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SPEAK BEYOND THE EDGE: CHINESE AND AMERICAN CONFESSIONAL POETRY IN A CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT

Abstract

American confessional poetry surfaced on the literary horizon against the backdrop of the time-honored Western confessional tradition and a clamorous post-War American society. As an experimental poetic voice, it challenged the yokes of all kinds: political, military, moral, cultural and literary. In the 1980s, warm reception of American confessional poetry in China engendered a discourse of Chinese confessions that is markedly poignant, dark and introspective. This paper looks into the making of a Chinese confessional poetics, especially of a discourse of women's poetry, in terms of shared authorial thematic and stylistic preferences, in interaction with American confessional poetry as a cross-cultural literary construct imbued with political significance. In doing so, it examines Chinese and American confessional poetry as a self-positioning, self-defining, self-articulating and self-interpreting act on the margin of the socio-political domain.

Keywords: confessional poetry, reception, politics, women poets, gender politics

Introduction

Western confessional literature has a history of more than 1,500 years. It registers the trail of Western civilization from the age of religious rule to secularization and to modernity. The desire to "get it out" links religious and secular confessions. The Renaissance and the Enlightenment are two significant points of reference when it comes to the advance towards secularization. The Renaissance which took place in the fifteenth century signalled the end of the Middle Ages when the Catholic Church had possessed supreme power over sovereign states and individuals. The Renaissance played a key role in separating the Protestant Church from Roman Catholicism and the state from the church. Three hundred years later, Enlightenment thinkers and activists took a big step forward in promoting the emancipation of individual selves from higher authorities by means of individual judgment and ideals. Surging individualism

continued to broaden the platform for secular confessions. In the post-World War II context, American confessional poetry arose as a distinctive voice among the currents of time-honored literary confessions, which, under the cover of self-disclosure and self-exhibition, articulate messages of personal politics. Psychotic self-expression by American confessional poets is reminiscent of the pervasive sense of despair, disillusion and scepticism felt by American and European intellectuals. It specifically targets the then-dominant capitalist consumerism and established power felt as repressive and restrictive.

The relative shortage of Chinese confessional literature is socio-psychologically induced, because most Chinese literati are reluctant to be marginalized politically and morally. Confucianism and Daoism as the bedrock of the Chinese cultural tradition are semi-religious, semi-philosophical by nature, and both attach great importance to life here and now rather than afterlife. Confucianism advocates moral and ethical excellence, as well as social and political commitment, through self-cultivation and self-discipline. The resultant literature is imbued with political aspirations, social awareness and moral pride. By taking a marginal stance, Daoism articulates strong scepticism of all effects and meanings of being (e.g., reputation, social status, power, fortune and misfortune, good and evil). The subject of Daoist literature often concerns a reclusive life-style and a let-it-be philosophy of life, articulated in a detached and escapist voice. It lacks the overtly subversive power of western confessional literature.

In the early twentieth century, the flooding of Western literature inspired a confessional mode of literary expression that had been subdued or had lain dormant in indigenous Chinese cultural tradition. Chinese intellectuals' surging interest in selves and selfhood went hand in hand with the grand narrative of national salvation and nation-building. History repeated itself in the 1980s in the aftermath of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), when political correctness was the one and only yardstick to judge literary production and reception. Privatised literary expression like confessions was disavowed as pro-capitalist vice.

Almost 25 years after the critical "discovery" of the American confessional school, this form also emerged in contemporary China. In 1981 two of Robert Lowell's poems appeared in the Chinese authoritative journal *Poetry* (*Shikan*). Large-scale introduction and translation of American confessional poetry followed in the official and unofficial circuits, especially in China's southwest Sichuan province. Sylvia Plath's poetry in particular stood out in this cross-cultural literary communication as an eye-opener for Chinese poets who were then still struggling to divest themselves of ideological baggage.

This paper draws special attention to the impact of American confessional poetry upon the Chinese literary scene in the 1980s. When I did my preliminary study of

Chinese and American confessional poetry some ten years ago, I was inclined to see them primarily as cross-cultural aesthetic objects, something occurring in the middle ground of cross-cultural literary communication. With time, I came to realize not a few blind spots embedded in my earlier research. One, I failed to pinpoint the political potentials of this veiled self-expression. Two, my earlier contextualization was incomplete and inaccurate. This is why I transplant the material from my earlier research and extrapolate it into the present context where new meanings and arguments are generated¹. In this article written with Chen Xiaomin we are arguing instead that both Chinese and American confessional poetry feature as aesthetic categories in particular intracultural and intercultural contexts as manifestations of personal politics, the personal is political, so to speak. American and Chinese confessional poetry can be read as a showcase of politicized self-expression at odds with established powers. We are particularly interested in how the confessional discourse relates to the acts of self-positioning, self-defining, self-articulating and self-interpreting and in how poets wrestle with politics to carve out a discursive space of their own, on the margin of the socio-political domain.

American confessional poetry in its historical context

American confessional poetry as a distinctive voice emerged around the 1950s and was popularised throughout the 1960s. M. L. Rosenthal² was the first American critic who employed the term “confessional poetry” in a review of Lowell’s *Life Studies* (1959). Lowell’s lyrical speaker in *Life Studies* assumes a bolder, more tormented personal voice than those of the *Land of Unlikeness* (1944), *Lord Weary’s Castle* (1946), and *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (1951). In *Life Studies* Lowell treats of deaths and failures in his family, of his imprisonment during World War II, and of his mental illness and institutionalization. Similar subjects informed the writing of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton after the two women poets attended the Boston poetry workshop instructed by Lowell in the late 1950s. The three poets’ shared preference for the same or similar subject matter is a major justification for American critics to lump them together as “confessional poets”. Additionally, both Lowell and Sexton credit W. D. Snodgrass’s *Heart’s Needle* (1959) as a source of inspiration and Snodgrass himself as their shared line of influence. The names of Theodore Roethke and John Berryman can also be

¹ J. H. Zhang, *American and Chinese Confessional Poetry: A Case of Cross-Cultural Intertextuality*, “Canadian Review of Comparative Literature” 2004, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 11-26.

² M. L. Rosenthal, *The New Poets: American and British Poetry Since World War II*, New York 1967, p. 23.

associated with the group, through *The Lost Son and Other Poems* (1948) and *Dream Songs* (1969) respectively.

American confessional poetry has its roots in the Western confessional tradition. Religious confessions address either God via church elders or the community of believers and potential believers, while secular confessions are directed towards an actual or “imagined community” for philosophical, political, ethical, or aesthetic purposes³. Through the act of confessing, personal feelings, frustrations, anguish, fears, failures, and a sense of guilt are poured out into the public arena, thus taking on communal significance. The harbinger of confessional literature dates as far back as St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. In the autobiographical section, St. Augustine addresses his spiritual wanderings, or in Robert O’Connell’s words, the “odyssey of soul” — along adolescent mischief and sexual adventures, the theosophy of Mani, endeavour for secular successes, and diving into Neoplatonic mysticism — towards the soul’s union with God⁴. Augustine’s “I”-speaker confesses his sins before the one and only addressee — God, who is “my source of sweet light, my glory, and my confidence”⁵. If Augustine’s confessions aim at the purification and salvation of the soul from inside the Christian community, Jean-Jacques Rousseau unveils his confessions as part and parcel of his political philosophy. Rousseau reveals things “inside and under the skin” to reflect upon universal problems and conflicts of human nature⁶. His *Confessions* is a master copy of autobiographies that inspire, engage, and provoke readers and writers of later generations.

Robert Phillips scrutinizes American confessional poetry against the backdrop of the Western literary tradition of using “the Self as primary subject, the Self treated with the utmost frankness and lack of restraint”⁷. He makes a long list of Western poets whose works more or less fit into the confessional mode: Sappho, Catullus, De Quincey, Musset, Wordsworth, Byron, Rilke, Baudelaire, and Whitman. American confessional poetry shares with previous confessional literature a desire for naked “truths” and continues to draw on the material of private life, but marked ruptures can be readily identified. Firstly, the subject matter of American confessional poetry shows unprecedented concern and enthusiasm for mental disorder and psychosis. Incidentally, among the concerned poets, Lowell suffered from long-term depression

³ Here I am referring to Benedict Anderson’s formulation of the nation as an “imagined community”, of people who do not and cannot know each other. See B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd edition, London and New York 1991.

⁴ R. J. O’Connell, *St. Augustine’s Confessions: The Odyssey of Soul*. Harvard UP, MA 1969, p. 4.

⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford 1991, p. 23.

⁶ C. Kelley, *Rousseau’s Exemplary Life: The Confessions as Political Philosophy*, Ithaca and London 1987, p. 3.

⁷ R. Phillips, *The Confessional Poets*, Carbondale and Edwardsville 1973, p. 4.

and died in a car accident, and Plath, Sexton, and Berryman all committed suicide. Secondly, American confessional poetry is spoken in a hard-edged and defiant voice, while much of previous confessional literature was of a gentle and cultivated tone. Thirdly, American confessional poetry, seemingly devoid of any religious, social or political commitment, works primarily as self-therapy.

Nevertheless, to put it in the right perspective, self-expression and self-therapy by American confessional poets is reminiscent of the pervasive sense of despair, disillusion and scepticism felt by American and European intellectuals. Traumatic experiences lurk in their collective memory: the two devastating wars, the indelible horror of the Holocaust, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Korean War (1950-1953), the shock of the French defeat in Vietnam in 1954, the McCarthy era with a hard-line anti-Communist stance, and the looming shadow of the Cold War between the super-powers of that time, i.e., the United States and its Western allies and the communist Soviet Union with its Eastern European allies and China.

The great fortune made during the war enabled post-War American society to redevelop the dynamic capitalist economy which had been retarded by the Great Depression in 1930s. According to George Tindall and David Shi⁸, the GDP of America almost doubled over the 1945-60 period; well into 1970, America with 6% of the world's population produced and consumed two-thirds of the world's products, propelling the expansion of consumerism. The society seemingly enjoyed great affluence and contentment. Houses were equipped with the latest appliances such as cars, TV sets and refrigerators. The divorce rate fell. The birthrate soared. Standard middle-class American women, with their feminine hairdos and delicate dresses, had to tend to the hearth and home as they enjoyed the fruits of capitalism yielded by decent and diligent men. Under the surface of economic affluence and comfortable domesticity lay a growing sense of unease as well as social upheaval. Many social critics, writers and artists reflected on the conflict of frugal Puritanism and excessive consumerism, targeting the alienating effects of profit-driven capitalism. A widespread sense of uneasiness fermented the Beats and the Hippies in the 1950s-1960s. Meanwhile, post-War Americans witnessed the start and peak of the civil rights movement, antiwar movement, prisoners' rebellion and native Indian movement. This helped accelerate the second-wave feminist movement of which the aim "was to challenge the 'cult of female domesticity' that had prevailed since the 1950s"⁹. Confessional poets who spent their adulthood in this clamorous era were caught up in between economic prosperity and spiritual deprivation, between big powers (government and military) and aspiring individuals; between social conventionality

⁸ G. Tindall and D. Shi, *American: A Narrative History*, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2004, p. 1279.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 1391.

and self-emancipation. Seen in this light, American confessional poetry can be read as articulation by tormented men and women who consciously put up a defence against the yoke of all kinds, political, military, cultural, and moral.

Within the literary discourse, American confessional poetry responds to and reacts against elevated romanticism and impersonalized high modernism. It marks a collective poetic endeavor to carve out a discursive space of its own. Robert Phillips sees American confessional poetry as a poetic engagement with the “shattered heritage of overoptimistic and overheated romanticism”, but devoid of romanticist idealism¹⁰. By joining the self-centric romanticist tradition, these so-called American confessional poets absorb senses and sensibilities into the “I” lyrical speaker. Their confessional poetics also unmistakably target high modernism, as represented by T. S. Eliot’s “objective correlative” and Ezra Pound’s imagism. In their battle against impersonal, objective modernist poetry, these post-War poets write “balanced narrative poems with unbalanced or afflicted protagonists”, in an iconoclastic, ironic, egocentric manner, for therapeutic and purgative purposes¹¹. In a similar vein, Billy Collins observes,

Lowell, Sexton, Plath, and other poets made to huddle under the “confessional” umbrella will drop the masks of Yeats, the personae of Pound, and the impersonality recommended by Eliot to achieve a more direct, less mediated form of personal revelation, often with wiggly psychiatric effects¹².

To the young post-War American poets, modernism represented by T. S. Eliot stands for an orthodox, solemn and heavy European tradition, which does not fit them. They prefer considering poetry as a process of making a life instead of a tool of expression, so they highlight individual life and experience in the kaleidoscopic society and grow attached to the previously taboo matter such as mental disorder, sex and suicide. Their passionate, defiant and “naked” confessions serve as an experimental voice to counter the overheated, overoptimistic romanticism and the restrained, sophisticated modernism.

Religious and secular confessions have long been conceived as a matter of self-disclosure, and notably of “secrets” and “sins”. Likewise, confessional poems are often equated with artefacts of lived experience. We approach instead confessional poems as aesthetic objects in their own right, as part of the constructive/reconstructive process of making a life, politically and poetically. In doing so, we ask what the poem does and what the poet does in/with it. Neither the poem nor the poet is the passive object

¹⁰ R. Phillips, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 16-17.

¹² See K. Sontag and D. Graham eds., *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography*, Saint Paul, MN 2001, p. 84.

of some historical process. Both are actively engaged in the process as subjects, not as objects.

Confessional literature in the Chinese context

If confessions have been deep-seated in Western literary tradition, Chinese confessions are much less prominent on the literary scene, especially in pre-modern China. According to Liu Zaifu and Lin Gang, the comparative shortage of confessional literature in China results from a cultural tradition that is “short of soul-questioning resources”¹³. Central to traditional Chinese poetics is the equation of literature with the vehicle of the Way (*wen yi zaidao*), be it collective responsibilities in Confucianism or nature in Daoism. Literature is supposed to abide by social, political, moral mandates or nature’s call in Confucian or Daoist terms. This poetics largely dismisses confession as a potentially subversive mode of literary expression. Consequently, confessional literature assumed a low profile in pre-modern China. Only under the huge impact of Western literature did tides of confession surface in modern Chinese works of literature, as in Lu Xun’s *Diary of a Madman* (*Kuangren riji*, 1918), Yu Dafu’s *Sinking* (*Chenlun*, 1921), Ding Ling’s *Ms. Sophie’s Diary* (*Shafei nüshi de riji*, 1928), and Mao Dun’s *Rainbow* (*Hong*, 1929), all professing aspirations to modernize the individual selves. In particular, Yu Dafu’s short story *Sinking* triggered off the so-called “Yu Dafu phenomenon”, reminiscent of the sensation provoked by Rousseau’s confessions that revealed things inside and under the skin to reflect upon universal problems and conflicts of human nature. Yet once again, modern Chinese writers’ yearnings for individuality and modernity were subject to the larger agenda of nation-building and national salvation, which radically diminished the disruptive power of modern Chinese confessions. The confessional passage at the close of *Sinking* is an example. The “I”-narrator is a hypochondriac Chinese young man studying in Japan. He is obsessed with European Romanticism and sexual fantasy. After his visit to an uninterested Japanese prostitute, he claims not to love any woman any longer but to love his motherland and later decides to take his own life¹⁴.

Surging confessional consciousness subsided in the 1930s when leftist literature became a dominant mode of literary production. Under the patriotic dictates of literature during the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), confessional literature became politically undesirable. Literature written during this period was noted for its political

¹³ Z. Liu and G. Lin, *Zui yu wenxue – guanyu wenxue chanhui yishi yu linghun weidu de kaocha* [*Sin and Literature – Studies of Literary Confessional Consciousness and Soul’s Orientations*], Hong Kong 2002, p. 2.

¹⁴ D. Yu, *Chenlun* [*Sinking*], [in:] *Zhongguo gongren chubanshe*, Beijing 2012, p. 51.

slogans and didactic message suffused with buoyant revolutionary ardour. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, leftist literature soon evolved into socialist realism (*shehui zhuyi xianshi zhuyi*), which propagated self-effacement and self-abandonment according to the standard of political correctness. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution constituted a watershed in contemporary Chinese literary history. Exemplary literature was political in nature, and literary subject matter was highly politicized with revolutionary zeal. The “I” speaker in socialist realism often features as an index of class, politics, and the discourse of nation building. Take Li Ji's *Black Eyes* (*Hei yanjing*, 1954) for example:

Dear big and bright black eyes
Please don't look around in my direction again
If you truly love paraffin and petrol
We welcome you to visit our refinery¹⁵

The poem is at its best a veiled expression of love and at its worst slavishly complicit with the dominant literary discourse. However, the politically enforced “I”-speaking literary style turned into voluntary, purposeful confessions in contemporary Chinese literature, as gestures of resistance and subversion. Infamous examples are the labelled or self-labelled “glamour writers” (*meini zuojia*) who have scandalized all Chinese literary circles by blatantly portraying minute details of private life for commercial gains. For instance, Wei Hui's *Shanghai Babe* (*Shanghai baobei*, 1999), Mian Mian's *Candy* (*Tang*, 2000), and Chun Shu's *Beijing Doll* (*Beijing wawa*, 2002). Willy-nilly, this preference for self-exposure in the 1980s and 1990s has a historical link with the Maoist era. Then, confession in the form of “criticism” (*piping*) and “self-criticism” (*ziwo piping*) took place at various public gatherings where politically incorrect people (e.g., rightists, capitalists, and morally corrupted prostitutes) were forced to confess their wrongdoings and to have them corrected under the surveillance of the masses. A morbid synthesis of asceticism and eroticism emerged when the alleged convicts were forced to detail privacies. This practice is somewhat parallel to the strange mixtures that emerged out of confessional manuals in the Roman Catholic tradition—and in the history of the Inquisition, which was obsessed with documenting things like sexual transgressions.

As a prominent literary discourse, contemporary Chinese confessional poetry arises from a need to revive selfhood, gender the self, and articulate the silenced self. The self-absorbed, confessional “I” speaker articulates to reconstruct individual selves by deconstructing the class-based revolutionary “I” in socialist realism and the collective, morally privileged “I” in much of traditional Chinese literature. This simultaneous

¹⁵ Z. Bian and H. Niu eds., *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo wushi nian wenxue mingzuo wenku: Xinshi juan 1949-1999* [A Treasure of Literary Masterpieces from the Past Fifty Years in the People's Republic of China: A Volume of New Poetry 1949-1999]. *Zuojia chuban she*, Beijing 1999, p. 87.

process of deconstruction and reconstruction requires points of reference. Like their modern predecessors, contemporary Chinese poets again turned to the West for role models to facilitate alternative self-expression.

Chinese reception of American confessional poetry

Translation as a significant medium in cross-cultural literary communication works to surmount cultural-linguistic barriers. Translations of recent Western literature and new translations of Western classics began to flood China's bookstores and establishment literary journals in the 1980s. Official journals and publishers were engaged in (re-)introducing Western literature to inspire Chinese readers, among which American confessional poetry emerged from the literary horizon. The June 1981 issue of the Chinese journal *Poetry* published Yuan Keji's translation of Lowell's *For the Union Dead* and *Skunk Hour* as well as some biographical notes about the poet. Sexton's *Man and Wife* and Plath's *Morning Song* and *Letter in November* appeared in the *Poetry* issues of September 1985 and May 1986 respectively. It is also noteworthy that Zhao Qiong and Daozi of Xi'an embarked on the translation of American confessional poetry in the early 1980s. Their commitment led to the publication of *Selected Poetry of the American Confessional School* (*Meiguo zibai pai shixuan*) by Lijiang Press in 1987 and of Plath's poetry collection entitled *Witch Burning* (*Ranshao de nüwu*) in Hong Kong in 1992. Some of their translation work was first published in unofficial poetry journals in Sichuan: *Modern Poetry Materials for Internal Circulation* (*Xiandai shi neibu jiaoliu ziliao*) and *Chinese Contemporary Experimental Poetry* (*Zhongguo dangdai shiyan shige*), both in 1985.

All sorts of unofficial and semi-official poetry journals (e.g., campus journals sponsored by university students) rivalled official publications in this endeavour. The irregularity of unofficial publication and distribution makes it impossible to trace all the relevant literature systematically. Still, Maghiel van Crevel's personal archive comprise many unofficial and semi-official journals that published the works of Lowell, Plath, and Sexton, e.g., *Sound* (*Shengyin*), *Continent* (*Dalu*), *The 1990s* (*Jiushi niandai*), and *Peking University Graduate Student Journal* (*Beijing daxue yanjiu sheng xuezhì*). Apart from the two aforesaid Sichuan-based unofficial poetry journals, another Sichuan-based unofficial poetry journal — *Chinese Poetry* (*Han shi*) — spurred on the "Plath tornado" in the wake of an overwhelming nationwide response to the official publication of Zhai Yongming's poem series *Woman* in 1986.

Chinese women poets encountered a fresh, enlightening, powerful voice in American confessional poetry – that of Sylvia Plath. Under Plath's influence, death and dark scenarios loom large in contemporary Chinese women's poetry. Three of Zhai Yongming's

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

Explicit and implicit references to Plath's poetry are scattered in the oeuvres of the aforesaid women poets. Take Zhai Yongming's *Silence* for example, in the first stanza, "she" turns up at night in reply to the call of a butterfly, in the manner of the cold, antique moon, mercury-like and inaccessible. Stanza 2 and 3 recollect minute details of the addressee's life: her failed suicide attempt; her provocative gestures; her deathly composure; her emotional crisis and deprivation; her residence surrounded by bright and black poppies; her unpredictable nature; her silence and death. All these sketches correspond to Plath's lived experience. The line "How did she master this art? She died"¹⁶ is a re-rendering of the following lines from *Lady Lazarus*:

Dying
Is an art, like everything else
I do it exceptionally well¹⁷.

By doing so, the poem is a tribute to Plath, addressing the conflict between art and life, between voice and silence, and between death and eternity.

A multitude of male-authored Chinese poems also carry confessional overtones through the rendering of such subjects as drinking, brawling, sex, darkness, and death. For instance, *Chinese Department* (*Zhongwen xi*, 1984) by the "boor-ist" (*manghan zhuyi*) poet Li Yawei is illustrative of a confessional narrative in which the third-person narrator called "Yawei" gives an ironical account of his lived experience together with his fellow poets as students of a Chinese department. To give another example, male poet Jing Bute, the penname of Feng Jun who initially called himself "Jing Te", is clearly inspired by Berryman's *Dream Songs* for the creation of *Mr. Jing Te* (*Jing Te xiansheng*, 1986). Berryman invents a Henry who speaks alternatively in the first, second and third person, and has a friend who also calls him "Mr. Bones". In a similar vein, Jing

¹⁶ Y. M. Zhai, *Cheng zhi wei yiqie* [*Call It Everything*], ed. X. D. Tang, [in:] *Zhongguo nüxing shige wenku* [*A Treasury of Chinese Women's Poetry*], ed. M. Xie et al, *Chunfeng wenyi chubanshe*, Shenyang 1997, pp. 25-26.

¹⁷ S. Plath, *Ariel*, London 1965, p. 17.

Bute fabricates an imaginary dialogue between the third person Mr. Jing Te (the poet of yesterday) and the “you”-narrator (identifiable with the poet now known as Jing Bute). *Mr. Jing Te* can thus be interpreted as a dialogue within the same personality split between past and present. Mr. Jing Te is a bizarre daydreamer, night-dreamer, killer, cancer patient, and self-willed transformer (into another Mr. Jing Te and a bat). The combined imagery of “dream” and “violin” refers to the title of Berryman’s poems¹⁸. If Berryman’s Henry features mainly as a sufferer and loser, Jing Bute’s Mr. Jing Te appears both surrealistic and violent. Speaking to the reception of Berryman’s poems, it is noteworthy that Lin Xue also weaves references to Berryman’s *Dream Songs* into her three poems titled *Songs* (Ge, 1992) with recurrent images like dream, music, and darkness. Nevertheless, textual evidence shows that Lin Xue clearly attributes a feminine edge to the images reworked on the basis of Berryman’s *Dream Songs*.

The politics of Chinese confessional poetry

American confessional poetry provided a significant frame of reference for Chinese poets to seek a fresh, powerful language to speak of individuality on the margin of the socio-political domain. Chinese confessional poetry has evolved within the framework of Chinese Experimental poetry in the PRC. Experimental poetry began with underground poetic practices in the early 1970s, when rusticated young students gathered together to read and discuss literature in rural areas of China. Those rudiments developed into the so-called “Obscure poetry” (*menglong shi*) in the period from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, when the first underground literary journal *Today* (*Jintian*) emerged in Beijing. Renowned *Today* poets included Bei Dao (b. 1949), Mang Ke (b. 1950), Duoduo (b. 1951), Shu Ting (b. 1952), Yang Lian (b. 1955), and Gu Cheng (1956-1993). The *Today* group was characterized by its quest for individual and creative freedom from contemporary political and cultural orthodoxy, and therefore was devalued by orthodox opponents as “opaque”, “bizarre”, “incomprehensible” or “modern”, as nothing but “anti-socialist” deviations from China’s Four Modernizations Program. On the other hand, Obscure poetry found a large readership among more liberal-minded supporters, young people in particular. During the 1983-1984 nationwide campaign against “spiritual pollution”, however, Obscure poetry was subjected to grave criticism and repression and the loosely defined *Today* school split. After a gradual relaxation of political suppression, the mid-1980s marked a high point in literary experimentation. Experimental poetry groups mushroomed in all major cities throughout the country. Both encouraged and haunted by the groundbreaking achievements of the Obscure

¹⁸ See J. Xu et al eds., *Zhongguo xiandai zhuyi shiqun daguan* [Overview of Groups in Modernist Chinese Poetry 1986-1988], *Tongji daxue chuban she*, Shanghai 1988, pp. 178-179.

poets, the younger generation was eager to look for new dimensions in their poetic experimentation with subject matter, poetic technique and language. According to Maghiel van Crevel, post-Obscure poetry was precisely “an extension and intensification of Obscure poetry”; it had “taken individuality and the re-humanization of the Self to extremes”¹⁹.

In the mid-1980s, a constellation of women poets emerged on the literary scene. With their literary output, they not only joined in polemic on political issues, but also contributed to constructing a new gender discourse that had not yet been defined in terms of traditional or socialist ethics and aesthetics. Obscured by the pantheon of male masters, notably Qu Yuan, Li Bai, Du Fu, Su Shi, only a handful of women authors had their voice heard in Chinese literary history. Li Qingzhao is a figure who is highly commended according to the literary criteria designated by male poets. In her works female images appear dependent, weak and passive. Her self-expression fits well with the feminine tradition, epitomizing aspects of traditional Chinese femininity, such as elegance, tenderness, sentimentality, submissiveness and self-pity. Much of women’s poetry before 1980 is reminiscent of Li’s feminine self-expression.

In post-1949 China, women were mobilized as a workforce for nation building, thus realizing a superficial form of gender equality at the expense of sexual differentiation. Gender awareness, then an easy target for public criticism of petty-bourgeois sentiment, was effectively screened out of the Chinese mindset. This political intervention in gender issues indeed enforced a kind of revolutionary androgyny, according to which Chinese women dressed, talked, behaved and thought like men. Contemporary Chinese women poets feel compelled to revise both the traditional stereotyped images of women and the politically enforced androgyny. Their writing of night and the color black serves as a means, or indeed a strategy to position themselves within and without the Chinese cultural tradition and to construct new gender identities. The black night embodies a self-sufficient world away from daytime clamor and the peeping eye of the sun. There, women can give free rein to their sexual desires and fantasies. Thus the night becomes a space of their own – the very place where Chinese women poets subvert and abolish centuries of prejudices against and taboos on womanhood.

Chinese women poets’ imitation and emulation of certain American confessional poets lead to a collective predilection for the confessional mode of self-expression, black imagery and representations of a death complex. With such a collective predilection, their poetry is exclusively labeled as confessional or as a collective plunge into the “error zone of confession”²⁰. In retrospect, we think that this labelling is no less

¹⁹ M. V. Crevel, *Language Shattered: Contemporary Chinese Poetry and Duoduo*, Leiden 1996, p. 85.

²⁰ D. Zang, *Zibai de wuqu* [*The Error Zone of Confession*], “Shi tansuo” 1995, no. 18, pp. 48-52.

than a double-edged sword. In aesthetic terms, it works to belittle women's creativity by disavowing women's poetry as a marginal discourse with little aesthetic value. Women poets have been depicted as "gruesome", "perverted" and "exhibitionist", and their poetry has been called formulaic, lacking in expressive breadth and depth, and inferior to men's poetry, on the basis of critical yardsticks designated and controlled by male poetry critics. In such cases, gender criteria are indiscriminately superimposed on literary criteria. In political terms, the labelling of women poets turns a blind eye to the significance of confession as a politicized mode of self-articulation from the margins in ambush against (rather than in confrontation with) established powers. The night consciousness and death complex that loom large in unofficial Chinese poetry in the 1980s actually bespeak a powerful yearning for artistic autonomy and poetic justice beyond the pale of politics.

Conclusion

American and Chinese confessional poetry emerged in different cultural, temporal and spatial domains. From an aesthetic point of view, American confessional poetry poses as a poetic revolution against overheated, overoptimistic romanticism and detached modernism. From an ideological point of view, American confessional poetry sides with earlier confessional literature by taking upon itself self-willed marginality against coercive powers of all kinds, religious, political, cultural, and ethical. As a product of cross-cultural communication, Chinese confessional poetry in the 1980s worked to counter political domination and to shake off the yoke of Confucian, Daoist, and socialist poetics. Since that time, Chinese poets have attributed positive readings into the ostensibly dark, highly personal subjects of American confessional poetry. Various rewritings are actualized through the emulation of role models, notably Plath. Certain confessional thematic and stylistic features reoccur in the selection process, e.g., "night consciousness" and "death complex". The sharing of textual sources by Chinese poets leads to poetic confessions, across gender, geographies, and poetry groups. Chinese women poets' collective predilection for the confessional mode of self-expression somewhat obscures the presence of confessional texts written by their male colleagues.

The received view is to see confessional literature as artefacts of personal experience disclosed in an exhibitionist way. We depart from this mainstream reading by shifting attention to the disruptive power inherent in confessional poetics that resists religious, political, ethical, and poetic coercion. To a large extent, confession is a self-positioning, self-defining, self-articulating and self-interpreting act within an actual or imagined community. Confessors across cultural-linguistic traditions tend to take a self-willed marginal position outside the religious, social, cultural or political mainstream. Literary

confessions often convey explicit or implicit political messages. Speaking beyond the edge thus turns into a politicized act of choosing the margins for the sake of self-empowerment and of pursuing poetic justice beyond the pale of the Establishment.