

On the Decipherment of Modern China and Spurned Lovers: Zhai Yongming's *Most Tactful Phrases*

—一条鱼和另一条鱼的玄机无人知道

[No one knows the secret catch between one fish and another.]

—翟永明, 鱼玄机赋 Zhai Yongming, “Ode to Yu Xuanji” (2009)¹

Long regarded as the contemporary Chinese feminist poet par excellence, Zhai Yongming has recently published a collection of poems and essays that centers around the secret catch between two very slippery concepts: womanhood and modern China. Construing political epiphany as gendered subtleties, 最委婉的词 (*The Most Tactful Phrase[s]*) uses feminized poetic practices to engender alternative historicisms and perspectives on Chinese transnationalism.² Chinese women’s poetry is apotheosized into the thing through which relations between Chinese linguistics, historiography, media, and constructions of national and global essence become fully apprehensible. Focusing on the dialogism in *The Most Tactful Phrases*, this essay shows new configurations between twenty-first-century global “sinological” work from the Chinese literary world and the ongoing project of feminist recovery and revivification.

Celebrated as the face of the revival of Chinese women’s poetry, Zhai has given us in *The Most Tactful Phrases* a collection of writings that departs subtly but resolutely from earlier works like *Woman, Plain Songs in the Dark Night*, and *The Changing Room*. As hinted by the title, *The Most Tactful Phrases* no longer approaches feminism through images such as ambivalence, trauma, and voicelessness, having moved feminism beyond the mode of apologia and thematics and into the position of a rhetorical and intellectual posture—of tact or the art of being roundabout. In her foreword to Zhai’s *The Changing Room*, her preeminent English translator,

¹ All translations in this essay are mine unless otherwise indicated. I have kept interviews that Andrea Lingenfelter conducted with Zhai Yongming in Lingenfelter’s own words.

² I am making an intervention in the translation of the title of this volume, which is officially translated as “Zhai Yongming poetry record: The most euphemistic/tactful words” (see the edition issued by Dongfang Chubanshe [Zhai 2009]). A literal translation of 最委婉的词 is “The most euphemistic word”; however, “euphemistic” loses the valence of subtlety—and especially feminine subtlety—that 委婉 carries, and “word” has no exact equivalent in Chinese. Noun-phrase(s) is the closest match. Moreover, “ci 词” also denotes “verses,” such as those in poetry and songs. These additional meanings are crucial to any reading of this text.

Andrea Lingenfelter, notes that “Zhai has not abandoned her identity as a feminist . . . [she] reject[s] the ‘taboo’ against feminism (*nǚxìngzhuyì* 女性主义) in contemporary China and ha[s] no difficulty calling herself a feminist” (Lingenfelter 2011, xiv). In order to parse the ongoing nature of Zhai’s feminism, we need to look at her total embrace of feminism as a critical tool. For the Chinese critic Deng Wenhua, Zhai’s goal was never to demand women’s rights or to dismantle the patriarchal system, as earlier misreadings suggest. Deng argues that Zhai’s poems instead claim the ontological category of gender by recreating its experiential strangeness in verse (2005, 47). This assessment of Zhai’s poetic style is later obliquely corroborated by Zhang Guangxin’s (2010) interpretation of Zhai’s frequent use of “false moves” (假动作) as the construction of worlds commensurate with the subtlety of the female experience (11). Both critics would place Zhai in a larger depoliticizing movement in contemporary Chinese women’s poetry as recently theorized—if somewhat schematically—by Wu Shihong (2009). Going “from ‘radical’ to ‘placid,’” contemporary women poets, Wu asserts, have abandoned the polemical, rights-oriented rhetoric of twentieth-century poetry in favor of the freedom to aesthetically express “gender subjectivity” (2009, 95) and its unsettling ontologies.

To build on Deng, Zhang, and Wu’s work while also rejecting their dialectics, I want to argue that for Zhai, gender subjectivity works as a privileged mode of intellection—a special type of knowing that feminist academics call intersectional. *The Most Tactful Phrases* employs the bellistristic aspects of traditional Chinese female poetics as enticements to deconstructive readings of history, language, media, and related cultural phenomena. As intersectional knowledge, Chinese feminism helps us navigate vignettes that are neither completely feminist nor completely transnationalist: a Sichuan Opera adaptation of *Lady Macbeth*, a gendered and embodied imagination of what it might mean to be a model in Gunther von Hagen’s controversial *Body Worlds* exhibit. Zhai no longer writes *about* Chinese feminism, nor does she lyricize it through the confessional or through conventions of “psycho-sexual and sociocultural self-awareness” (Lingenfelter 2011, xiii). Rather, *pace* Shira Wolosky’s definition of engendered poetics as “a discourse of discourses” (2010, 573), feminism for Zhai has become the most tactful, powerful language, which tantalizingly, enigmatically surveys the complex terrains of modern China and global sinologies.³ Femi-

³ In her essay, “Relational Aesthetics and Feminist Poetics,” Wolosky argues that engendered poetics is interrelational and heteroglossic by its very nature since engendered poetics automatically “implicates psychology and history, politics and religion, anthropology and ideology” (2010, 573). She nominates engendered poetics as a “language space in which

nist poetics has become the point of departure rather than the cumulative effect or the end of assessment.

This essay is divided into two parts. Part one investigates Zhai's vision of the relationship between twenty-first-century Chinese feminist poetics and the deconstruction of modern China—not the deconstruction of its women's agendas but its deconstruction period. I examine how her poetry and poetics establish the unique suitability of tropes of feminist recognition—moments when we say, ah, so that is what a Chinese feminist poem ought to touch on—for laying bare a postsinological world. This is a world in which the politics of representing and studying “China” everywhere circulate and proliferate, one in which the “DNA of the Chinese language” (中国文字的DNA) morphs alongside gender and global technologies (Zhai 2009, 136), and in which ancient and contemporary Chinese histories are broadcasted through transnationally constituted mediascapes.⁴ The second part of this essay, focusing on two Sapphic figures whom Zhai hails from the Tang dynasty for a poem and an essay, respectively, unpacks Zhai's ambitious nomination of female poetic virtuosity as the terminus a quo of the next phase of China's poetic revival. I examine how Zhai trades in co-optable historical female personages so as to confront the reader with poetic virtuosity, a confrontation that collapses reading for female scandal and reading for linguistic revival. For Zhai, I will argue, the political potential of decipherment locked into feminist poetics is ultimately a question of art: not only “what does a transnationally constituted China look like to a female poet?” but “how can knowing it be pleasurable in ways for which we are already primed?”

In taking up *The Most Tactful Phrases*, the reader is first confronted with the odd referentiality of the volume's title. What is “the Most Tactful Phrase” alluded to here?⁵ We find the answer in the title poem, which leads us directly to a dictionary definition: the most tactful phrase is “regime change,” nominated by the American Dialect Association as the 2002 “Word of the Year” (Zhai 2009, n. 1, 28). Leading with Thomas Mann's prediction that “in our age, the fate of humankind will be expressed in terms of

different realms, positions, and their articulations are able to come into encounter and conflict, dialogue, confrontation, disputation, confirmation” (572).

⁴ All poems in this essay are cited using line numbers, sometimes with the additional notation of sections if we are working with a longer poem. All quotations from Zhai's essays are cited using page numbers.

⁵ In Chinese it is undeterminable whether 最委婉的词 is singular or plural, one noun phrase or multiple noun phrases—an ambiguity that Zhai preserves throughout the volume—hence the indeterminacy in this essay.

political jargon,” “The Most Tactful Phrase” ruminates on “regime change” and the way it masks violences perpetrated during transfers of power in love and war: “On account of [this] one phrase, the world and love / Cannot hold back their sobs” (世界和爱情 都因一个词 / 而痛哭不已) (lines 4–5). To catalog the full effects of the political euphemism “regime change,” the poem turns outward and inward, drawing on transnational and private sites of trauma. Its second stanza offers a Chinese update on Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” invoking the Euphrates and the Mississippi—bodies of water that metonymize American imperialism in Iraq and the legacy of slavery at home. These rivers run into the torrent that drowned Ophelia (淹死哦菲利亚的情欲之河) and the “red river” (a color that alludes to the Chinese Communist Party) that comes with calamities in one’s hometown (伴随家乡祸害的红色之河) (lines 9–10). As a euphemism that masks the collateral damage of power, “regime change” taps traumas both broad and deep. The second-to-last stanza makes its broad applicability visible by glossing “regime change” as the Sichuanese colloquialism “class dismissed” (下课) and the Chinese expression “finding a new love / moving on to someone else” (移情别恋) (lines 19–24). In one neat act of semantic stacking, “the most tactful phrase” catches in its crosshairs global trauma and private suffering, activating the conflation of political and private affect. Whitewashing occurs in both love and war, and the poems in the volume visit this equivalence over and over again, refracting it through the politics of translanguaging.

“The Most Tactful Phrase” is, then, a poem that teaches us how to read *The Most Tactful Phrases*. It is not only a collection of poems but a new-fangled dictionary of Chinese analogues of global vocabulary words (or neologisms). It studies the unstated power dynamics in terms with transnational histories and futures. But, in addition, according to the terms laid out in the title poem, “the most tactful phrase” also undergoes a semantic slide in this volume from political whitewashing to the female love complaint—that language of wanting to be better loved that is used by women who are left behind. This semantic slide accounts for why so many poems in the volume proceed not to expose prettified speech or political euphemisms but to study women who have lost their beauty/desirability/legibility under the romantic code. A collective womanhood in “The Language of (Those Born) in the Fifties” (五十年代的语言) speaks up for the interchangeability between the devolution of political language and failed, disappointed love. The Cultural Revolution slogans (口号) spoken by those born in the fifties are now only “one by one paraded out as jargons at banquets” (在晚宴上被一道一道地 / 端了上) (lines 4–5) and so “we no longer

speak this way, just as we no longer speak of love” (我们已不再说那些语言 / 正如我们也不再说“爱”) (lines 15–16). A whole set of language for political activism (symbolized by the red flag and pamphlets) will “never return again”; for a whole generation, love has been “chemically castrated likewise never return again” (而整整一代的爱情 已被阉割/也不再回来) (lines 12–13). In “The Language of the Fifties,” language battles come to a head literally between the sheets (“落在我们的床第之间”) (line 31). Elsewhere, the association between China’s shifting lingualisms and the female love complaint is less pronounced. But, in either case, the poems in *The Most Tactful Phrases* test that complaint’s ability to assimilate the politics of regime change and related linguistic/discursive overhauls; they solicit readers to use a traditionally belittled perspective—the scorned woman—to brave that kind of knowing. Therefore “the most tactful phrases” (最委婉的词) has two meanings. First, it names those circulating terms (such as “regime change”) whose political hypocrisies can be called out by Chinese feminist deconstruction. Second, it describes the genre of poetry—traditionally viewed as politically impotent—that can charm readers to take on that kind of deconstruction. “Euphemism of the Year” therefore sheds its cynicism and becomes a unique form of possibility.

Making good on this possibility, at the poetic level, is primarily a matter of staging. Poems in *The Most Tactful Phrases* interpolate seemingly unrelated pieces of cultural history into the foreground, making us more attentive to the alternative histories in engendered sinologies. “Gentlemen and Beasts” (绅士与野兽), a poem that alludes to art punk band ½ Gentlemen/Not Beasts and their song “I Love Oriental Girls,” acts precisely as such a history. Culminating in a world where McDonalds everywhere proliferate and Mulan has gone to Disney World, “Gentlemen and Beasts” tracks gender through empire with rapid-fire intercuts into the history of Chinese lingual and media modernity. It begins by staging three scenes of orientalized objectification of women, thus unpacking the allusion buried in the title. In the first scene, drawn from Meiji Japanese writer Nagai Kafu’s “American Stories,” an American or European man named Pierre addresses Kikuko and asks that she behave more like a Turkish or Persian woman. In the second scene, Prosper Mérimée tells his creation, Carmen, to act like a gypsy. In the third scene, the French artist Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres asks his “Grande Odalisque” to model herself after Scheherazade. With these three vignettes of orientalism and the male gaze in place, the poem pivots to China, resetting the stage with what Lydia Liu (2004) might call the semiotics of territorial sovereignty in the nineteenth century:

我讲的是爱新觉罗的年代	I am speaking of the time of Aisin Gioro (Qing ruling clan)
金戈铁马换成了浅吟低唱	Shallow moans and low songs have replaced golden axes and iron horses
那就是在两百多年以前	That was over two hundred years ago
异国均为蛮夷之地	“Foreign countries are on balance barbarian lands”
女皇帝当时骄傲地说	the female emperor said proudly at the time
大臣们也跟着这样说	And her ministers repeated after her.
华夏人 我们有自己的秩序观	The people of Hua Xia we have our own sense of order. ⁶

(Lines 24–30)

In this abbreviated history, the construction of an essential Chineseness, “Hua Xia 华夏,” in opposition to the term “yi 夷” (barbarian) comes out of anxieties about foreign incursion and loss of sovereignty. As Liu shows in *The Clash of Empires* (2004), the Chinese word “yi 夷” coupled with the English word “barbarian” in the early 1800s in a complicated series of forced mistranslations. This semantic shift spoke to a larger phenomenon in which China was increasingly pressured to conceptualize territoriality and ethnicity in terms that were not its own, and to concede sovereignty despite resistance (often imaged as the dowager empress’s stubborn insistence on the old world order despite the writing being on the wall). During this critical period of sinicist world-making, “missionaries had arrived in China” (那时传教士已来到了中国) (line 33), a milestone that the poem, through ellipsis, correlates with China’s later sexual self-colonization. From the late Qing world order, the poem jumps to an anonymous moment in the early twentieth century: black-and-white films are introduced in Hollywood, beautiful white women are romanced on the silver screen, foot binding becomes a pervasive practice, and some nameless subject—Western or Chinese or both—“gazed on the delicate young ‘Zhi Na’ women / who were all so ‘Coca Cola’ (注视着那些小巧的支那少女 / 她们都是那样可口可乐) (lines 44–45). A derogatory Japanese term for Chinese people, “Zhi Na 支那,” was imported to America through nineteenth-century transpacific translation, and “Coca Cola,” phonetically translated

⁶ Hua Xia was the name proposed by Qing intellectual and statesman Huang Zunxian for the Central States, later adopted as a term for “Chinese” (Liu 2004, 76). It is unclear which historical document Zhai refers to overall, for the nominal Female Emperor of China, Wu Zetian, lived over eight hundred years ago, and the other famous female sovereign, the Empress Dowager Cixi, lived a little over a hundred ago. Neither of them ever declared that “foreign countries are on balance barbarian lands” as far as my research shows. This piece of “history” might be Zhai’s creative interpretation of changes in the nineteenth-century Qing world order brought on by translanguaging.

as “ke kou ke le 可口可乐,” or “delicious and satiating,” became a chauvinist moniker for loose young women. Following the poem’s historiographical logic, the politics of China’s nineteenth-century worldview, including a program of self-ethnicization against its continental neighbors, cannot therefore be separated from the sexual politics of the ongoing loss of sovereignty in the face of Western colonization, which not only effeminized China but fetishized that very regressiveness through neologisms and new media. If we accept the poem’s premise that collusive constructions of race and sexuality abound in transnational nation-building, then the decidedly global cosmopolitan ending leaves us with an altogether new sense of disquiet. In the “age of the interweb / gentlemen and beasts are now clothed in Armani” (因特网的年代 / 绅士和野兽都穿上了阿玛尼品牌) (lines 46–47). Even the height of linguistic and cultural hybridity implies a continuation, rather than an abatement, of the troubling gender politics of East/West confrontation.

Just as the objectification of women in China has a long and tangled history in nineteenth-century sinicisms, orientalisms, and related forms of transcultural imperialism, so feminist consciousness in contemporary China comes with its own discursive baggage. For an overarching perspective of these intersections, we can go to a poem like “New York 2006” (纽约 2006). Self-presenting as a souvenir poem of Zhai’s stint in the United States, “New York 2006” weaves together two discourses that rarely meet in poetry: the affective experiences of the gendered body and the gendered reader and the Chinese language politics that overflow national boundaries. The poem is a careful observer of curious phenomena in Chinese-English translanguaging, or what it calls “problems between Chinese and English” (汉英之间的问题) (I, line 25). For example, it notices that a black man waves a photograph as he explains the history of 9/11 to tourists; “Is he All-Seeing?” (不知他是不是全知视角?) the poem ponders, wryly noting that he has the Chinese character “God” (神) embroidered in large font on his baseball cap (II, lines 111–13, 119–20). The international flows that helped popularize Chinese characters as fashion statements also deliver us to a strange world where, by coincidence, Chinese characters have new purchase on post-9/11 politics on the ground. “New York 2006” becomes an intellectual map of New York for those interested in contemporary sinology—knowledge at once situated and embedded in the West and yet drastically different from the colonial perspectives of old. The poem even cites its familiarity with contemporary women theorists of modern China who reside in the United States: Zhang Zhen (poet and professor of film and history at NYU) and Liu He (aka Lydia H. Liu, professor of East Asian

languages at Columbia University), two prominent critics and theorists of modern China who are presently in departments of East Asian languages and cultures (III, lines 123–27). Dropping the names of these US-based female sinologists, the poem shows us it has its eye on the new front lines of China's knowledge production.

Under such an eye, New York becomes a city layered with translingualisms and transnationalisms, as well as their curious metamorphoses and betrayals. In “Mid-town: Song of the Sichuan Restaurant,” we join “four men and two women discussing / international matters pertaining across East and West” (四男两女 讨论着 / 横贯中西的国际话题) (II, lines 52–53). The poem listens in on this coterie of successful people, capturing snippets of machismo, celebrity gossip, and smug speculations about the ripeness of the Chinese market for international currencies. At this time, one of the Chinese men in the dinner group asks his female table-mate (possibly the poet herself) with the “naiveté of a successful man” (成功男人的天真): “Are you a women’s rights activist/monger?” (你是不是女权主义者?) (II, line 75).⁷ The poem thinks out the illocutionary significance of her possible responses in English: “An utterance of ‘Yes’: destruction” (消灭) / An utterance of ‘No’: sexual ecstasy” (销魂) (II, lines 78–79). In this small yet loaded exchange we see the narrator’s dilemma: relationality in Chinese cosmopolitan settings demands the renunciation of what is cast as an outdated identity—an older, more slavish story in which a Chinese woman discovers her feminist consciousness after coming into contact with more “progressive” nations. The associative pairing of the English yes/no with the Chinese words for erasure/sexual fulfillment points further to the complexity of gender politics in a translingual setting. The *mise-en-scène* of feminism—are you or aren’t you a feminist—and the consequences of your answer are entangled with linguistic utterance and rhetorical performance as much concerning “matters pertaining across East and West” as concerning gender expression. Silenced, the narrator reflects on the corroboration of internationalism and gender oppression and its double standards, which deem women’s rights a *passé* form of cross-identification while

⁷ In Chinese, “女权主义” takes on a pejorative connotation, meaning something more like “women’s libber.” Zhai has her own take on the politics of women’s rights terminology in China: “When most Chinese men hear the term *nüquan zhuyi* [women’s rights feminism] they see red. The term *nüxing zhuyi* 女性主义, feminism with the emphasis on gender, just as the name implies, is much less threatening. But the origins, similarities, and differences between these two terms are things nobody cares about. Most people picture feminists as a barbarous horde intent on stripping men of their power. Sexist men may even flatter themselves that these women want to be men” (Zhai 2008).

setting no limits on the advantages men can take from new China/US collaborations:

经济腾飞 道琼指数
 苏富比拍卖纪录
 以及这些 骇人的指标下
 发扬光大 的大男人主义
 都是 MADE IN CHINA

Soaring markets Dow Jones indexes
 Sotheby's auction records
 Under these wicked indicators and the like
 Male chauvinisms widely and proudly promoted
 Are all MADE IN CHINA

(II, lines 93–98)

This epiphany is a satisfying one. And yet it returns us, by way of language, back to a conundrum, just as the speaker's hypothetical answer to her male friend gets caught in its translingual illocutions. Is "MADE IN CHINA" really "made in China"? When we are dealing with global signifiers with messy histories, where does the feminist place her outrage?

In *The Most Tactful Phrases*, tropes of feminist recognition and epiphany are often means to ends: they facilitate an acute awareness of the dangers of language in transnational modernity. In "On One Report on Child Prostitutes" (关于雏妓的一次报道), a twelve-year-old girl "cannot understand why so many old, ugly, and dirty men / want to lie on her stomach (直不明白为什么 / 那么多老的, 丑的, 脏的男人 / 要趴在她的肚子上) (lines 21–23). Setting out to recover the voice of that child, the poem shortly takes up an unexpected line of thought: "Reading the newspaper I keep thinking: / You can't write a poem about this / can't turn a poem into this thing / masticating it with loud noises / Tinker a lyric into teeth in order to repeatedly chew at / these diseases" (看报纸时我一直在想: / 不能为这个写诗 / 不能把诗变成这样 / 不能把诗嚼得嘎嘣直响 / 不能把词敲成牙齿 去反复啃咬 / 这些病) (lines 35–40). An extended negation—you can't turn poems into the dissection of malaises, you can't do this, you can't do that—the remainder of "On One Report" rejects the use of a literary genre, the diagnostic, that has historically been associated with sinological texts. The poem demonstrates the difficulty of taking up the pen for the victim without summoning rhetoric used in cooptative periodizations of Chinese history in the past. The mouthy metaphors—mastication, chewing—allude to the body of diagnostic literature in the early Republican period (and today) that troped from Western literature a medical approach to China's perceived social crises. The diagnostic genre, popularized by writers such as Lu Xun, exposed backward social patterns in China in such a way as to essentialize these problems as national afflictions and introduce to China a sense of itself as a country in need of cures. Zhai pointedly rejects the moralizing and diagnostic approach and, in a further polemical gesture, groups

that genre with the information “stuplimity” that assaults the modern Chinese reader.⁸ If written out as originally intended, the poem muses, it would have added the child prostitute’s voice to the data pour of modern China, composed of “information flow, hotlines, and global perspectives” (信息量, 热线/和国际观点) (line 56). Thus “On One Report” introduces one ideal subject of progressive feminist writing only to introduce the mediatedness of the Chinese woman’s plight in history and in the present age.

“Lady Macbeth” (马克白夫人) also stimulates the cognitive pull toward feminist recognition (i.e., the feeling that, naturally, Lady Macbeth would be a suitable icon for the Chinese female poet) but disrupts the satisfaction of that recognition by exposing feminist recognition as a form of cliché in Sino-Western feminist and cultural exchange. The poem describes a friend’s adaptation of Macbeth for Sichuan opera, but it allocates the cross-cultural feminist potential of watching that adaptation to a fictional audience member. An unidentified woman sitting in the front row reviews the Chinese Shakespeare production and programmatically responds with a Sheryl Sandberg–*Lean In* type of critique of the play’s pedagogical value. “Lady Macbeth is someone else’s destiny / We are actually the captains of our fate in this day and age” (马克白夫人是别人的命运 / 我们才是这个年头里的每一个自己) (lines 32–34). At the end of the poem the same woman—ostensibly a cultural critic—walks away with a diametrically opposed but equally insubstantive comment: “The women of the last century / and the women of this century are not really different” (上一世纪的女人 / 与本世纪的女人 并无不同) (lines 52–53). The poem dutifully notes this cross-cultural exchange (or, what it really is: two sets of neoliberal clichés that negate the value of exchange since they can be made with or without watching the play). But the poem does not concern itself over whether Chinese women identify with Lady Macbeth, or even whether a moment in which Chinese women watch Lady Macbeth’s ambition, constitutes a modern feminist moment. “Lady Macbeth” swerves from whatever the figure of Lady Macbeth may mean to a Chinese audience—where we expect the poem to go—to reflect on the technical details of cross-cultural adaptation, the negotiations between literary content and available artistic forms. The poem gives one example of a successful cross-cultural marriage of content and form: the pathos of Lady Macbeth and the elaborate rules of tossing one’s “water sleeves” (水袖) in Chinese opera, which simultaneously restricts and codifies the movements of the female role. “Water

⁸ “Stuplimity,” borrowed from Sianne Ngai, refers to the feeling of being overwhelmed and bored at the same time by the objects or instruments of postmodernity, here taken to be the Internet (2005, 276–78).

sleeves” can “go around and around, tangling and entangling,” capturing “a woman’s fidelity / and the wild ambitions that spring from that fidelity” (水袖也可以绕来绕去 / 正好表达一个女人的忠贞和 / 由此而来的野心) (lines 48–50). In this poem, feminism has to come down to formal approximation rather than abstracted comparativism. The woman in the front row jotting down “takeaways” that are uninspired and, more importantly, inattentive to formal detail is just that—a side component in Zhai’s larger reflections on the dialectics of stage and audience in the production of cross-cultural feminist icons.

“New York: 2006,” “On One Report on Child Prostitutes,” and “Lady Macbeth” show how feminisms and modern sinologies (matters like Chinese stage production, Chinese historicism, Chinese information technology) share spaces and speakers, collaboratively and sabotagingly. They teach us that the poetic management of the female victim can skirt dangerously close to the language of pathology and obsession with empiricism, which people have used to manage China; that the performance of global Chineseness can retrench gender roles; and that the cross-cultural exchange that seems to promise dialogue on feminism can invite both under- and overdeterminations of that possibility. Zhai’s ambivalence toward the notion of a progressive transnational space for the modern feminist echoes Shu-Mei Shih’s (2002) debunking of the temporal and spatial schematics of identitarian feminisms.⁹ The cross-discursive attributes of Chinese feminism suggest how nuanced our approach to China’s postcontact political realities must be. Zhai’s ambitions do not end with poetic deconstructions of feminism’s entanglements with sinology, however. In Zhai’s poetics, twenty-first-century Chinese woman’s poetry has a two-pronged directive. First, as we’ve seen, it has to recreate the conditions under which insights into “*wei wan*,” or “not obvious” translingual and transnational ironies might be possible. For Zhai, the same China that demands an intersectional eye trained on feminism is also ripe for an overthrow of the way people approach poetry. In *The Most Tactful Phrases*, Zhai reoutfits the lyric with an at-once classicist and global sensibility, aware of transnational China’s speech genres but also critically self-distanced from them. This sensibility, while feminist, is one that disaffectedly studies feminism’s geopolitics.

Toward this end, Zhai affixes to what is unmistakably twenty-first-century woman’s poetry (and readership) an autochthonous project of po-

⁹ In her article, “Towards an Ethics of Transnational Encounter, or ‘When’ Does a ‘Chinese’ Woman Become a ‘Feminist?’” (2002), Shih complicates the narrative of China’s exposure to Western liberal feminism, suggesting that the urge to label women’s movements in China as happening in a transitional time or place as “feminist” betrays its commitment to the geopolitical and teleological schematics of identity politics.

etic revival. This project is primarily undertaken in the poem “Ode to Yu Xuanji” (鱼玄机赋) and the essay “The Enchantment of Endlessly Reversible Verses” (回文无尽是璇玑) (both in Zhai 2009). Both point to an acrostic capacity inherent in the Chinese language before translanguaging, a capacity that Zhai chooses to attribute to historical Chinese women poets. Zhai believes that feminist poetry has enjoyed an emergence in the past two decades.¹⁰ However, her actual poetics indicate that the readiness of modern, translanguaging China to overtake a neotraditional feminist poetics has little to do with the momentum of a trend but rather issues from its very translanguaging modernity. Now teetering at the edge of phenomenological comprehensibility, the semantic integrity of and between Chinese “words” loosening in the face of globalization and digitization, China is poised to reengage with two historical figures that also push language to the extreme. Therefore we must introduce a new layer of intention to Zhai’s decision to reclaim historical Chinese women for her neofeminist poetics. Revived from the slim annals of dynastic women writers, Zhai’s two poetesses represent an aesthetic intervention, as well as a postsinological one. By this I mean that Zhai employs these figures to negotiate a new approach to Chinese history/language/reality in light of its transnational, translanguaging, and pop cultural tendencies. These figures are constructed so as to enter into dialogue with today’s audience. This is why I refer to them as poetesses and not just women poets: they function as ciphers of a larger poetic-political project in which decipherment and language play reinstate poetry’s vibrant and active role in a wider cultural discourse. Producing unparalleled language puzzles while also wearing their gender on their sleeves, Zhai’s reconfigured poetesses do not so much recall China’s poetic past as coax their readers into an emergent poetic future.

The first of these figures is Su Ruolan, female prodigy from the Former Qin period (350–394 AD) who composed the grossly understudied and underadmired masterpiece *Armillary Sphere (Xuanji) Diagram*—an embroidery of palindromic poems organized into a 29 × 29 character grid (see fig. 1).

A remarkable linguistic and poetic feat, the *Xuanji Diagram* yielded poems that could be read backwards and forwards and in any number of line combinations along its different coordinates, “yielding 7,958 three-, four-, five-, six-, and seven-character-poems” (共计三, 四, 五, 六, 七言诗 7958 首) (Zhai 2009, 133).¹¹ In a “postindustrial world that mixes high

¹⁰ See the essay “Women’s Poetry: Our Wings” (女性诗歌: 我们的翅膀) in Zhai (2009).

¹¹ The official name for this piece of work, “Armillary Sphere Diagram,” refers to the resemblance between the rows and columns of reversible writing and the astronomical in-

仁智怀德圣唐贞妙显重章奸臣害我忠贞桑田飘浮江湘
 伤嗟情家明葩荣志庭闹乱作人惨奸佞凶害我忠贞桑田
 惨叹中无镜纷为笃明难受消源祸因所恃态极骄盈榆硕孝和淑自为隔
 怀伤君朗光谁终荣苟不义姬班婕妤好辞鞏汉成薄退远敦贞敬殊
 慕所路房容珠感誓城倾在戒后孽赵氏飞燕生景谗退远敦贞敬殊
 增离旷帙饰曜思穹灾犹炎盛兴渐至大伐用昭青昭患谦危节所是山
 忧经遐清华英多苍形未在慎深虑微察远祸在防萌西滋蒙疑容持从梁
 心荒淫妄想感所钦岑幽岩峻嵯峨深渊重涯经网罗流光电逝推生民
 室妃闹飞衣谁追何思伤时形寒岁识凋松愆居欢如阳移陂施为祇差生
 空后中奋袞为相如感伤在劳贞物知终始旧独怀何潜西不激无通者旷
 惟自节能我容声将自攻君想颜丧改行士念谁贱鄙翳日无愤将上采悲
 思兴厉不歌治同情宁夜侧梦仁贤别行士念谁贱鄙翳日无愤将上采悲
 咏风樊吹发观羽幢龙旋容衣诗情明显怨衰情时倾英殊衰殊身节菲路
 和周楚长双华宫忧虎雕饰绣始璇玑图义年劳叹寄华年有志饰身节菲路
 音南郑歌商流傲殷繁华曜壮观终始心诗兴感远殊浮沉时盛意丽哀遗身
 藏邵卫咏齐曜情多文曜壮观终始心诗兴感远殊浮沉时盛意丽哀遗身
 摧伯女志兴荣伤患藻荣丽无端比作丽辞日思慕世异逝倏无一俯忧作己
 悲窈河遐硕翠感生婆漫丁冤诗风兴鹿鸣怀悲哀谁逝倏无一俯忧作己
 声窈广路人架我艰是漫是漫丁冤诗风兴鹿鸣怀悲哀谁逝倏无一俯忧作己
 发淑思逐其藏情惟何艰生时盛医盛孟宣伤感情者颓然盈体仰情成幽
 曲姿归迤颀蕤悲苦怀思苦我章恨微元悼思戚知沙驰亏不忠容何成幽
 秦王怀土眷旧乡身加兼愁悴少精神退幽旷远离凤麟龙昭德怀圣皇人
 商游桑鸣扬仇伤身我乎集怨辜何因备当苦辛当神飞文遗分归贱
 弦西翳双激好推君深日润漫愆思罪积怨其根难寻所明轻殊孤乖雁为
 激阶阴巢水悲容仁均物品育施生天地德费平均匀专通身架殊散声应
 楚步林燕清思发离滨汉之步飘飘离微隔乔木谁阴一感寄飭散声应
 流东桃飞泉君叹殊心改者感呢亲闻远殊我同衾志精浮光离哀伤有
 清廊休翔流长愁方禽伯在诚故遗旧度故君子惟新矣志精浮光离哀伤有
 琴芳兰凋茂熙阳春墙面殊意感故新霜水齐杰志清纯仰望谁思想怀所亲

Figure 1 The *Xuanji Diagram* is an artifact (characters embroidered on silk) as well as a piece of text. Although the artifact has been lost, a Ming dynasty painting depicting the *Xuanji Diagram* called “Lady Su Hui and Her Verse Puzzle” can be seen in the East Asian collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Accession no. 33.167). In lieu of using an image of the *Xuanji Diagram*, I have transcribed its 841 characters (29 characters by 29 rows) here for the reader.

art with the everyday” (后现代工业社会 . . . 消解和模糊了艺术和生活的界限), Zhai extols Su Ruolan’s language play as both “highly literary” and “carrying strong visual effects” (带有文学性质的可视艺术) (136). At a time when the Chinese language’s “DNA is being altered” (136) because languages are romanized to accommodate the alphanumeric keyboard, a renewal of interest in Su Ruolan and her *Xuanji Diagram* can, Zhai suggests, reclaim the Chinese language’s inviolable genius in ways that do not further approximate it to the language systems of the logocentric world.

strument that features spinning, concentric metal circles. Zhai is punning on the homophonic relationship between armillary sphere (*xuanji* 璇玑) and the Daoist concept of abstruseness or profound cleverness (*xuanji* 玄机) in the title of the essay, “The Enchantment of Endlessly Reversible Verses” (回文无尽是璇玑), to suggest that this particular model of textual placement is profoundly interesting.

It could be said that the *Xuanji Diagram* and the feminist poetics it carries reenchant Chinese language from within. Moreover, palindromic poetry demands a strong grasp of the limberness of archaic Chinese and its linguistic structures, thus preventing that enchantment with the Chinese language from becoming just another exploration of the Chinese character as pictograph. Su Ruolan's work represents an alternative to current trends in the collaborations between high art and the Chinese language in which "a number of contemporary artists have used text to probe the ultimate meaning of writing" (许多艺术家将文字作为材料去探寻文字的终极意义) (135). Zhai characterizes these works as "turning the architecture and external appearance of Chinese characters into a kind of abstract visual art while the meaning of the characters themselves has all but vanished" (他们的作品将中国文字的结构与外形表现为一种抽象的视觉艺术, 而文字的意义却被去除, 消解) (135).¹² The *Xuanji Diagram* contributes a diametrically opposite kind of text-as-art. Rather than using Chinese language as pure image or reflecting on the global misperceptions of Chinese text, Su Ruolan's work "is another kind of extreme, relying exclusively on the uniqueness of the Chinese language, reprogramming it, redesigning the interpretive and serial relationships between characters, exploring and paying proof to the endless possibilities in Chinese language's generability" (它则在另外一个极端上, 依靠汉字的特殊性, 重新编码, 设置汉字与汉字之间的识读和序列关系, 探求和证实了中国文字可能衍生的无穷意义) (135). Such a language can be "reprogrammed" in the first place because it is one that preserves the semantic relationships between its "words" even if they are read in reverse, producing new logics and meanings. "Perhaps," adds Zhai, "no other language in the world can approach its morphological capacities" (也许没有任何一种文字能够像中文那样自体变异) (135). Su Ruolan, in other words, maxes out the sui generis genius of the Chinese language as a language rather than as symbols or artistic forms.

Zhai compares the *Xuanji Diagram*'s political potential for subverting dominant aesthetic discourse to American artist Judy Chicago's ceramic and embroidery art, *The Dinner Party* (1974–79). Just as Judy Chicago "used women's arts and crafts movement to challenge contemporary art's valuation of art" (利用女性工艺艺术挑战现代美术的既定美学价值), so Su Ruolan's *Xuanji Diagram* innovated Chinese art by melding high intellectual art with folk art (136). But whereas Judy Chicago did this conscientiously for gender politics, Zhai goes on to write that Su Ruolan ac-

¹² For examples of this kind of art, see Xu Bing's art installation of made-up Chinese characters ("A Book from the Sky") and Gu Wenda's large-scale pseudo-Chinese calligraphy ("Temple of Heaven").

complished the same “a number of centuries earlier” (早了若干个世纪), being “way ahead of her time” (有着超前的前卫意识) (136). The point is not that Su did this first but that she did it *avant la lettre* of feminist intervention in the field of art. Again, here we see the logic of Zhai’s new visions for feminism in China: Su Ruolan did not wish to do anything “feminist,” but the nature of her composition makes it supremely cogent in today’s matrix of technology and art in which the Chinese language turns. Under the right kind of manipulation, the unique capabilities of the Chinese language in historical usage and poetic practices can speak across the ages to the acrostic nature of China’s current reality. Simultaneously a collection of poems and a grid of linguistic units that generates text, the *Xuanji Diagram* is curiously a precursor of the digitization of Chinese and its logic of inputs and outputs, combinatorics and returns. Both a language supermachine and a concubine’s love token, the *Xuanji Diagram* is also uniquely positioned to force a meeting of poststructuralist/postmodern treatments of the Chinese language and historical “womanly” narratives and concerns.

If Su Ruolan is plucked out of relative obscurity to serve as a model for the versatility of the Chinese language in the hands of poetic and linguistic genius, her *Xuanji Diagram* further appeals to Zhai for its paratextual features that lend themselves to romance, women’s everyday life, and feminist intertextuality. Zhai recounts how she discovered the *Xuanji Diagram* while studying Chinese women fabric artisans. Stitched on brocade, the *Xuanji Diagram* was a love object sent by Su Ruolan to communicate her longing to her husband.¹³ In what might look to us like an extreme misappropriation of ends to means—a masterpiece serving as a handkerchief for a possibly philandering husband—the *Xuanji Diagram*’s anecdotal *raison d’être* links its otherworldly poetic virtuosity to the commonplace feminine desire to woo a faraway lover as well as the everyday female practice of brocade making. The key to Zhai’s neotraditional poetics lies in the perfect compatibility between language mastery and ordinary womanliness—a dialectic that for Zhai has wondrous viability in contemporary, postsinological China.

This same dialectic can also be seen in Zhai’s second figure for her model of poetic revival in China: Tang dynasty poetess and concubine Yu Xuanji.¹⁴ Another freak genius from imperial times, Yu Xuanji shares with

¹³ In another version of this story, which Zhai rejects, the *Xuanji Diagram* was Su Ruolan’s enticement to a distant and perhaps philandering husband who, astonished by her genius, immediately returned to restore his favor.

¹⁴ For examples of Yu’s writing, see *The Clouds Float North* (Yu 1998).

Su Ruolan not only a homophone (Yu *Xuanji* and the *Xuanji Diagram*) that means hidden cosmic pattern or arcane knowledge (*xuanji* 玄机) but also many stylized characteristics such as beauty, lust, jealousy, and artfulness. Zhai mentions the traditional term—“Complaints of the Boudoir” (*gui yuan* 闺怨)—that was used to describe this combination of pathos, virtuosity, and typicality (2009, 134). What she proceeds to do is reinvent *gui yuan*. A gender stereotype, the *gui yuan* woman becomes in Zhai’s hands an avatar of political, linguistic, and poetic subtlety.

Zhai’s deliriously strange “Ode to Yu Xuanji” (鱼玄机赋) (also collected in *The Most Tactful Phrases* [2009]) pays tribute to the Tang dynasty poetess whose brilliant life ended in a mortifying account of female rivalry and irrational violence. Restored to the classical canon, Yu Xuanji’s life is still mostly known to us through a male-authored history. Tang historian Huang Fumin’s (1931) account in *San Shui Xiao Du* 三水小牒 is so bizarre that it bears retelling. Born in Xijing, Yu Xuanji entered into early concubinage but decided to become a Daoist nun.¹⁵ The charismatic and talented young poet often entertained male guests in her home. One day, before leaving to visit with a friend, Yu Xuanji instructed her maid Lü Qiao to announce that her mistress was out should someone come to call. When she returned late in the evening, Lü Qiao promptly informed her that a man on horseback had come and left. Suspicious that the pretty young servant had had amorous relations with the mystery visitor, Yu Xuanji accused her of deception. Deaf to her pleas, the mistress ordered her maid to remove her clothing and then beat her to death with a bamboo board. Terrified of what she had done, Yu Xuanji buried Lü Qiao in her backyard under the assumption that no one would notice the disappearance of a servant. A few days later a guest detected the stench of a rotting corpse in Yu Xuanji’s backyard. She notified the magistrate, who happened to have a personal vendetta against Yu Xuanji, having once been denied a loan by her. Many defended Yu Xuanji, but in the end she was executed by decapitation in autumn (Huang 1931). A petty spat over a male caller. A beautiful young woman disrobing her maid and beating her to death. A botched cover-up and an inglorious execution. This most salacious version of Yu Xuanji’s life is the only thing we have on record from her time.¹⁶ Without any counterevidence, Yu Xuanji’s career is forever blighted by a particularly female type of embarrassment: a lovely prodigy with the disposition of a fishwife. And as is customary, the untoward parts of Yu Xuanji’s

¹⁵ In the Tang dynasty, it was customary for Daoist nuns to marry and even serve as courtesans. For a study of these social norms, see Du (2005).

¹⁶ Huang Fumin’s version has been disputed since the Yuan dynasty. See Cahill (2005).

life have fed the popular reclamation of her work. Zhai complained that when she went online to search for articles on her historical subject, a “Google search turned up shocking headers like ‘The Queen of the Realm of Passion,’ ‘From “Scorned Woman” to “Slut,”’ ‘Yu Xuanji—A Life Destroyed by Jealousy,’ ‘The Nympho Nun,’ and so on” (Zhai 2008). Scandal mongering drives the ongoing interest in this (and other) historical female poets.¹⁷ What the increasingly decadent versions of Yu Xuanji’s life have done for her posthumous fame, they have also in equal measure done to seal her within the stereotype of womanhood gone awry.

“Ode” takes advantage of the fact that people have been attracted to Yu Xuanji for all the wrong reasons, playing up the received narrative of her decadent demise and eternal resentment through a repeated line: “She will never give in / let it go” (她永远都不服气) (Zhai 2009, IV, line 113; V, line 154). At times “Ode” seems like an ordinary act of recovery. In an essay condescendingly titled “Easy to Obtain Invaluable Gifts, Harder to Procure a Faithful Man,” Ling Lie refers to what he perceives as a lethargy and lack of originality in Yu’s themes and metrics to justify his assessment that they fall short of the standard of “*jia zuo*,” or “superior work.” Ling concludes that, nonetheless, it’s good enough for a woman writer (2008, 59). Against this kind of dismissal, in what Lingenfelter calls “revisionist historicism,” Zhai “reexamines the lives of poets like Yu Xuanji” in “an effort to restore reputations that were dealt with unfairly by generations of Confucian and post-Confucian historians and scholars” (Lingenfelter 2010). “Ode” recycles many of Yu Xuanji’s verses in its body, implicitly arguing that her images, metrics, and turns of phrases were subtler and wilder, finer and bolder, than those of her much more famous male contemporaries Li Bai, Du Fu, and Wang Wei. But even as “Ode” restores the poetess, making a show of restoration along the way, its poetic logic exceeds that of restoration. “Ode to Yu Xuanji” also hypothesizes the female complaints of spurned love and not getting one’s say in order to maximize its potential for hijacking sinicist historiography and China’s media landscapes today. In Zhai’s grim apotheosis, the embittered Yu Xuanji

¹⁷ For example, Yu Xuanji is featured in the recent anthology *Manmu Lihuaci: Lidai Nvshiren de Shishenghuo* 满目梨花词: 历代女诗人的诗生活 (Kang 2008), which can be roughly translated as “Eyes full of pear blossom lyrics: The poetic lives of women poets from successive dynasties.” Punning on the phonic similarity between “shi 诗” (poem) and “si 私” (private, with innuendos of “unmentionable”) the title of this anthology uses the slippage between “shi sheng huo 诗生活” (poetic life) and “si sheng huo 私生活” (private life) as a selling point. Taking many liberties, the editor of *Eyes Full of Pear Blossom Lyrics* spices up Huang Fumin’s original account by exaggerating the rivalry between mistress and maid and by recasting the magistrate as one of her many rejected suitors.

reflects on the gender politics of the archive, exclaiming “She has only herself to blame; ill luck / Think about all those other female poets / Who left for themselves sufficient materials for analysis / Who wouldn’t even bother to notice someone like Huang Fumin” (Zhai 2009, V, lines 135–37). At the same time, Yu’s historical inaccessibility makes her uniquely qualified to mediate modern China’s multiple sociolinguistic forms. The poem’s first lines “This is a story about the murdered and the murderer; 868 AD / Yu Xuanji in cangues / was delivered to the execution scaffold lying in blood and tears” (这是关于被杀和杀人的故事 / 公元 868 年 / 鱼玄机 身穿枷衣 / 被送上刑场 躺在血泊中) (2009, I, lines 1–4) approximates the voice-over of contemporary sensation documentary. The last section, “An analytical report of Yu Xuanji’s Death” (关于鱼玄机之死的分析报告), spoofs the closure offered in contemporary criminal justice cases. A performance of contemporary genres, Yu Xuanji’s speaking voice also takes on a conscious anachronism, parodying the popular entertainment genre of “young women as time travelers,” as one of Zhai’s interviewers points out (Li Changwei, in Zhai 2013b). At one point the poem even shows us what a 2005 Yu Xuanji might look like and thus cheekily fulfills the imaginative imperative of progressive feminism that has enjoyed popularity in Chinese media.

Superficially restricted to the genres that have been designated for misunderstood female talent—the overly dramatic television special, the zither tune, the wistful epitaph, the time travel, and so on—the fictional Yu Xuanji inflicts her victimization on these spaces as a form of literary reconnaissance. The falling of the blade in the opening sensation drama sequence only manages to chop off “scales” (鱼鳞), a play on the surname Yu, which means “fish,” and those scales turn into static flurries on a screen (Zhai 2009, I, lines 33–36).¹⁸ The disembodied Yu Xuanji morphs into a technological firewall for those anonymous researchers and scandalmongers glued to the Internet, their “frantic fingers” (快速移动的手指) searching for salacious information on historical women (I, lines 13–15). Using the metaphor of Yu’s original verse, “fingers like hooks” (手指如钩) (I, line 21), the poem disarranges the media through which we claim knowledge and power. Making verses wherever it can and often to catechretic effects, the female poetic composition in “Ode” elicits the pleasure of watching modern linguistic discomposition without the anxiety of linguistic supercession.

¹⁸ A further wordplay comes in the choice of the idiom “*yi wang da jing*—网打尽” to describe Yu Xuanji’s besting of present-day Internet voyeurs, since the idiom, which literally means “catching all with one net,” connects the fish pun in Yu’s name with the World Wide Web (in Chinese also called a web [*wang* 网]).

We may take Section III (“A Tune to the Pattern of Alighting Geese” 支花调寄雁儿落) as an example of this aesthetic. Titled to indicate that the contents will follow the metrical and lyrical rules of the classic Yuan dynasty tune Yan Er Luo 雁儿落, Section III instead innovates its own “tune” for its fantasy dialogue between Yu Xuanji and her victim Lü Qiao:¹⁹

Candles, incense, backgammon
 Mahjong, dominos, betting
 If I were a man
 In three hundred and sixty plays on the board we would see who
 has the upper hand . . .
 Silver hook [a calligraphy term], rabbit’s hair [type of calligraphy
 brush], tomes
 Impromptu composition, reading poems, answering poem for poem
 If I were a man
 Naturally all the glory would be mine

蜡烛、薰香、双陆
 骰子、骨牌、博戏
 如果我是一个男子
 三百六十棋路 便能见高低 . . .
 银钩、兔毫、书册
 题咏、读诗、酬答
 如果我是一个男子
 理所当然 风光归我所有.

(Zhai 2009, III, lines 78–81, 88–91)

Yu Xuanji’s “poem” takes the form of six two-character objects, followed by the eight-character repeated line, “if I were a man,” and then a final rejoinder. The groups of objects form tableaux of poetic and intellectual competition—parlor games that are usually gendered male but now poetically claimed by the two women. Seizing also on the fragmentary nature of this compositional scheme, the lopping effect of adjacent two-character pairs, Yu Xuanji and Lü Qiao further appropriate the theme of fragmentation for their self-fashioned poetess tradition. In this alternate reality, the two are no longer murderer and murdered, equally silenced by history, but

¹⁹ Also known as the popular Chinese zither composition “Ping Sha Luo Yan,” a Yuan dynasty compositional scheme stipulating four-line stanzas of five characters per line; Yan Er Luo is often combined with “De Guo Sheng Ling,” a metric scheme that has four segments of five characters each, followed by a two-character segment, another five-character segment, and a final two-character segment.

rather collaborators, coconspirators even, of a brave new world of poetry. “Search and round up fragments of your poems for me,” Lü Qiao—now more fellow priestess than victim or maid—says to Yu Xuanji, “and I will compose a new tune for you” (你为我搜残诗/我为你赋新曲) (Zhai 2009, III, lines 95–96). Zhai purposely replaces the more natural choice, “collect” or “shou 收” with the similar sounding, quasi-neologistic term “search” or “sou 搜”—the verb used nowadays to denote looking things up on Internet search engines—and thus subtly modernizes the two women’s speech. Their dialogue occupies a convergence between a traditional and ideal poetic practice—one preexisting and one yet to become mainstream, one belonging to history and one to the future of Chinese feminist poetry in which we “sou 搜,” or scour search engines for a women’s literary remains. The section symbolically leaves off the traditional “tune” to underscore a formative moment in the creation of a female lyric tradition—the neo-traditional assemblage of the poetess’s fragments (*can shi* 残诗).

According to Yopie Prins, poetic reclamations of Sappho in the nineteenth century (also known as the poetess movement) essentially harnessed something that was historically unverifiable but primed for retroprojection to change the dominant means of cultural transmission.²⁰ I want to suggest that a similar dynamic guides Zhai’s reanimation of dynastic women poets. In Zhai’s feminist revival, “the depersonalization of deconstruction” and the “repersonalization of feminism” become “haunted by each other” (Johnson 1987, 44). Lyric authorship, by purposely confusing the persona with the depersonalizing properties of textual remixing, effectively “hypothesize[s] a living whole from dead letters” (Prins 1999, 4). The construction of such an identity for the purposes of poetic composition depends on the authority of an originary, historical voice whose slim textual corpus can only support purposive poetic bricolage. As with the invocations and rewritings of Sappho in Victorian life, the resurrection and rewriting of Yu Xuanji and Su Ruolan in twenty-first-century China also supply an ongoing, oracular voice to the female poetic tradition, thereby authoring and legitimating female and feminist desires and, most importantly, provides a quintessential “engendering figure for the reading of lyric” (Prins 1999, 7).

In “Letter from a Prior Dynasty” (2013a), we can see more clearly Zhai’s transposition of the historical poetess for an engendered interpellation of the modern reader.²¹ Qiu Yanxue 邱砚雪, a fictitious “undocumented/unverifiable female poet” (无考女诗人) from the past hails the

²⁰ See Prins’s *Victorian Sappho* (1999) as well as Prins and Virginia Jackson’s theory of lyric practice (Jackson and Prins 1999).

²¹ “Letter from a Prior Dynasty” (前朝遗信——无考女诗人邱砚雪信札) was written in 2012 and though it is not collected in *The Most Tactful Phrases*, it represents a continua-

male scholar (*shu sheng* 书生) from a “later dynasty” (Zhai 2009, line 2). As the speaker “sets down her endless housework” (放下作不完的家务事) (line 8), she composes a letter to a young scholar of the future. She anticipates that in this future “writing composition is no longer important” (写将不再贵重) (line 16) and sets out to direct his lyrical reclamation of a vanishing past. Through knowing her he can “know” that past’s “muted but pristine landscapes” (我的朝代 它淡而清的山水) and its “cold but tranquil poetry and letters” (冷而静的诗书)—its everything “destroyed in weather, destroyed in the earth / destroyed in the people’s revolution” (亡于气候亡于土壤 / 亡于人民起义) (lines 46–51). The poem masquerades as a gentle, comely solicitation of sympathy for ordinary female miseries, but in the end it monopolizes the modern man’s lyrical access to the past. And as it pivots from personal complaint to depersonalized lyric, it performs taking consolation from a linguistic continuity between the poetess whose corpus has been lost and the future reader who has recourse to the same Chinese language that she deftly wields:

Brush and ink with the sweeping of the autumn wind
 Beget little square characters I use them
 Knowing that hundreds of years later you are still using them

毛笔和水墨 随秋风扫过
 就有了小小的方块字 我使用它
 知道 几百年后你们还是用它

(Zhai 2009, lines 37–39)

Qiu Yanxue uses the linguistic continuity between ancient and modern Chinese characters to entice her reader: “I am manipulating [these characters] controlling the pleasure-production sites in your brain [我控制它, 制作你大脑的欣快感] . . . it grabs your attention . . . making you approach [me][使你无限向前 靠近]” (lines 40–43). She seduces the reader into this rapturous state so that Chinese writing might become precious (*gui zhong* 贵重) again against the tides of literary degeneracy caused by things like “the state of the nation / Progress / and the body” (国情/进步/身体) (lines 16–19). By first identifying with the speaker’s female complaint, the future male scholar can relearn and restore the poetic culture of the past.

Figures like Su Ruolan and Yu Xuanji (and the quasi-fictional Qiu Yanxue) are paramount to Zhai’s project. Their works ply the Chinese language’s pretranslingual features to virtuoso extremes, while their stylized

tion of the themes of the archive-lessness of the Chinese poetess and the transhistorical power of her voice.

personalities provide the necessary female drama to allow those works to continue to proliferate meaning and generate interest in today's world. Su Ruolan's lyric contribution lies as much in her subsequent appearances in Empress Wu Zetian's writings (1999) and Li Ruzhen's Qing dynasty feminist novel (*Flowers in the Mirror* [镜花缘] ([1827] 1992), as in her original palindromic creation on cloth. Zhai's deconstructionist fascination with a text's own engendering of intertext entails a practical investment in a female persona—a spurned lover, an unending complainer—who invites the reader to renew her engagement with Chinese text. Just as in her cosmopolitan poems, the gendered view coincides perfectly with the epiphanic knowledge of transnational, translingual China. The reader does not have to switch lenses. Zhai's poetess poems remove the competition between the polemics of feminism and the compulsive pleasures of the lyric.

The genre of complaint in turn becomes one of possibility. In the essay “Women's Poetry: Our Wings” (女性诗歌: 我们的翅膀), Zhai exposes the validation of female poets in China as a form of self-congratulatory male generosity, noting wryly that the respectful nods from the male-dominated literary world relegate feminist poetry to the realm of “special effects” (特殊效果) (2009, 118). Speaking of a matter with which we're all too familiar, Zhai complains about women's poetry being categorically included so as to be categorically dismissed. If only “women weren't given a spot in literary history only on account of the label ‘women,’ and precluded from ranking among the most superior male poets because of that same label—this,” concludes Zhai, “is what I had to say in 1988 . . . is what I continue to say today” (就像我在 1988 年曾经说过的一样: “我希望有一天女性不仅仅凭借是‘女性’这个理由在文学史上占据地位,但也不仅仅因为‘女性’这个理由就无法与男性诗人并驾齐驱站在最杰出诗人之列。”这就是我今天仍然要说的话) (118). But whereas writing the self-staged female complaint inevitably runs up against the accusation of the broken record, and de facto irrelevance, the lyricized version offers an entirely different option. “Why bother to write poems of complaint?” (又何必写怨诗), “Ode to Yu Xuanji” asks again and again, prompting nonanswers such as this one:

Human life is as the smoke that rising, already descends
Let it be Longevity is the same thing as early death
So why write the poetry of complaint?

人生一股烟 升起便是落下
也罢 短命正如长寿
又何必写怨诗?

(Zhai 2009, II, lines 74–76)

The complaint points to itself as a recessive ontological position: a doing that is already a nondoing, a protestation that is already a renunciation. This conundrum provides the poem's traditional sounding, yet implausible, oxymoronic images, such as this one of smoke rising at the same time as it falls. "Why write poems of complaint?" the poem asks. Naming the futility simply occasions another act of writing. The complaint functions as the mechanism that brings the poem into being, flourishing on the utter conventionality and conventionlessness of female scorn. We hear it coming, but when it does come it speaks so enigmatically that we listen some more.

Instead of shunning stereotypes of womanhood, Zhai's poems take advantage of the fact that our political order and hermeneutical tendencies recode everything in terms of the fulfillment and the disappointment of love. "Regime change" shall also be known as "transferred love," "The Most Tactful Phrase" announces, and Zhai uses this semantic slide wherever possible to link ideological subtlety to feminized protest. In the poem "Ancient Times," a separation topos of "ancient times" delivers us to "modern times" through a love complaint. "In ancient times," the speaker demurs, "I would have only been able to write letters to you like this / not knowing / where we might next meet" (在古代, 我只能这样 / 给你写信并不知道 / 我们下一次 / 会在哪里见面) (Zhai 2009, lines 1–4). In "modern times" she crams her lover's inbox with "5 strokes Chinese characters" (五笔字型) (one method of typing Chinese on alphabetic word-processing systems) (lines 5–6). The implication of changing communicative technologies for relationality is suspended in a romantic code: "You smiled slightly / Kept your head down / and we walked another ten leagues" (你微微一笑 / 低头间 我们又走了几十里地) (lines 29–30). For if Zhai's ideological campaign involves the "rewriting of histories [and historicisms, we might add] that she has found to be pernicious" (Linginfelter 2010), her lyrical project suggests that such rewritings should not go against the grain of pleasure reading, and that it should harness the hermeneutical tendencies shaped by contemporary popular culture and historical genres, by centuries of listening to and for the narratives of courtship and separation. One of the volume's many metaliterary poems, "On Reading *A Collection of Offer and Response Poems from East Mountain*" (读《山东酬和集》), draws a continuous line from romantic genres of previous dynasties to modern Sinophone speech. From the melodramatic self-drowning of beauty-scholar romances we come to a stolen moment between contemporary lovers on the bank of the historically romantic West Lake in Hangzhou. The generically gendered man and the generically gendered woman mime the lyrics of 1990s Mandopop to utter their minimally devastating love complaints:

The male said, “Don’t love (me) too much”
 The female said, “Just love (me) a little”

男的说：不要爱太多
 女的说：只爱一点点
 (Lines 48–49)²²

We eavesdrop on nothing original or extraordinary whatsoever—a stereotype of a man keeping a woman at a distance, a woman who just wants a little more affection than he is willing to grant. But by listening in on the modern love complaint, the reader marshals disparate Chinese literary genres into a synthetic whole. Archived with other moments of lyrical reading, this exchange is no more profound than it needs to be to link up to past genres.

Once again we see Zhai trading in stereotypes in order to reauthorize the world as a fundamentally lyrical one. Yu Xuanji is described ironically as “having mastered the genre of nature poetry” (*fu de jiang bian liu* 赋得江边柳), literally: able to compose verses on willows by the riverbank but “unable to manage/capture men’s hearts” (*fu bu de nan ren xin* 赋不得男人心) (Zhai 2009, line 131).²³ The duplicate use of “able to compose” (*fu de* 赋得) to indicate lyrical competency and failures of femininity signals the commutability of one trope and the other. The entirely expected rhetoric of the spurned woman systematically serves as the point of delivery of poetic genius. This can also be seen in Zhai’s use of “flowers hooked her head” (鲜花钩住了她的人头) (line 5), an image depicting Yu’s upturned face after the execution, to suggest the reader’s mode of engagement.²⁴ In the original poem, this implausible fishing metaphor captures the ways in which the beauty of falling petals provokes upturned faces, thus “hooking” people’s heads. In “Ode,” this catachresis names the ethos of the neotraditional feminist lyric, the violent and successful bid for modern attention from soft and beautiful falling things.

Women poets risk pigeonholing (and worse) when they write about women who aren’t loved, appreciated, counted, or understood, women who have lost youth or beauty or both. Zhai seems to take on that risk completely. Rather than write pronouncedly feminist verses about pronouncedly feminist issues, Zhai rebrands feminism as a layered conscious-

²² Lyrics taken from Eric Woo’s 1994 hit song, “只爱一点点” (Just love me a little).

²³ This is ironic because Yu Xuanji’s most famous poem is titled “On Willows by the Riverbank” (赋得江边柳), the poem to which people refer to indicate her mastery of the genre. Zhai’s second clause is a play on this title.

²⁴ This is a very close adaptation of one of most haunting lines in “On Willows by the Riverbank” (赋得江边柳): “falling flowers hooked her head” (花落钩人头).

ness of the sinological world, and a lyrical reclamation of its past literary cultures. This type of consciousness indulges in the topos of love, separation, and their complaints in order to surveil alternative histories and futures: gender subjectivity, the formation of modern China, and the transversal impact of mediation. Zhai's feminist poetry is not heteroglossaic or unrelentingly arcane because that is how a contemporary Chinese woman writes the contemporary Chinese woman's condition but because it alone can access the experiential and perceptual lacunae of contemporary Chinese thought. "I want you to know me," the undocumented female poet woos her young scholar, "like you've never known anyone before / My name is our secret code. . . . The writer and the reader / The power of language games between two people" (我要你认识我 / 就像你从未认识过别人 / 那是我们之间的秘密符号 / . . . / 写和读 / 二人博弈的力量) (2009, lines 25–32).²⁵ The poetess's enjoinder is a whisper and an overtaking. Her verses tender the supreme aural and epistemological pleasures of the neofeminist view, or—in what amounts to the same—the most nuanced, and perhaps most tactful, view of modern sinicist domains.

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²⁵ I have taken another liberty with translation here. The literal translation should be "Reading and Writing, the power of gambling/gaming between two people." Given the context, the nouns "reading" and "writing" are clearly shorthands for the reader (the young scholar) and the writer (Qiu Yanxue), and "bo yi 博弈" refers specifically to something both exegetical and creative that happens between a reader and a mysterious text.

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