That's because the trend in China today is just the reverse of what it is in the West. That is to say, China faces the question of whether women should return to the home rather than the question of how to leave the home. Western feminism occurred with the development of productive forces, as a natural process. Of course, as productive forces advance and people no longer have to rely on brute strength and can use their brains, then two things are true; women can afford to stay home to do housework and they can take on employment, have the opportunity for wage labor and economic independence. All kinds of political requests came about for this reason. It occurred quite naturally. In China the situation was quite different. After seizure of political power, the government gave sexual equality to women. Even though the productive forces did not

really allow it, it had to be done that way. We call it “high employment and low salary.” The whole thing has proved a terrible drag on Chinese productivity. And when productivity lags, women end up in an even worse situation. Chinese women today should not request individual employment per se but should consider how they can make their contribution to modernization and the development of productivity. In some rapidly developing rural areas, like Daqiu Village, the women have all gone home. So Chinese women have no reason to be interested in feminism abroad.

- W.Z. Workers and farmers, it's true, are not so aware of the overseas situation. What about intellectual women and feminism?
- D.Q. Even when they are knowledgeable, it's not a hot topic except for a few specialists. It is because the topic is quite remote from what concerns Chinese women and the things that affect their lives.
- W.Z. Do you know of anyone studying feminism?
- D.Q. I guess there are a few people, like those who study Chinese women. Li Xiaojiang is one, and there are some people in the Women's Federation who study foreign affairs. Once a European woman came over from the journal *International Women's Literature* and brought a periodical with her. When we opened it we saw the first two lines—How many books haven't you read? How many men haven't you slept with?—and we just burst out laughing. It showed us how distant their lives were from the lives of Chinese women.
- W.Z. How did you learn about feminism?
- D.Q. I'm not really interested in feminism. I'm ignorant about the world situation, but I do feel that feminism is not the force to push China forward. Nonetheless, the condition of women is the condition of the country at large. The condition of women is a sensitive point, a barometer. If you want to know how wealthy a country is, how civilized or educated it is, just look at the women. Yet, pushing China forward is not dependent on the women's movement. It is an important factor, but generally I think that what the Women's Federation has done since Liberation has had serious negative effects.
- W.Z. What are these negative effects?

D.Q. They worsen the situation because their ideas are so wrong. For instance, they supported the contemporary “Qin Xianglians.”⁹ The old marriage law stipulated that if one party refused the divorce then the couple could not be divorced. The law was changed in the 1980s. Now if one party insists, the dissolution will be granted. The Women’s Federation has opposed this new stipulation. At the national conference of the Women’s Federation this year a bill was proposed firmly opposing this stipulation. The Federation women said, ‘Oh, these poor women. They did everything for their husbands,’ and used the analogy of Qin Xianglian and Chen Shimei. I wrote an amendment to the effect that if it was simply a matter of finances the husband could be severely punished monetarily to the point where he had to support her for the rest of her life, but that the marital relationship should be ended. My view was rejected. They mixed everything together—financial, moral, and so on.

W.Z. So what is the divorce situation now?

D.Q. There is still a variety of local policies; in Heilongjiang and Shanghai the court punishes the “third party,” for instance. If there is a “third party” involved in the marriage, the court refuses to grant the dissolution. It’s ridiculous. Often people want to divorce because they have a lover. [laughs] So those who have lovers have to keep the affair a top secret.

W.Z. Doesn’t the Marriage Law say the marriage can be dissolved when the people no longer love each other?

D.Q. Sure, but that’s not the reality. You can petition the court but the court returns your petition. Then you have to wait six months and start all over again. Sometimes it can last for five to eight years. It’s hell.

W.Z. I recently read one of your pieces concerned with bigamy and it made the difficulty of divorce very clear.

D.Q. The bigamists I wrote about are rural women. They live far from civilized society and far from the possibility that urban intellectual women would like to have of divorce on demand. These women were sold like animals.

W.Z. What view did the Women’s Federation hold on divorce in this case?

⁹ Qin Xianliang, who, with her husband Chen Shimei, have come to represent the modern woman who refuses a husband’s request for divorce and a husband who requests divorce in order to marry another woman, respectively.

- D.Q. They just protect the woman in case men abandon the wife.
- W.Z. What about when women want the divorce?
- D.Q. They don't interfere with that. Sometimes they seem to think that the woman who requests the divorce is immoral and has a lover. They have a lot of outdated notions. My views are quite different from theirs on most things.
- W.Z. Have you read any contemporary Western novels?
- D.Q. Very few. Fewer than almost anything else, actually.
- W.Z. But have you noticed how preoccupied Westerners are with sex in their novels?
- D.Q. Yes. Sex remains a taboo subject in China. My *Xing kaifang nüzi* [Woman of open sex] is considered heretical.¹⁰
- W.Z. Why did you write it?
- D.Q. Because I think it is a serious phenomenon. We can already see it.
- W.Z. So when you wrote [about a married woman who has a lover] it was from your observation of reality, not from an idea?
- D.Q. Certainly it is based in reality. But it is also fused with ideas. Firstly, I think it is ridiculous for Chinese people to avoid talking about sex. In reality the situation is that at the bottom of society there is sexual repression and at the top sexual indulgence. That's unfair. It's an important part of injustice and inequality in China right now. Secondly, it just is no longer possible for the authorities to maintain sexual repression as they did before the GPCR. When people don't have much sexual knowledge, including biology and psychology, they aren't psychologically prepared; that this is a reality in our country is very obvious. And very bad. The paucity of basic knowledge about sex hygiene has caused an epidemic of venereal disease, while the lack of psychological knowledge has caused the infliction of damage mentally, too. It's impossible to estimate how severe this damage has been, since we have no social outlet or place to discuss the problem. How do you know when people are emotionally hurt? Lots of things are absolutely necessary and yet we still do not possess them! In *Open Sex* I didn't just talk about my own views but rather told the story objectively. I meant to tell readers that such people exist. Actually I think the young girl in the story is pathetic. But after the story was published it aroused a

¹⁰ *Shouhuo* No. 2, 1988.

tremendous controversy and response. There were two sharply opposite responses, actually. One reader wrote to say that she was so moved she couldn't sleep; I guess she probably had been unfairly punished for her sexual activities. She wanted to establish a regular correspondence with me. Most of the letters, however, reviled me.

W.Z. In what way?

D.Q. They say I am obscene.

W.Z. What kind of people say so?

D.Q. Cadres.

W.Z. Male?

D.Q. No, actually most of them female. Recently someone told me about a really gross example that just came into our editorial department. After reading a reader's letter criticizing my story the chief editor wrote on it that it should be passed around to all editors so that everybody could see how I am getting cursed out. [laughing] I don't care. I told my colleagues that being reviled or not is not the issue here and getting chewed out is not by definition such a bad thing. What I find significant is what they are cursing about. I think that over the next five or ten years there will be two major issues preoccupying Chinese social life. The first will be de-Maoification. This the people will carry out through a process of ongoing discussion and historical self-examination in which the historical truth is revealed. The other will be the issue of sex. I anticipate a great conflict and tremendous discussion and a transformation of people's behaviors and attitudes.

W.Z. Do you think the conflict will take place between the generations or between men and women?

D.Q. Not between men and women. Certainly between the old and new generations.

W.Z. Are the readers who write in saying they like your work men or women?

D.Q. It is difficult to judge by their names. I have many readers, both male and female. My recent book, *Interviews with Scholars*, has provoked more response from male readers. Men seem to prefer academic discussion and women the sentimental or romantic stories. These days I deliberately eradicate the romantic elements in my work. If I fail to do so I consider that I've failed. I even want

to purge them in a subjective sense. Even when I write about women I do so without any romanticizing sentiment whatsoever.

W.Z. Did you write *A Series of Chinese Females* from a female perspective?

D.Q. No, and actually Li Xiaojiang, who studies women, criticized me for this. I have always sought to reach beyond gender. The people I have the most contempt for are the cadres of the Women's Federation. I really feel that the only people who work in the Federation are those who can do nothing else. [laughs] The situation in China is this: I think that if a woman wants to do anything she must forget about her own gender. Li Xiaojiang has said that I suppressed my female sense and that was a loss. Maybe she was right. Once I wrote a story called *My Little Crooked Poplar*, in which I described the relationship between a mother and her handicapped son. Were I to go on in this vein, I suppose that I might be able to write sentimental stories, and many female writers are really good at writing stories about subtle emotions. But I am interested in social problems now. I don't like being considered a strong woman, to be sure. And Li Xiaojiang has convinced me that females should keep their own characteristics. I don't think my colleagues would say that working with me is the same as working with a man. But often I am the only female in a group of men and we manage to get along with each other quite well.

W.Z. When did you start writing?

D.Q. After 1979. I graduated from Harbin Military Institute and majored in missile launching. I liked reading literature. My first story was called *Longing*.

W.Z. In *Longing* you told a very touching story about a couple who lived apart for a long time. Was this a personal experience?

D.Q. No. The story had nothing to do with me. Some female writers can only write about themselves. I'm not that kind of writer. On the contrary, I put a lot of energy into camouflaging myself.

W.Z. Where does your husband work?

D.Q. Here at the same newspaper. He does managerial work.

W.Z. Have you any children?

D.Q. One daughter. She's a junior at Beijing University majoring in Chinese history. She often recommends books to me and is both a good friend and a good helper.

- W.Z. As a female writer and reporter, mother and wife, do you experience any conflict between your career and your family?
- D.Q. Yes. This morning I said to my daughter: "The great pity in our family is that we have two fathers and no mother." [laughs] Fortunately my daughter has grown up and is quite a help now. She washes the dishes and does the food shopping. I haven't washed dishes in three days. [laughs]
- W.Z. Does your husband do housework?
- D.Q. Absolutely nothing. One leg of my chair is broken now and he hasn't fixed it yet. I told him that if he didn't do anything about it, I may fall down and die because of that chair. [laughs] Nobody does housework in our family and everything is very simple.
- W.Z. When your daughter was a baby, who did the housework?
- D.Q. That was during the Cultural Revolution. Our whole family was sent to the countryside, so I had to send my child to stay in a stranger's home in Beijing. It cost me forty-five yuan a month from my salary of fifty-six. For three years I was prohibited from going to Beijing and thus could not see my child. She had ear infections but people didn't dare tell me about it. When I finally saw her, she was already three years and six months old. She was pitiful. Other children learn to walk by toddling from mother to father, the parents holding the baby's hands. But my child had no one to hold her. The family that cared for her had eight children; their youngest child, who was only six at the time, took care of my daughter. Then, whenever I got a letter from them I would just cry my heart out. I haven't written about this period of my experience. I will in the future.
- W.Z. What writer do you like most? Have you been influenced by this writer?
- D.Q. Lu Xun. That's because in my juvenile years and particularly during the Cultural Revolution nothing else was available and I had to read and reread Lu Xun. So I became a Lu Xun scholar. I actually published an article on Lu Xun that some scholars think is very good.
- W.Z. Who is your favorite female writer?
- D.Q. The American novelist [Joyce Carol] Oates. I like her novel *Sad Song of the Coffee House*.
- W.Z. What about Chinese women writers?

D.Q. I like Zhang Ailing [Eileen Chang], a female writers of the 1930s. You could compare Zhang Ailing's work to that of Chen Naishan. Zhang was a real young mistress of her bourgeois family, but she grasped the true nature of her social group and was thoroughly fed up with it; Chen, of course, wants to be a young mistress, but finds that she cannot realize her dream. [laughs]

W.Z. Do you have close contact with other Chinese women writers?

D.Q. The close friends I have are normal compared with other female writers. Zong Pu and Fen Xiaoyu are friends. Some of the female writers are difficult to get along with; people like Zhang Jie and Zhang Xinxin, whom even male writers try to avoid.

W.Z. Why?

D.Q. They're too self-centered. That includes Dai Houying. You have always got to coax and praise them. It's tiresome. Once or twice I don't mind, but it's tedious to have to go on doing it all the time. For instance, I sympathized with Dai Houying a lot at first. At one conference we were allowed to choose our roommates and I chose Dai. But after talking for half an hour we decided to maintain a distance and we've been very polite to each other ever since. She delivered half an hour's lesson to me on the Marxist theory of literature the very first time we met! [laughs] Later when the authorities treated her badly, she wrote me constantly asking me to find connections in Beijing who could help her out. I did what she asked me to do but we could never become friends. I feel she is too much for me to handle. I don't have many friends among the female writers but I do count as friends some female scholars like Li Qingfan and Li Xiaojiang. I interviewed them both. And Wang Rongfen, classed a political criminal at one time, now a sociologist studying Max Weber. There aren't many female scholars, though, fewer and fewer these days. At academic conferences you often see very good young men. But I've only met one young female scholar, Li Xiaojiang. I'm extremely glad to have met her.

W.Z. Do you have this feeling recently that women are tending to hang back?

D.Q. It's because men have advanced so fast. Nowadays in China there are plenty of opportunities for men to exert their potential.

W.Z. Why not women, then?

D.Q. I think it has something to do with learning ability. You may not agree with me, but I think that God made females' biological

structure different from males; women give birth to babies and breast-feed them, so their brain structure must be different, too. [laughs] Women have to bear more important responsibilities in life.

W.Z. Then how do you explain yourself?

D.Q. As for myself, I have an idea. I was a science student so I want to use a coordinate to illustrate my point. It's called the normal curve. On this coordinate, the highest female intelligence is equal to the highest male intelligence but the number of each group is different. There are simply more highly intelligent men than women. Certainly the coordinate has a temporal line as well, so it is possible that in some eras and at some levels of productivity women's highest intelligence will not be fully exerted. At least that is my theory. [laughs] In Nature there are many things that have such normal curves, such as human weight. Fewer people are extremely fat or thin. Most are in the middle. There are fewer very bright and very stupid people, too. Male and female curves will never be the same, though. I think feminists will be strongly opposed to my theory. [laughs]

W.Z. Feminists would say that there is actually almost no difference in intelligence. Rather a lot of standards in the world have been decided on by men and that men have used their standards to evaluate women. Certainly this disadvantages women who cannot accord to male standards.

D.Q. I can argue that Nature has made human beings this way for millions of years. Human civilization has existed for only a few thousand. Civilization is not long enough yet to change Nature and human biology is not irrational. I think that we can say with assurance only that we do not understand the reasons yet.

W.Z. Some feminists deny sexual difference while others admit it. But difference does not necessarily imply superior or inferior.

D.Q. Almost all the highest representatives of human civilization—philosophers, mathematicians—are men, though. It's been so long: it's been thousands of years. I want to write an essay on this. I absolutely disagree with sexual equality. Men and women are different; they are born different and cannot be equal. We can only allow equal rights when the specific area is clear. As the civilization and culture change the content of equal rights should differ.

W.Z. In the United States, if women want equal rights they have to deny sexual difference. Not long ago there was a major law suit over

women's maternity leave. Some men said that giving women maternity leave was discrimination against men. Equal rights meant treating everyone exactly the same.

D.Q. That's ridiculous. Men have an instant of pleasure but women get stuck with a nine-month pregnancy, and so women should be compensated.

W.Z. American feminists are faced with this dilemma. If you want to emphasize equal rights then you cannot admit sexual difference. If you emphasize sexual difference it can always be used as grounds for discriminatory practices and preventing women from having equal pay or equal employment opportunities.

D.Q. I think that American society is in a transitional phase. Of course, when China solved this problem by fiat then productivity decreased. Chinese productive relations cannot afford to pay for women's maternity leaves. China is just not qualified to extend [maternity leaves to all]. And women end up having to suffer more at this low level of productivity. Looking back, we know that women in primitive society did all sorts of things wrapped in nothing but leaves. And look at women in places like Huian county, Guangdong province, who have to do everything. We enjoy fifty-six days of maternity leave now. That's all Chinese women enjoy. If you raised the leave prematurely productivity would suffer. Women don't like to hear this. They say: hey, we want to live a good life and you're a woman, too, so how come you don't understand the situation. But this is the cruel reality. When [Chinese] society is more advanced women should have welfare. I have a feeling the United States is at this stage right now.

W.Z. What's your general view of Chinese women today?

D.Q. China's productivity has been static for so many years. This is the reality and it forces women to think: what should we do? Certainly what women can do is not a question that can be answered by individual women but that has to be decided by the whole society. However, we advocate individuality now and we do think that every person needs to think [for herself]. Consideration should not simply be from individual need, things like "I should not be fired." We need theoretical workers to dispel this leftist and unenlightened notion in order to set women free. Then women can find new ways for themselves. These days the Women's Federation is helping women who've been fired and unemployed women to find new jobs. I approve of this. I want to start a periodical called *Housekeeper*. This makes people feel funny when they hear it. But

I really think that we need to instill rationality, rational patterns of life and modern concepts into housekeepers because they are more important than anyone else. I believe that a country that wishes to change, to carry out something like birth control, for instance, must begin by educating young girls. When girls are educated they will know what to do. I knew, and I have only one child. In those days I could have had three children, but did not want to. Moreover, I already know how to educate children and what sort of family life we must have, and so on and so on. These are all problems that can be solved. The education of young girls is extremely important. Some notions we used to have are obsolete now. They seem to be there to benefit women but actually it is women who are hurt by them. I came to these views because of Li Xiaojiang. She enlightened me. [laughs] Before I met her I'd never thought about women's questions and I wanted to forget I was a woman.

W.Z. Why when we mention the family do we always think of women? What is the man's place in the home?

D.Q. That can't be separated from history. Again, I'd put it this way: God made human beings this way, and women just like to keep house. If a married couple want to reverse things and the man wants to stay at home, that's fine, too, since this is something people should decide for themselves. Of course custom dictates a lot, and many women want to stay home these days. And if, after women return home, they are bored and want out they are free to do so. I think these decisions should take place in a relaxed and free atmosphere. The major problem now is that housework is so heavy, so boring and so dull that it cannot be called a pleasure.

W.Z. Do you ever feel sad because you are a woman and a writer?

D.Q. No. Why should I? I feel happy because there are lots of things I cannot express even to my husband or relatives but can put into my work. I can express myself fully and freely through my work. Of course, if you want to write about sex you have to be cautious and keep something back. [laughs] But that is because of cowardice in our hearts, not because of the social environment. If you are a woman who has the identity of a writer many people are waiting to read your stories; you can communicate directly with readers about what you have thought and what you have felt. This is a wonderful thing. It does not make me feel unhappy, ever.

W.Z. Some female writers have felt upset and suffered because their writing on sex has caused gossip.

- D.Q. The people who gossip are wrong. Their gossip does not change the fact that you are always yourself. I don't care about such things. Remember my mentioning that the chief editor passed the negative letter around to all the other editors? I really don't care. Do whatever you want. You can expel me from the Party and that suits me just fine. Of course, I don't violate the law, and we differ only on matters of opinion. We can debate in the newspaper. Would you dare debate with me? Well, I don't care. If we are quite confident about our own behavior then we have nothing to fear from what others say about us.
- W.Z. Do you distinguish male from female Chinese writers?
- D.Q. Once I wrote an article on Chinese women writers in which I divided them into two categories. One writes with instinct, about themselves, like Zhang Jie. When they write about themselves their writing is gorgeous and their work attractive and sincere. Others, like me, try to hide themselves as male writers do. Why don't we find these two categories among male writers? Again, I think it is a matter of learning ability or intellect. To be a writer of the social type [like me] you need to read a lot and really understand society. If you are the little mistress type and all you want is to be comfy and sit in front of your vanity table with your pen, it's much easier. Just write out all your daydreams. I think many female writers limit themselves because they don't like learning. Certainly their work has markets, too. Actually lots of people want to find that kind of little corner to pleasure themselves or seek solace. Such work will mold people's personalities, as the other kind does, but it will never have a great impact.
- W.Z. If you had the chance to interview an American woman writer, what would you ask?
- D.Q. [pausing] Were you to ask this question to an ordinary person you would get an easy answer. But I'm a reporter. When you ask me this question I automatically think: Who is this person I'm interviewing? What has she written? Perhaps I'd want to know how she produced her work. I'd have to do research first. See how I've failed to answer your question today. [laughs]
- W.Z. Well, just thinking of yourself as Dai Qing and not a reporter, what would you like to know about Western women writers?
- D.Q. I'm not that interested in them. I went to Australia once for five weeks. I was part of a Chinese women's studies group, and we stayed in several homes. I met different people, among them a woman writer. Australian women's lives are quite different from

ours. And their status as writers is different from ours. They have a real sense of mission when they write, but primarily they see it as a hobby rather than as a source of income. They write seriously and they do exert individuality to express the self. I, on the other hand, think of my responsibility as primarily social. If you let me choose, I'd go to a nursery and write about three-year-olds because I adore children. But that just won't do. I recall that the case of Chu Anping hasn't been raised by anyone yet.¹¹ The Trotskyist case hasn't been mentioned yet, either, and so on and so on. I write from a sense of mission, so I feel I am quite different from them. I could say that my conditions are not as good as theirs or that theirs are inferior to mine; since their lives are so simple all they have to write about are their interior feelings. We, on the other hand, confront so many problems—the danger of being sent to prison, the need to fight against powerful authorities, and all the other serious problems. But this is pleasure. When I sit with Western female writers I sense that we have little to communicate. I would have no interest in them at all unless I regarded them as the subject of my research.

W.Z. What do you think of the issues raised by gender?

D.Q. I seek harmony. Nature is set this way already. People don't have the power to change it, so we should treat it with awe and try to maintain harmony. In China today gender conflict is not so serious. Other conflicts are far more severe. Chinese women are constituted of different groups. Divorced women are in a real predicament and women at the lower rungs of the social system are too sexually repressed. However, this is not a sexual issue, really, but an issue of poverty. Intellectual women like us are fortunate indeed. We feel no repression, and so for us there is no sexual oppression.

W.Z. Your articles are often sharp and daring. Why are you so daring?

D.Q. I have nothing to lose. I'm just a reporter. I have no other titles.

W.Z. What about your Party membership?

D.Q. They can expel me if they like. When Liu Binyan was expelled I actually considered quitting. When a Party member like Liu is expelled, what's the point in staying on? But because I did not want to make a scene I stayed on. Well, the cadres in our Party branch treat me well.

¹¹Labeled a Rightist in 1957. Dai Qing is trying to raise this injustice to urge the government into rehabilitating Chu.

W.Z. What is your current writing project?

D.Q. I am editing a set of books on the Cultural Revolution and a set of readings for juveniles.

GLOSSARY

Chen Shimei	陳世美
Chen Yu-shih	陳幼石
Cheng Naishan	程乃珊
Chu Anping	褚安平
Dai Houying	戴厚英
Dai Qing	戴晴
“Fang zhou”	“方舟”
“Huang shan zhi lian”	“荒山之戀”
“Jinxiu gu zhi lian”	“錦綉谷之戀”
jingjie	境界
<i>Kulian shu</i>	《苦楝樹》
Li Ziyun	李子雲
Liang Xiaosheng	梁曉聲
Liu Binyan	劉賓雁
Meng Weizai	孟偉哉
<i>Nanren de yiban shi nüren</i>	《男人的一半是女人》
nüquan zhuyi	女權主義
<i>Nü xing—ren</i>	《女性一人》
Pan Jinlian	潘金蓮
qizhi	氣質
Qin Xianglian	秦香蓮
quwei	趣味
Shen Rong	諾容
shenmei jiazhi	申美價值
<i>Sheng huo de lu</i>	《生活的路》
Shi Tiecheng	史鐵城

“Wang”

Wang Anyi

“Xiao cheng zhi lian”

Xiao Hong

Xiaoshuo jie

“Xing kaifang nüzi”

Xue cheng

Zhang Ailing [Eileen Chang]

Zhang Jie

Zhang Xianliang

Zhao Yuanzhen

Zhu Lin

zhuti xing

“網”

王安憶

“小城之戀”

蕭紅

《小說界》

“性開放女子”

《雪城》

張愛玲

張潔

張賢亮

趙元真

竹林

主體性