

Leaving Taboos Behind: Notes on Two Novels by Chen Ran and Lin Bai*

While Virginia Woolf (1929)¹ considered autobiographism a dead end, some contemporary Chinese writers, like Chen Ran 陈染 (b. 1962), Hai Nan 海男 (b. 1962), Hong Ying 虹影 (b. 1962), Lin Bai 林白 (b. 1958), and Xu Xiaobin 徐小斌 (b. 1953) make the most of it as a starting point. The two best known novels by Chen Ran and Lin Bai – namely *A Private Life*² (*Siren shenghuo* 私人生活; Chen Ran 1996) and *A One-Person War*³ (*Yi ge ren de zhanzheng* 一个人的战争; Lin Bai 1997c) – provide a fitting example of these writers' use of autobiographism and outspokenness.

The above-mentioned women writers embody the core of the so-called 'Individualized' Writing (*gerenhua xiezu* 个人化写作), a literary tendency which found fertile soil for flourishing in the pluralistic context of the 1990's.⁴

Both the novels I am referring to are representative of the main characteristics of the authors and offer a wide range of clues to their approach to literature.

A Private Life by Chen Ran is commonly viewed as the most successful

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¹ Virginia Woolf is a well-known and much emulated writer by the authors of 'Individualized' Writing. See Pozzi (2004a: 25).

² The novel was first published in 1996 in *Huacheng* and was recently translated into English (Chen Ran 2004).

³ The novel first appeared in 1994 in *Huacheng*, after being rejected by several literary magazines. It was then published by Gansu renmin chubanshe with a cover displaying a photograph of a nude woman. In no time, the novel was denounced as obscene and pornographic. Lin Bai had no alternative but to revise the novel to have it re-published. This controversy ensured notoriety to the novel. On this topic, see Sang (2003: 176-81); Xu Kun (1999: 66-71). See also Kong Shuyu (2005), published while my article was in press.

⁴ For a detailed analysis of this literary phenomenon and its definitions, see Pozzi (1999: 251-56; 2004a: 1-103).

fulfillment of the 'Individualized' Writing.⁵ Since the very beginning of the novel, Chen Ran brings the reader in a private world, where the main character is Ni Niuniu 倪拗拗 (*i.e.* Chen Ran herself or, better, a conflation of narrator and author),⁶ a world where nothing happens because everything has already happened. The novel is the narration and, above all, the analysis of the narrator's own past. In the first few pages we meet with nearly all the main characters, at least with their heavy shadow: Ni Niuniu, her mother and father. Just one key-character is missing, that is widow He 禾; she will appear in the fifth chapter, but since widow He is the narrator's alter-ego and «she is the mirror of myself» as Ni Niuniu says (Chen Ran 1996: 145), it is as if she was already there as well. Together with the main characters, Chen Ran provides also the main themes of her narration, that is to say loneliness, relativism, melancholia, despair towards men, feeling of hopelessness and loss. Ni Niuniu introduces herself as «a fragmented person of a fragmented era» (*yì ge canque de shidai li de canque de ren* 一个残缺的时代里的残缺的人), one who desperately «needs a lover, no matter if man or woman» (*ibid.*: 8). What is most interesting is that the narration starts with the term 'time' (*shíjiān* 时间) and a dissertation about its inexorable flow; the novel, with a *Ring-Komposition* framework, ends with the same concept and even the same sentence – a quotation from a song – is repeated both in the beginning and in the end of the novel, that is: «Time has passed by and I am still here» (*Shíguāng liúshì le wǒ yīrán zài zhèlǐ* 时光流逝了我依然在这里) (*ibid.*: 1, 222). *A One-Person War* by Lin Bai presents a similar circular structure. The first scene is that of the female protagonist Lin Duomi 林多米 (with no doubt the alter-ego of Lin Bai)⁷ masturbating when she was five years old, safe from prying eyes under the mosquito-curtain. The last scene of the novel is the woman Lin Duomi masturbating. Moreover, in Chen Ran's *A Private Life* as well, one of the last pages is devoted to a scene of autoerotism. What dramatically emerges from both the novels is an irrevocable and irreparable solitude. But the analogies between the two novels are not reduced to this.

Both the novels tell the life of their women protagonists starting from their childhood, a sort of coming-of-age memoir, up to their mature age (in both cases around thirty years old). A key-aspect of these works is the fragmentary character of the narration: the plot turns into an amalgam of the narrator's thoughts, feelings, and memories. The writers often use the first person,

⁵ Note that 'Individualized' Writing is often defined Private Writing (*sirenhua xiezuo* 私人化写作) as well, the adjective 'private' being a clear reference to the novel by Chen Ran.

⁶ I wish to point out that the name of the main character of the novel could be read Ni Aoao as well as Ni Niuniu. Sang (2003: 207 ff.) opts for the former. I opt for the latter supported by Visser (2002). The name means 'disobedient' in one case, and 'stubborn' in the other.

⁷ Lin Bai frequently gives her name to her female characters (Pozzi 2004a: 27). In fact Lin Duomi bears her family name; moreover, the name Duomi, meaning 'much rice' and thus directly referring to whiteness' semantic sphere, recalls the author's first name Bai, meaning 'white'.

abruptly shifting to the third. This creates a sort of pre-arranged confusion in the reader. Because of the identification between author and characters, reality and fiction clash and converge at the same time. However, the narration of the process of ripening of Ni Niuniu is, in some way, more linear than that of Lin Duomi. The tendency to disjointedness is indeed one of Lin Bai's prerogatives.

The content of Chen Ran's *A Private Life* is easy to summarise: Ni Niuniu is seen as a «problematic child» (*wenti ertong* 问题儿童) (*ibid.*: 13), who refuses the company of others. She doesn't «care about adults' business», since «the world outside has no relationship» with her (*ibid.*: 35). She spends most of her time alone speaking to parts of her body, *i.e.* to her legs, that she calls 'Misses Yes' (*Shi xiaojie* 是小姐), to her arms, that she calls 'Misses No' (*Bu xiaojie* 不小姐), and to her fingers 'Misses Chopsticks' (*Kuaizi xiaojie* 筷子小姐) (*ibid.*: 9-12). She has a tight relationship with her mother, who gives her an «abstract kind of love» (*yi zhong chouxiang de ai* 一种抽象的爱), with no warmth (*ibid.*: 136). She has since the infancy a deep hatred and a feeling of revenge towards men, who are represented by her mean and cold father and her cruel teacher Mr T. All the women in the novel are tied up by an often emphasised sisterhood sanctioned by their revenge feeling against men's idiocy and meanness. «I will chase him away. I will avenge you» is what the child Niuniu promises to her grandmother being thrown out of the house; the man she refers to when desperately screaming «I will avenge» (*wo yao baochou* 我要报仇) «is of course father» (*ibid.*: 27).⁸ After her parents split and the father disappears, she and her mother move to an anonymous building in Peking and so does their former neighbour, widow He. They constitute a sort of 'republic of women', where they live with no need of men. What Ni Niuniu experiences then is a forced sexual intercourse with Mr T, an enthralling and too brief love with a young man (who is oddly described to have a kind of feminine beauty and sensitiveness), the death of her mother for sickness and the death of widow He in a fire, the admission to a psychiatric asylum and, finally, a never-ending solitude.

Not a single event occurring in a woman's existence is neglected, starting from childhood, which is viewed as the fundamental period for the formation of one's character, up to puberty, adulthood, and the fear of growing old. As Dai Jinhua (1996a: 50) has noted, Chen Ran plays two roles in her works: the analyst and the analyzed.⁹ It is not a mere case that one of the most used verb in Chen Ran's pages is, after 'to remember' (*huiyi* 回忆), 'to analyze' (*fenxi* 分析), while in Lin Bai we find a wide use of the verb 'to remember' as well and, secondly, of the verb 'to feel' (*ganjue* 感觉).

⁸ Niuniu attacks paternal authority by making a highly symbolical cut in his trousers. This cut is told as compulsory and inevitable; note that the chapter in which the scene takes place is titled 'Scissors and Attraction' (*Jiandao he yinli* 剪刀和引力; Chen Ran 1996: 34-40).

⁹ Dai Jinhua also notes how Chen Ran is deeply interested and involved in the psychoanalysis' field.

The same punctual description of all the stages of women's physical and psychological growth is present in Lin Bai. Besides, in her *A One-Person War*, she speaks in detail of abortion (Lin Bai 1997c: 191, 214-17), nearly an obsession in her works,¹⁰ where she provides all the possible definitions for it in the Chinese language and repeats the operation's dreariness step by step.

If a urban sisterhood is shaped in Chen Ran, as Patricia Sieber (2001: 22) stated, what takes form in Lin Bai's works is a wilder counterpart of the same sisterhood, she draws what I have elsewhere defined as 'the myth of the moon' (Pozzi 2004b), that is to say a dreamy depiction of almost fantastic women characters always symbolized by and compared with moon's whiteness. In such metareality men have no place. The dizzy background of *A Private Life* is a grayish and noisy Peking,¹¹ while in Lin Bai's *A One-Person War* Peking is simply the town where Lin Duomi (and the writer as well) lives at present, the place where she abandons herself to the flow of emotions and memories and where she physically jots down her thoughts. Peking represents society, an alien world that swarms, just out of the window, with injustice and oppression towards women. But the real setting of the novel is Shajie, a neighbourhood of the writer's hometown, Beiliu, in Guangxi province, a wild land in the south, bordering Vietnam, humid with never-ending rains. Shajie is the physical projection of the writer's inner world. Here, women are mysterious queens, free to reign over their own bodies and souls. But in Lin Bai's works, there is also a real and vivid Shajie, with detailed descriptions of every aspect of Guangxi's old traditions, popular habits, and luxuriant nature. To a certain extent, dimly and discontinuously, we can recognise a fresh outbreak of the 'Seeking Roots' Literature.

The first word of Lin Bai's *A One-Person War* is 'mirror' (*jingzi* 镜子), a frequent image both in Lin Bai's and Chen Ran's works. In front of it there is almost always a woman examining her naked body or questioning herself. This scene symbolises the way to soothe the disappointment of the real world suggested by the writers: taking shelter in narcissism and seeking comfort in the inner self. The title of the epilogue of the novel is 'Escape' (*Taoli* 逃离), another recurring concept in both the writers, for whom the final destination of their flying away is perhaps their own private world. As Chen Ran (2001: 37-38) has stated: «I've no homeland in my heart, my body is my homeland».

In Lin Bai's *A One-Person War* a real plot is missing, since there is an unpredictable succession of fragments of Lin Duomi's past intermingled with weird encounters with fascinating women, more similar to ghosts, suddenly appearing and inviting the narrator to the netherworld. The narration is also crossed by digressions about movies, legends of the author's homeland, and

¹⁰ See for instance Lin Bai (1993: 80-81; 1997a: 67-68, 120-25; 1998: 11-14).

¹¹ Visser (2002: 179-87) points out how the representation of Peking in *A Private Life* reflects the sense of alienation typical of Chinese contemporary urban literature.

several micro-stories of women characters belonging to other works by Lin Bai (and the writer openly tells the reader in which work the whole story is narrated). The story of Lin Duomi shares many analogies with that of Ni Niuniu and that of Lin Bai herself. She is a lonely and taciturn child who lost her father when three years old, nobody takes care of her, not even her own mother; she is terribly sensitive and attracted by feminine beauty, wondering if she is lesbian or not (Lin Bai 1997c: 37). Lin Duomi suffers from the same kind of autism (*youbizheng* 幽避症) Ni Niuniu is affected by (Chen Ran 1996: 3), that is to say she fears and avoids people.¹² It is a sort of «narcissistic love» (*zilian de aiyi* 自恋的爱意) generated by «a masochist psychology» (*zinüe zhi xin* 自虐之心) (Lin Bai 1997c: 225). Lin Bai (*ibid.*: 191) makes her protagonist declare:

I'm destined to think and move freely only at the very moment I confine myself [*youbi* 幽闭]¹³ in a room. If I only open the door, I feel disoriented and at a loss. I've spent years in overcoming such weak point of mine, with no results. I wonder if I was naturally born to closed and dark rooms.

After a wretched childhood, she is about to become a screenwriter, but loses this chance because of her involvement in plagiarism. She spends the years of the university in a sort of apathy, becomes then librarian and, finally, screenwriter. The men she meets either try to rape her, or cheat on her, or exploit her. Eventually all of them abandon her. At the very end, after some years spent with an old widow in a home lined with mirrors in Peking, she gives herself in despair to an old man. All the main events occurring to Ni Niuniu and Lin Duomi really resemble Chen Ran's and Lin Bai's own experiences.¹⁴

The two novels are thus built on the memories and body belonging to the narrator, but narrator and author often identify with each other. Memory and body act as the foundations on which the narrative frame is built up. These writers write down pages imbued with what belongs only to them, in other words, what they have experienced (the memory) and the physical instrument of their experiences (the body). In this way, using «blood where tradition used ink» (Lin Bai 1998: 221-22), they claim to have found a way of writing that is their own, in such a sense they find in autobiographism a starting point to create their own art.

¹² See for instance Lin Bai (1997c: 22, 36).

¹³ There are several terms for 'autism' in Chinese language, generally combining characters expressing self-isolation, like *gudu* 孤独 (all alone), *zibi* 自闭 (autistic), or the two different 'youbi' used by Chen Ran and Lin Bai, with *zheng* 症 (disease). Note that both novels display a striking recurrent presence of such terms.

¹⁴ A deeper insight into the autobiographical character of 'Individualized' Writing is proposed in a yet unpublished paper titled 'About *Gerenhua Xiezuo* and the Tendency towards Auto-graphism in Chinese Contemporary Literature', presented by the author at the XV EACS Conference in Heidelberg (26-29 August 2004).

Besides an overabundance of autobiographical information, in both works there is the exposure of topics viewed as taboos by orthodox morality. This serves as a means to assert the freedom of the woman-individual and her originality. There is an inclination to the unconstrained and accurate treatment of one's sexuality, an incredible outspokenness not only about sexual intercourse between men and women,¹⁵ but also about shameful, 'immoral' questions such as masturbation, lesbianism,¹⁶ and narcissism. To provide one example of the presence of such themes in the novels, I can mention a passage of Chen Ran's *A Private Life* in which widow He morbidly seduces the child Ni Niuniu and induces her to caress her and kiss her breasts (Chen Ran 1996: 51-54). Moreover the writers deal with open and detailed descriptions of women menstruation (*ibid.*: 77-79) and «secret parts» (*yinmi de difang* 隐秘的地方) (Lin Bai 1997c: 5), particularly concentrating on breast's description. Finally, Chen Ran (1996: 84, 137, 238) and Lin Bai (1997c: 192) also mention people smoking hemp (*dama* 大麻).

As already pointed out, the female characters in 'Individualized' Writing are often seeking safety by escaping.¹⁷ Up to the point that Lin Duomi is conceived as an «escapologist» (*taopaozhuyizhe* 逃跑主义者) (*ibid.*: 222). They fly away from a world that is ruled by, and fit for men. At the same time, they feel they are «people dropped by the society» (*bei shehui yiqi de ren* 被社会遗弃的人) (*ibid.*: 224). Their forced escape conveys a criticism – sometimes sharp, sometimes veiled – against a society where women seem to have no chance. For both writers and their characters, writing is the only channel of communication with the outside world. Ge Hongbing (2004), borrowing an expression coined by the writer Zhao Botian 赵柏田 (b. 1969), refers to a great number of writers born in the 1960's as to «the survivors of the red era» (*hongse shidai de yimin* 红色时代的遗民). He argues that all these writers¹⁸ share common features mainly derived from the cultural and historical background they grew up in, *i.e.* the period following the Cultural Revolution upheaval. One of this features is no doubt the feeling of uncertainty and disorientation recognizable in the representation of characters unceasingly flying away. In Ge Hongbing's words, the writers generally referred to as the 'late-

¹⁵ See for example the narration of Lin Duomi being raped and the details provided on penetration (Lin Bai 1997c: 132, 159-60).

¹⁶ On homo-erotic desire in 'Individualized' Writing, see Pozzi (2004a: 84-91); on female same-sex desire in modern China and in the two novels here examined, see Sang (2003). I went a step further in the analysis of this topic in a still unpublished paper presented at the X AISC Conference in Venezia (10-12 March 2005) and titled 'Lesbismo e letteratura femminile' [Lesbianism and Women's Literature].

¹⁷ With reference to this topic in Hai Nan's works, see Pozzi (2004a: 31).

¹⁸ Chen Ran, Han Dong 韩东 (b. 1961), Dong Xi 东西 (b. 1966), Lin Bai, Lu Yang 鲁羊 (b. 1963), Qiu Huadong 邱华栋 (b. 1969), Xu Kun 徐坤 (b. 1965), Zhu Wen 朱文 (b. 1967) among others.

comers' (*wanshengdai* 晚生代) constitute «a running generation» (*benpao de yi dai* 奔跑的一代). This sense of disorientation together with «the postmodernist tendency to turn inward toward an all-embracing subjectivity» (Cai Yongchun and Batt 2003: 50) lead to a strong attention towards one's body. In Chen Ran and Lin Bai's works, this emphasis on the body melts with a gendered quest for self-expression and echoes Western feminist writings, in particular Hélène Cixous' (Yang Lixin 2002; cf. Cixous 1975). What takes shape is the so-called 'Body Writing' (*shenti shuxie* 身体书写 or *shenti xiezuo* 身体写作), also indicating the works by a younger generation of women writers, namely Mian Mian 棉棉 (b. 1970), Wei Hui 卫慧 (b. 1973), Chun Shu 春树 (b. 1983), and others, who are generally grouped by critics under the label of 'Beautiful Women Writers' (*meinü zuojia* 美女作家). Nonetheless, in my point of view, the works by these 'Beautiful Women Writers', with their much stronger market-oriented frame, are a degeneration and impoverishment of the tendency inaugurated by Chen Ran and Lin Bai.

Dealing with such themes, narrating private and small stories, sketching men out only as mean, superficial and empty beings, provided to Chen Ran and Lin Bai some criticism in mainland China's literary world (e.g. Ding Laixian 1995).

It is hard to say whether these writers represent a radical cultural change or a continuity with a tradition of women writers, like Ding Ling 丁玲 (b. 1904) or Bing Xin 冰心 (b. 1900) for instance. In my opinion, their works allow for both interpretations. On the one hand, their dreamy and idealised depiction of women has much to share with suggestions derived from *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Hong lou meng* 红楼梦) for example, and it often conceals an attempt to satisfy men's desire, more than declaring their own. Still, both Lin Bai and Chen Ran are aware of this, since they do not deny an influence of *The Dream of the Red Chamber* and, besides, Chen Ran (1996: 49), describing the room where widow He lives and meets Ni Niuniu, writes:

This is the room of women, here one woman or two women unceasingly put on and take off clothes, they do not speak, they use a code, it is as if behind the invisible mirrors in the room there were hidden men's eyes, and the eyes are peeping at them...

Lin Duomi and Ni Niuniu's private and solitary war against society, their flight towards freedom, their search for their own expression reaches a dead-end: both novels end with a sense of despair. Everything is 'private', but there is no 'life' anymore. Lin Duomi is depicted as an «invented child» (*xugou de haizi* 虚构的孩子) (Lin Bai 1997c: 125) and, in the last pages of the novel, Ni Niuniu names herself «Miss Zero» (*Ling nüshi* 零女士) (Chen Ran 1996: 209). After one's private war, it is as if nothing had been conquered.

On the other hand, many critics, such as Dai Jinhua (1996b: 95), Chen Xiaoming (1995), and Li Jiefei (1997) have stressed that the novelty behind

'Individualized' Writing is basically related to two main features.¹⁹ First of all, novelty consists in a strong assertion of individualism, shared by all the writers. In the second place, it is related to the full ripening of women writers' consciousness of their own gender. 'Individualized' Writing represents women's definitive shift from being the object of narration to acting as its subject. In critics' eyes up to the 1990's, women's inner worlds were wrapped in mystery, covered by the veil of the silence in taboos (*shenmigan* 神秘感). Now, thanks to the works of writers such as Chen Ran and Lin Bai, the chance to understand female intimacy and personality and the possibility to enter the world of this mysterious object (*shenmi duixiang* 神秘对象) have gradually become concrete.

I partially agree with these views. However, it should also be noted that these writers, in spite of their originality, often end up by relying on similar narrative formulars. Moreover, I would argue that Lin Bai and Chen Ran's representation of an exclusive feminine hyper-sensitivity together with their awareness of a sort of voyeurism they induce in the reader, can also be read as means to acquire visibility in the literary field.²⁰

In conclusion, the characteristics of fragmentariness and autobiographicity, if well-mastered by the authors in their short stories, in *A Private Life* and *A One-Person War* give way to a sense of unbalance and disharmony. In other words, both the novels display a high degree of disjointedness between imagination and self-expression. Perhaps also due to the conspicuous length of the novel genre, here writing is more born of conation than of imaginative creation: writers give vent to their own passions in search of a vicarious satisfaction. In this sense, the very point of debate should not be the worthiness of autobiographism, but the lack of filtering out one's own emotion.

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¹⁹ See also He Guimei (1996); Ran Xiaoping (2003).

²⁰ On the complicated relationship between voyeurism and market economy in the writers' works, see Pozzi (2004a: 92-103).

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