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Q: "Subjection and subjectivity" can you, please, explain how the two terms applied or did not apply to women Chinese poets at the end of the sixteenth beginning of the seventeenth century?

*A: Subjection certainly applies - in the sense that women were considerably under the power and authority of men in social, political, legal and ritual terms. The traditional precepts of the separation of the inner vs. outer spheres, the precepts of "three followings" (father, husband and grown son respectively for a woman at different stages of her life), are both good examples of classical patriarchy. But then again, it was not a watertight system but quite full of contradictions. Thus, filial piety, the primary virtue in Confucianism, obliges a man to respect the wishes (and whims) of his parents, including his mother. Thus elderly women/widows could enjoy quite a bit of power.*

*Subjectivity is trickier. If it is thought of as similar to the idea of the autonomous individual, then it does not apply - not in China and perhaps not too many other places either. The degree of agency and power a woman may have in traditional China was a matter of considerable negotiation, a matter of give and take. In terms of poetry, a feminine figure in a poem can hardly be said to have subjectivity, since such a figure is typically allegorical or symbolic. Maybe we can say that woman poet may be said to exercise some degree of subjectivity as she plays with established conventions.*

Q: If you were to select a text which incorporates the best of Chinese women's poetry, what would it be? What are the best translations? How adequate is Kenneth Rexroth's and Ling Chung's *Women Poets in China*? Did you mention that Ezra Pound had a translation? What male poets should we include, if any, to provide a context and counterpoint to Chinese women's poetry?

*A: The good translations, in my view anyway, are those by Arthur Waley, and yes, Pound - but neither did anything with women poets. I think there is much one can find in their translations that speak to issues of gender. For women poets, most translations are recent, erudite, but not exceedingly poetic. Kenneth Rexroth's and Ling Chung's *Women Poets in China* is alright. The anthology edited by Kang-yi Sun Chang is more expansive. *Red Brush* (eds. Wilt Idema and B Grant) is good for its extensive contextual information.*

Q: This fluidity of gender "voice" (ventriloquism) in poetry--is it evident in fiction or any of the classical visual arts? It seems as if the Confucian mold was so strong that women had few outlets for personal expression other than poetry.

Are there arts including film that demonstrated the same struggles noted as the female poets? Did the introduction of film in the 1900's influence much of the classics?

*A: Fiction was a late genre to develop in China and considered lowly, almost not reputable. For that reason, women did not touch it until late 19th century. Male-authored fiction was typically omniscient, rather than first-person, so that authorial person is not much of an issue.*

Q: I want to start with a question about the difficulty of writing classical Chinese poetry. What I mean is something like this: A friend and I were once talking about Dante's Divine Comedy, and my friend--who is Italian--said that Dante's achievement wasn't really related to his ability to write a long poem in 'terza rima'. Italian is such a rhyme rich language that it's not hard to write rhymes. (Dante's achievement, he said, was in inventing 'terza rima' and writing a complicated literary work.)

However, writing 'terza rima' in English is difficult to do at all, because of the relative scarcity of rhymes in English compared to Italian. So all those Victorian 'terza rima' translations of Dante, even though they are not very good poetry, are substantial achievements in their own right. Similarly, I remember being told once that it's much easier to write haiku in English than Japanese, because Japanese words tend to be polysyllabic, and in English we've got lots of 1-syllable Anglo-Saxon words. So, in classical Chinese poetry, is it hard to write a poem? That is, if, for example, you adopt the 5 x 7 structure, the appropriate rhyme scheme, is it difficult to write something within that structure that makes sense? Or is it easy to write something that complies with the rules, but hard to write a good poem?

Here's one more way of putting it. Even a mediocre villanelle is something of an achievement in English (while a mediocre poem in free verse is no achievement at all). Is it the same for a mediocre lyric poem in classical Chinese poetry?

*A: Writing a good poem in any language is hard. For a classical poem in Chinese to be good, minimally, there needs to be an effective harmony between the scene and the emotion, and usually, a poem needs to contain at least a couple of allusions, which add evocative power. And yes, Chinese is a rhyme rich language - in fact, too rich, because of its monosyllabic nature, and that most words end in vowels. So the technical challenge is not in finding ending rhymes but in the tonal patterns, which govern not just the ending words but all words, and how they relate to one another. That said, to master the basics of writing a classical poem is not beyond most literate people - a couple of months of trying it repeatedly will make you a passable versifier in at least one of the 700 patterns.*

Q: How would you describe the state of feminism in contemporary China? I mean either as a conceptual apparatus/academic discipline, or as a

*A: As an academic topic, feminism is still there - there are usually a few professors who self identify as feminists on most campuses. There are no departments or even loose centers of feminist studies as in the US.*

*Well, to be honest, I've seen one book on feminism in contemporary China.*

Q: The poem written by the last woman poet you presented - where she spoke of how uncomfortable she was in her woman's body - seemed so relevant to today's discussions of transgender/transsexuals. She poignantly articulated something that I've read that people today

articulate when they seek surgery to change their gender. I wonder if you know of this phenomenon occurring in China and if this poet is something of a hero/heroine? I can imagine she would be in the US, if people knew of her work.

In India, I've read, there is a transgender community (Hijra) that live together and have a particular role in the society/Hindu relation - they are sometimes prostitutes, but also seen as somehow sacred/ or to have the ability to bless people etc. You see the men in Saris in the street begging and I believe sometimes they are given babies to raise that are born with both genitalia - anyway, anything like this in China?

*A: There are certainly occasional stories about such figures in literature, but no community that I know of that played a noticeable function in society. A perhaps unrelated community that was prominent in traditional China is the eunuch - they are analogous perhaps to communities you describe in the sense of being social pariah while playing a key role.*

Q: Is there a transgender/transsexual community in China today that you know of?

*A: You are raising a great point. Qiu Jin was so distinctly unhappy about her female body that it cannot but resonate with contemporary transgender community. On the other hand, I would think that to her, the body is not "natural" or biological but quite culturally constructed - in other writings, she points to such elements as the bound feet and the pieced ears. The female body as conceived in traditional China (and I would venture in many other societies as well) may be said to signal culturally constructed femininity, from head to toe.*