

## **AGAINST MYTH AND HISTORY: A NEW WRITING OF MOTHERHOOD IN CONTEMPORARY CHINESE WOMEN'S LITERATURE**

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My mother and I have the same blood running in our bodies, but we are completely different women.<sup>2</sup>

In 1833 the Chinese scholar Yu Zhengxie compared an unmarried woman to an unemployed worker.<sup>3</sup> For Yu, marriage was a woman's occupation, the way she made a living. But a marriage without children was not enough. The woman must have children, ideally sons, to guarantee her survival. If she did not she could be divorced and become "unemployed".<sup>4</sup> In this consideration, maternal love accorded with a practical personal need, and the Confucian code of filial piety confirmed for the mother the pragmatic benefit of reproduction and child rearing. However, once the practical need of mothering for survival is removed from a woman's life (as is now happening), the moral and emotional codes concerning mothering are challenged. Such challenges, as expressed in stories by Chinese women writers published since the 1980s, amount to a rewriting of motherhood.

To discuss this rewriting, I confront, first of all, the centuries long Chinese reproduction culture, which the Chinese sociologist Li Yinghe defines as "a set of concepts, beliefs, customs and habits on the matter of

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<sup>2</sup> Jiang Zidan, "Dengdai huanghun" [Waiting for dusk] in *Jiang Zidan xiaoshuo jingcui* [Selected stories by Jiang Zidan] (Chengdu: Sichuan Renmin Chubanshe, 1998), p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> See Lin Yutang, *Wuguo yu wumin* [My country and my people], (Beijing: Zhongguo Xiju Chubanshe, 1990), p. 128.

<sup>4</sup> The traditional Chinese idea of filial piety prescribes that the greatest failure in life is the failure in producing male offspring to continue one's family name.

reproduction”.<sup>5</sup> I also face questions regarding China’s family planning policy, such as what impact the family planning policy has had on concepts of mothering and childbirth in this period. Furthermore, I consider whether the challenges to the mainstream discourse of motherhood from women writers contributes to the implementation of the family planning policy, which regards the birth of more than one child as a “crime”, as many well-informed observers have pointed out.

A telling point, that may throw light on both the traditional Chinese reproduction culture and the impact of the family planning policy on mothering and childhood, is the statistical gap between the government’s expectation of a population of 1.2 billion by 2000 and the actual 1.3 billion reached by that date. Stubborn resistance to the policy from people in rural areas was the prime cause of the discrepancy. Having said this, I would also like to point out the widespread misunderstanding that China’s family planning policy is a strict “one-child-per-family” policy. Although the government encouraged a couple to have only one child and, in many areas, especially in the cities, measures were taken to ensure that a couple had only one child, the policy was largely compromised in the countryside, where a peasant couple was allowed to have a second child if their first born was a daughter.<sup>6</sup> And many peasant women would continue childbearing if the second child was also a daughter. As the rural population accounts for over 60 percent of the total population, the average birth rate in China was 1.8 in 2004.<sup>7</sup> Given that this statistic includes urban couples in their 20s or early 30s who did not have a child because they did not feel they were ready or they simply did not want to have children, the so-called “dinky” families, one may say that the family planning policy succeeded in the cities where traditional concepts of childbearing and mothering receded because of urban women’s economic independence and the rising of their self consciousness. But the policy largely failed in rural areas because the rural economic conditions and the traditional village culture did not bring about women’s financial independence and self-consciousness, consequently the traditional reproduction culture still reigns in such areas.<sup>8</sup>

Women’s bodies cannot be free where the traditional reproduction culture reigns. Nevertheless, there is an internationally prevalent view which regards the family planning policy as the one and only means for control of

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<sup>5</sup> Li Yinghe, *Shengyu yu chunluo wenhua: Yi ye zhi sun* (Reproduction and village culture: one man’s offspring) (Beijing: Wenhua Yishu Chubanshe, 2003), p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> In the light that the family planning policy allows all couples who have a child with some congenital defects to have a second child, this compromise that allowed rural couples to have a second child if their first born was a daughter equates being female to having a congenital defect. Surprisingly, I have never heard any scholar making a critical comment on this, while the family planning policy is widely denounced.

<sup>7</sup> “International Population and Development Forum” : <http://www.hb.xinhuanet.com>, 5 Sept. 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Li Yinghe analysed this “village culture” in field research and points out convincingly that it is this village culture that has led the villagers’ reproduction behaviour to an irrational frenzy. See *Shengyu yu chunluo wenhua*.

women's bodies. This view is problematic in that it implies that Chinese women's bodies had enjoyed freedom before the implementation of the policy. For example, Harriet Evans writes that

Ever since September 1980, when the Central Committee's Open Letter announced a crash programme to restrict population size to 1.2 billion by the year 2000, the control of women's bodies has been crucial to the government's strategy of economic development. As far as state policy towards women is concerned, women's health, education, employment, marriage and social status have all been subordinated to the goal of controlling fertility.<sup>9</sup>

In actual fact, the traditional reproduction ideology enshrined in the phrase "more sons, more happiness" (*duo zi duo fu*), dominated women's bodies before the horrific-sounding "crash" programme came into practice. Even today, over twenty years after the promulgation of the policy, the traditional reproduction ideology still makes peasant women continually bear children, until they have one son or several sons. In an extreme case, a peasant woman gave birth to nine daughters before she had a son to continue her husband's family name.<sup>10</sup> The woman, who looked old and haggard in her forties, was obviously not in control of her body. Her reproductive behaviour was irrational, as she did not need ten children to support herself and her husband in their old age; instead, the cost of raising ten children was far beyond their ability as it would have been for most other families.<sup>11</sup> It is this traditional aspiration for sons that has largely controlled women's fertility in the countryside.

The situation is different in the cities, where residents are generally aware that China's huge population is detrimental to the improvement of living standards and an uncontrolled population growth will be disastrous. This awareness aside, most urban women have full-time jobs, which will provide them with a retirement pension, therefore, they do not have to depend on either their husband's nor their children's financial support. Closely associated with their financial independence is the rise of their self-

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<sup>9</sup> Harriet Evans *Women & Sexuality in China* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), p. 156.

<sup>10</sup> "Chaosheng tiaozhan Zhongguo shiliu yi renkou shangxian: mingren duozi yinfa guanzhu" [Going beyond family planning policy challenges the upper limit of 1.6 billion population: famous people having more than one child attracted attention], [http://www.cn.news.yahoo.com/040908/55/25kso\\_2.html](http://www.cn.news.yahoo.com/040908/55/25kso_2.html).

<sup>11</sup> The traditional aspiration for sons also lingered on with Taiwanese women. Su Qianling, a Taiwan woman writer and a mother of two daughters, wrote that her female friends would ask her when she would have another baby, as if the two daughters were not countable as children. An unfamiliar woman, out of good will, even brought her a "secret recipe" for conceiving a son. In her work place another woman who also had two daughters would often begin her talk with "Women like us who have two daughters"; she sounded as if they were secondary human beings. Two of her university classmates got married but a decade later the woman had to stay in a mental hospital due to a mental collapse under the pressure from her parents-in-law and her sense of guilt from having only two daughters.

consciousness which, in turn, further orientates them to opt for self-fulfilment rather than a big family.<sup>12</sup> Besides, given the fact that most Chinese men still do much less housework, these working women are well aware that working and mothering could very likely mean a dual burden. All these factors would have contributed to their willingness to follow the family planning policy or even not to have children at all. According to Li Yinghe, consciousness of a female self has given a number of well-educated urban women a “low pain threshold”. Unlike their rural sisters, who have “a very high pain threshold” and strive for more sons, these women take as their life goal a happy life and refuse to suffer the pains of reproduction labour and the dedication of time, energy and money to child rearing and education. Together with their husbands they choose not to have children at all (Li herself is one).<sup>13</sup> Needless to say, these women need moral support in their opposition to the dominant view of mothering as women’s immanent nature and foremost duty.

The above is the general social background in regard to the family planning policy, against which contemporary Chinese women writers launched this rewriting of motherhood.

### **Some Historical Background of the Mother Figure**

To discuss this rewriting, it is necessary to examine briefly the past images of the mother figure in Chinese texts. To do this, I shall look into three resources in this regard: Chinese mythology, language and literature, and historical records. My purpose is to examine how the mother image was positioned historically and if the historical mother image highlighted maternal love as the foremost immanent element in women’s nature.

Chinese mythology suggests the existence of mother worship, in which the mother’s image is more identifiable with the power of nature than with tender love. For example, in the Shang dynasty (1600-1100 B.C.) the sun and the moon were respectively referred to as “East Mother” (Dong Mu) and West Mother (Xi Mu).<sup>14</sup> Back further into the past, Xihe, a goddess, was said to be the mother of ten suns. And the sun was not all nurturing. A Chinese legend relates that at one time the ten suns baked the earth so dry that many people died and a god had to shoot nine suns to leave just the one sun we have today. Given the universal primitive worship of the sun, such stories allow us to have a glimpse at the supreme position of the mother among the early Chinese.

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<sup>12</sup> Female employees took up 43% of all urban employment in 1990; this figure was 42.4% in 1982. See *Women In China: A Country Profile. Statistical Profiles No. 10* (New York: United Nations, 1997), p.61.

<sup>13</sup> Some husbands take “avoidance of the wife’s pain in labour” as the foremost important reason when making decisions not to have children. See Li Yinghe, p. 193.

<sup>14</sup> Du Fangqin *Nüxing guangnian de yanbian* [The change of the female concept] (Zhengzhou: Henan Renmin Chubanshe, 1988), p. 18.

The mother's supreme position is inseparable from her reproductive power. The myth of Nüwa, the Chinese mother goddess, who not only melted stones to mend a leaking sky but also created human beings out of clay, is evidence of primitive fertility worship.<sup>15</sup> The worship of fertility even attained an assimilating power, which could transform a god. After Buddhism came into China around the first century, the Bodhisattva Guanyin (Avalokiteśvara in Sanskrit) who, if not originally male, at least was non gender-specific, became a beautiful goddess (out of a potential gamut of 30 odd incarnations) whose major power for the Chinese populace was to enable women to have children. Hence, Guanyin enjoys the popular name, Child-giving Mother (*songzi niangniang*).<sup>16</sup> If ancient Chinese mythology contains any collective unconsciousness, the mother image in the unconsciousness is basically established on the mother's reproduction function rather than on her tender love.

The image of a powerful mother can also be traced in the Chinese language. The Chinese character *hou*, which now means "queen", shows in its ancient form a woman giving birth to a child. According to the Chinese linguist Dai Zhaoming, the female *hou* was the highest ruler of a primitive matrilineal community.<sup>17</sup> Even long after the actual ruling power had fallen into male hands; the character *hou* still functioned as an indicator of the supreme position of a ruler. The later kings of the Shang dynasty referred to the earlier kings as *Hou*; the earliest Chinese dictionary *Erya* (compiled by Zhou Han in the early Han dynasty) explains *hou* as "the sovereign".<sup>18</sup> The meaning of *hou* changed from that of a powerful mother to that of a male ruler, indicating a shift of power based on a general subjugation of women and subsequent sexual discrimination. Presumably, prior to the male-dominant age before the patriarchal family had been firmly established, there was a time during which women were subdued. This is evidenced in the early forms of Chinese ideographs for meanings such as "wife" (*qi*), "concubine" (*qie*), "slave" (*nu*), and "impressive strength" (*wei*), which all convey the idea of a woman under the control of a (male) hand or a weapon.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Meng Fanhua recently conducted field research into the historical sites of Nüwa worship in Shanxi Province. Apart from dozens of remnant sites of Nüwa temples, these include an extant rock picture, drawn 10,000 years ago during the Stone Age. In this picture the goddess lifts her right arm up towards the sky, holding a piece of rock in her right hand. She stands with her legs apart, exposing her private parts. This hint at reproduction is reinforced by six black points around her feet, showing her creation of life on earth. See Meng Fanhua "Huangtu Gaoyuan de Nüwa Chongbai" [Nüwa worship on the loess plateau] in *Chinese Culture Research*, vol. 24 (Summer, 1999), Beijing Yuyan Wenhua Daxue Chubanshe.

<sup>16</sup> Lin Shuming *Nüxing zhuyi wenxue piping zai Zhongguo* [Feminist literary criticism in China] (Guiyang: Guizhou Renmin Chubanshe), pp. 207-208.

<sup>17</sup> Dai Zhaoming, *Wenhua yuyanxue daolun* [Introduction to cultural linguistics] (Beijing: Yuwen Chubanshe, 1996), p. 159.

<sup>18</sup> See *Yuyan Dadian*, vol. I (Haikou: Sanhuan Chubanshe, 1990) p. 1449.

<sup>19</sup> For these early ideographs see Wang Hongyuan *Hanzi ziyuan rumen* [The origins of Chinese characters] (Beijing: Sinolingua, 1993), pp. 168-170.

In traditional Chinese culture, the maternal image was codified in such idioms as “strict father and loving mother” (*yanfu cimu*) and “virtuous wife and good mother” (*xianqi liangmu*). Yet in ancient times, there was not much historical or literary narrative to substantiate a loving maternal image.<sup>20</sup> Instead, the traditional Chinese mother image can be seen as part of a patriarchal strategy whose major function was to ensure the perpetuation of hierarchical orders in both the family and society. The well-known story about Mencius’ mother, who moved house three times to avoid undesirable influences upon the would-be Confucian sage, testifies to a mother’s function. In this light a mother could become a vicarious patriarchal authority. She could also force her son to divorce his wife, which would eventually lead him to suicide, as is described in the ancient poem “A Peacock Southeast Flew”. In the poem, when the son begs his mother not to “dismiss” his wife, the mother answered:

My son, have you no respect?  
How dare you speak in your wife’s defense!  
I have lost all feelings for you,  
On no account will I let you disobey me!<sup>21</sup>

The historical record also extols as a good mother a woman who expelled her son, who was already a government official, from home just because he failed to treat his guest in the appropriate way.<sup>22</sup> In another instance, cruelty overrode maternal love when a queen mother in the Song dynasty wanted to have her newborn child killed, because she anticipated its “abnormal” infantile appearance would “surely ruin the country and the royal family”.<sup>23</sup> Another story from the Song period records how a woman, in a rage against her husband’s flirtation with a sing-song girl, actually chopped her baby son into pieces and asked her maid to present the chopped pieces in a plate to her husband.<sup>24</sup> These may be extreme cases, yet they indicate that we cannot take the so-called “mother nature” for granted.

In spite of the notorious “three obediences”, in actuality the mother was not to be disobeyed by her sons.<sup>25</sup> Within the family the mother shared the father’s right to educate and punish children as well as the right to arrange

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<sup>20</sup> There may be a few examples to show the good mother, such as the popular story about how Mencius’ mother moved house several times so as to avoid undesirable influence upon her son (the story is reflected in the well-known proverb *Mengmu zelin*).

<sup>21</sup> See “A Peacock Southeast flew” in Victor Mair (ed.), *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 464.

<sup>22</sup> See Huang Yongtang (trans. from classical into vernacular Chinese), *Guoyu Quanyi* (Guiyang: Guizhou Renmin Chubanshe, 1995), p. 215.

<sup>23</sup> See “Yuan Huanghou Zhuan” [The biography of Queen Yuan] in *Song Shu*, in the electronic version of *Gujin tushu jicheng* [Compendium of Ancient and contemporary books] (Nanning: Guangxi Shifan Daxue Chubanshe).

<sup>24</sup> Zhang Bangwei, *Hunyin yu shehui* [Marriage and society] (Chengdu: Sichuan Renmin Chubanshe, 1989), p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> The “Three obediences” traditionally prescribed for a Chinese female were: to obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage and her son after her husband’s death.

their marriages. Although the patriarchal system privileges the father's superiority, traditional Chinese culture emphasises the children's filial piety to both parents. The *Twenty-four Stories of Filial Piety*, which retained nationwide popularity up till the early 1950s, venerated the mother side by side with the father.<sup>26</sup> A mother was, to a considerable extent, a powerful figure, and her love for her children was seldom described as a natural given, unconditional and unchangeable.<sup>27</sup> Ancient and dynastic Chinese texts, historical or literary, do not particularly describe a tender and loving mother's nature.

However, in the May Fourth cultural rebellion against Confucianism and patriarchal ideology, the mother image was reconstructed with national and revolutionary significance. It was during this period, Sally Taylor Lieberman points out, that "an idealized maternal figure became a staple of China's New Literature":

A gentle, nurturing figure, selflessly and naturally loving, sometimes suffering, occasionally joyful, her image, voice, and movements were evoked in a sentimental linguistic register. Opposite her was the child, usually male: the infant, a new, as-yet-unformed being unfolding in her embrace; the schoolboy making his first forays into the world; or the adult-child yearning for, and sometimes finding, solace and strength in her love.<sup>28</sup>

Women writers, newly emerged on the literary scene at the time, also participated in the idealisation of the mother. For example, Feng Yuanjun's courageous and rebellious female protagonists, in their search for freedom, are "deeply attached to the unique boundless maternal love". "More than one daughter in her stories, for the sake of her mother, hesitates to sever an arranged marriage."<sup>29</sup> And even Lu Yin, who suffered from discrimination from her own mother since she was born, created images of the loving mother in her writing, and her heroine would become "anxious if anything is going to sadden her mother."<sup>30</sup> In the women writers' stories, the mother was "old and worried", a symbol of the suffering and the weak; she could not but carry

<sup>26</sup> Lu Xun commented on the prevalence of these stories and pointed out their harmful effect on children's psyche in his "Ershisi xiao tu" [The pictures of the twenty-four stories of filial piety]. See *Lu Xun, Zhaohua xishi* [Gather morning flowers in the evening] (Hong Kong: Sanlian Shudian, 1958; 2<sup>nd</sup> printing, 1972), pp. 18-24.

<sup>27</sup> A typical example of such a mother can be seen in the old dowager in the famous novel *The Dream of the Red Mansions*. No one in the clan, including her sons of ranking officials, dared to disobey her.

<sup>28</sup> Sally Taylor Lieberman *The Mother and Narrative Politics in Modern China* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1998), p. 20.

<sup>29</sup> Meng Yue & Dai Jinhua *Fuchu lishi dibiao* [Floating out the horizon of history] (Zhengzhou: Henan Renmin Chubanshe, 1989), p. 17. All English translations from Chinese originals are mine unless specified otherwise.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18. For more information about Lu Yin's suffering at her own mother's hand, see Lu Yin, "Autobiography" (trans. Amy Dooling) in Janet Ng and Janice Wickeri (eds.), *May Fourth Women Writers: Memoirs* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1996), pp. 95-120.

out the orders of the father. On the other hand she was also “idealised” and portrayed as a loving mother. Such an image of maternal love, as Meng Yue and Dai Jinhua observe, was “abstract and vague” in women’s literature of the time.<sup>31</sup> It was set up to provide a “gendered identity” so as to “fill up the structural lack at a cultural level in terms of subjectivity in the psyche of a generation of rebellious daughters.”<sup>32</sup>

If there was a “structural lack in terms of subjectivity” for the “rebellious daughters”, such a lack could also be found in their male peers. For, in actuality, the young male writers produced more texts embracing the image of a tender, loving mother. The imaginary mother, in contrast to the oppressive Father, represents kindness and moral beauty. In the imaginary mother figure there was the general assumption of maternal love rooted in Nature. The reconstruction of motherhood, therefore, amounted to a rediscovery of genuine human nature at the time when the young writers castigated images of traditional Chinese personalities. Given the historical meaning of May Fourth literature, in terms of nationalism, modernisation, and revolution, the idealisation of the mother figure, Lieberman observes, “was part of a deliberate and collective effort by young intellectuals to discover a genuine human nature that could serve as the basis for more humane social relations in a future modern society.”<sup>33</sup>

The reconstruction of the mother figure, based on her biological function, presumed the mother to be in possession of an innate maternal love, which could be used to oppose the artificiality of the old social order. Such a reconstruction of the mother’s nature, progressive as it appeared to be, consolidated the restrictive, self-sacrificing role of the mother and further served to erase women’s personhood. Functioning in such a way, the reconstruction of the mother figure contradicted the mission of modernisation. For if the degree of social liberation is measured by the yardstick of women’s liberation, then the reconstructed maternity curtails the mother’s ability to act as a female person. Such maternity “has functioned to elide the specificity of women’s identities and social functions by equating femininity always and only with reproduction and nurturance.”<sup>34</sup>

### Rewriting the Mother/Baby Oneness

Based on the loving and tender nature of the mother, a wealth of literature sings the praises of the infant’s “delicious symbiosis” with the mother. For example, the Chinese woman writer Bing Xin was well known for such themes.<sup>35</sup> In one of her famous poems she evokes the imagery of the sea and

<sup>31</sup> Meng Yue & Dai Jinhua, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> Lieberman, p. 20.

<sup>34</sup> Elizabeth Grosz *Sexual Subversions* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), p. 119.

<sup>35</sup> For good reference resources about Bing Xin, see Fan Boqun (ed.) *Bing Xin yanjiu ziliao* [Research materials on Bing Xin] (Beijing: Beijing Chubanshe, 1984).



moon to reflect the natural relationship of the maternal bosom and the child.<sup>36</sup> Virginia Woolf let Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* desire a narcissistic returning to the maternal body, as she wishes to mingle with Mrs Ramsay like “waters poured into one jar.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in Julia Kristeva’s *Black Sun*, the mother’s service to the male infant seems inevitable and natural.<sup>38</sup> Whether in China or in the West, seldom have scholars or writers examined the mother/baby relationship from the point of view of the mother.<sup>39</sup> Instead, psychoanalysis employs phrases such as the “infant’s pre-oedipal fusion with their mothers,” “the polymorphous bodily pleasures and rhythmic play of mother-infant communication,”<sup>40</sup> and “the blissful isolation of the intra-uterine existence.”<sup>41</sup> In these cases, the mother is not a speaking subject but a figure who remains dumb and mute about a physically uncomfortable process of bodily change which would eventually lead, among other things, to physical pain or even life-threatening danger in labour and exhaustion in child-rearing while working for an income.

The idealised relationship of mother/baby oneness is an ideo-linguistic edifice which commands reverence and homage. To dismantle it risks the danger of impairing familial and social ethics. Nevertheless, contemporary Chinese women writers, as mothers themselves writing from an imagination based on their lived experiences, began to expose this mother/baby oneness as a myth.

In women writers’ fiction after the Cultural Revolution, the earliest feminist liberation of women from the conceived maternity can be read in Zhang Xinxin’s “On the Same Horizon” (Zai tong yi dipingxian shang, 1981) and Zhang Jie’s “The Ark” (Fang zhou, 1982).<sup>42</sup> Both writers were criticized by the male-dominant mainstream Chinese critics for “virilizing” their heroines. Part of the heroines’ “virilization” lies in their prioritisation of work

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<sup>36</sup> Bing Xin *Fan xin chun shui* [Blinking stars over spring water] (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1998), p. 85.

<sup>37</sup> Virginia Woolf *To the Light House* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955).

<sup>38</sup> Julia Kristeva *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

<sup>39</sup> An exception can be seen in Mosuo culture. The Mosuo people is an ethnic minority in the bordering area of Sichuan and Yunnan Provinces, whose culture is centered around a “mother’s consciousness”. The Mosuo people regard a child’s birthday as the mother’s suffering day, so they do not celebrate birthdays. See Zhou Huashan *Wufu wufu de guodu: zhong nü bu qing nan de Muoso* [A Country without Father or Husband: The Matrilineal Muoso without Gender Discrimination] (Beijing: Guangming Ribao Chubanshe, 2001), p. 26.

<sup>40</sup> Ann Rosalind Jones “Inscribing Femininity: French Theories of the Feminine” in Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn (eds.), *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 86.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted from Christine Forula *Modernism’s Body: Sex, Culture, and Joyce* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 206.

<sup>42</sup> For the original version of this story, see Zhang Xinxin *Zhang Xinxin Daibiaozuo* [Representative works of Zhang Xinxin] (Zhengzhou: Henan Renmin Chubanshe, 1988), pp. 33-164. For an English version of “The Ark”, see Zhang Jie *Love Must Not Be Forgotten*; trans. Gladys Yang et al. (San Francisco and Beijing: Panda Books, 1986), pp. 113-202.

and self-fulfilment over maternity. Zhang Xinxin's anonymous heroine has an abortion so as to develop her career; Zhang Jie's heroine Liang Qian entrusts her son entirely to her parents' charge, as she is always busy with her film directing. In doing so they liberate themselves from the mother's role.

However, it is in Zhang Kangkang's novel *The Invisible Companion* (Yinxin banlü, 1986) that the maternal nature is further rejected. Interestingly, the rejection is set clearly against the stereotyped literary description. Xiaoxiao, the heroine of the novel, is an educated youth who marries another educated youth in the Great Barren North where they are sent to "receive re-education".<sup>43</sup> She unexpectedly becomes pregnant. When she gives birth to a baby boy, the narrative relates,

Nothing was like what is described in stories – the young mother is filled with feelings of happiness at her first sight of the baby. In this room, on the bare earthen bed, she was filled with a strange sense of alienation. She felt life was somewhat absurd to her.<sup>44</sup>

If actual experience is not reflected in the established discourses about maternity, then Jiang Zidan's pregnant heroine in "The Sham Moon" (Jia yueliang) has reasons to "hate" poets, because

they sing the praises of the fidgeting foetus in the maternal body to deceive women that being a mother is glorious [...] that the cause of creating a life is loftier than anything else. Therefore every pregnant woman expecting labor is eager to let the foetus out so that she can be a mother as soon as possible, regardless if the baby is willing to come into the world or not.<sup>45</sup>

In light of this, the desire to be a mother is pathetic because it is the result of believing a lie. To be a mother is no longer to be unselfish and loving. On the contrary, it is selfish and vain if a woman wants to be a mother just for her own glory. The hypocrisy of the poetic discourses that have deceived women is further exposed in Jiang Zidan's "Waiting for Dusk" (Deng dai huanghun).<sup>46</sup>

In this story of an experimental style, two female voices alternatively narrate apparently two women's life experiences. The first-person narrator repetitively recalls her first menstruation as the commencement of a

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<sup>43</sup> "Educated youth" (*zhishi qingnian*) were high school students when the Cultural Revolution started in 1966; many became "Red Guards". In December 1968 Mao, after using them to launch the Cultural Revolution, issued a call asking them to go to the countryside to "receive re-education from the poor and lower-middle peasants". The Great Barren North is a vast land of wilderness in the northeast of China, where a huge number of educated youth were rusticated during the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>44</sup> Zhang Kangkang *Yinxin banlü* [The invisible companion] (Beijing: Huayi Chubanshe, 1995), p. 179.

<sup>45</sup> Jiang Zidan "Jia yueliang" (The sham moon) in Jiang Zidan *Zhenchao youxi* [Game of chastity] (Kunming: Yunnan Renmin Chubanshe, 1996), p 205.

<sup>46</sup> Jiang Zidan "Dengdai huanghun" [Waiting for dusk] in *Jiang Zidan xiaoshuo jingcui* [Selected stories by Jiang Zidan] (Chengdu: Sichuan Renmin Chubanshe, 1998), pp. 20-59.

womanhood that focuses on family relations and maternal experience. Juggling with the first-person narrator, the third-person narrator intermittently puts in fragments of an anonymous young woman's disappointing romance, in which she is deceived and sexually exploited by a married man. If the third-person narrative reveals women's vulnerability in romantic relationships, the first-person narrative openly challenges the almost fundamental role of woman as a tender and loving mother. Both narrators are informed by consciousness of gender conflict, but the first-person narrator's double identity of daughter/mother contributes powerfully to the exposition of the mother myth.

The daughter's narrative involves a critical examination of her own mother's beliefs. The narrator's mother, a gynaecologist, believes that only after becoming a mother can a woman be "a complete woman". This conventional idea holds motherhood as an indispensable component of womanhood. In spite of her mother's instruction the narrator has no desire to be "a mother who has power over and obligation to another life".<sup>47</sup> Opposing the traditional idea of filial piety, that regards being born as a great favour for which a child owes lifelong filial duty to the mother and father, the narrator cannot see any point in having a child in light of her tense relationship with her own mother. When she is unhappy with her mother, she often wonders to herself: "Did she bring me to this world only to create more chances to make herself angry? Or to have one more object on which she could release her feelings, whatever they are? She gave me life, therefore she assumes that she has the right to despise me, ridicule me, and interfere with everything in my life."<sup>48</sup> Her critical view of her mother adds to her unwillingness to be a mother herself.

Unwilling as she is, the narrator becomes pregnant, but this only gives her a chance to further refute conventional beliefs about motherhood. In a narrative vividly true to lived experience, Jiang Zidan elaborates bodily details of pregnancy, and extends a logic of self through gestation to a "vicious truth" of murderous impulse on the part of the mother.<sup>49</sup>

For the narrator, maternity introduces itself by making her feel sick. She goes to see a doctor only to be told that she is not sick but pregnant. The subsequent naturalistic description of the ill symptoms of pregnancy presents the gestation phase as a period of unusual suffering and torture. Apart from her swollen feet and deformed body, the most agonizing aspect is vomiting. The narrator vomits almost everything she eats, and is always in such a state of exhaustion that she has to be confined to bed. To protect her pregnancy, her mother and husband treat her like a delicate patient. She is forbidden to watch any sad or violent TV programs or read anything of that nature. So described, the pregnant woman is not only physically but also intellectually deprived. Maternity is therefore no longer an entirely wonderful and happy

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Experimenting with new ways of writing, Jiang Zidan talked about her special attention to details so as to develop an "absurd logic", behind which there is "vicious truth". See Jiang Zidan *Jiang Zidan xiaoshuo jingcui* [Selected stories by Jiang Zidan], p. 350.

experience for women, and pregnancy is nothing but a dreadful illness of the female body.

Her disgust with the maternal role and the physical torture of pregnancy gives rise to a secret wish to vomit the foetus out. Every time after vomiting she insists on examining her vomit in the spittoon, hoping to find “hairs, nails or other fragments of the foetus”.<sup>50</sup> The early oneness of the mother and child, said to be sought after unconsciously by the narcissistic avant-garde artist, is by no means a blissful symbiosis here, but a ruthless life and death struggle.<sup>51</sup> As the narrator confesses:

I became thinner and thinner rapidly. I knew the foetus usurped my womb and was ruthlessly sucking my blood and eating my flesh and tendons. It was getting stronger day by day while I was becoming weaker and more emaciated. I could do nothing about it. My only consolation came from the part of my belly which was still flat. Sometimes I felt the foetus stopped its plundering and went into a slumber. On these occasions I wished my belly muscle were stronger so as to tie up the sleeping foetus and stifle it.<sup>52</sup>

To the pregnant mother, the foetus is a monster eating away her body; her only way to protect her body is to get rid of the foetus. The mother’s murderous impulse sounds reasonable and justifiable in the description.

Susan Rubin Suleiman observes that “Melanie Klein speaks with great sympathy and understanding about the murderous impulse that every child feels towards its beloved mother; she does not speak about the murderous impulse that a mother may feel towards her beloved child.”<sup>53</sup> Lieberman quoted this observation by Suleiman to comment on the mother in Lin Shuhua’s story “Xiao Liu” (Little Liu, 1929): “in her failure to get mad at her son’s greed and arrogance – we feel the terrible loss of self that the suppression of the mother’s perspective implies.”<sup>54</sup> Jiang Zidan’s story provides a contrast, in which the self comes back to the maternal figure through a distinctively murderous impulse towards the foetus. Furthermore, in a drastic attempt to protect the self, the murderous impulse develops into an act of murder in the case of the narrator’s female friend.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>51</sup> Julia Kristeva pointed out that Bellini presented maternal space as “fascinating and puzzling” and depicted motherhood as the site of an unrepresentable *jouissance*. See Julia Kristeva *Desire in Language* ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 243-247. Similarly, Christine Froula observes that “in Joyce as well as in Freud [...] narcissistic states entail a return to earliest childhood, a regression to the original mother/child union.” See Christine Froula *Modernism’s Body: Sex, Culture, and Joyce* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 206.

<sup>52</sup> Jiang Zidan “Dengdai huanghun” (Waiting for dusk) in *Jiang Zidan xiaoshuo jingcui* [Selected stories by Jiang Zidan], p. 29.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>54</sup> Sally Taylor Lieberman, p. 145.

In this murder case, the logic of self-preservation is brought to the extent that the self-erasing maternity becomes a prolonged suicide for women. Therefore, implicitly, a woman may not only have a murderous impulse towards her children but may actually kill them in order to avoid self-erasure. The narrator reiterates the fleetingness of female life as a journey to death, starting from menstruation, followed by pregnancy, child-rearing, and eventually death. This female life cycle is not much different from that of animals. And the omission of the maternity phase may possibly render this life more enjoyable to the female self. Furthermore, according to the story, if the mother is a beautiful woman with a hectic working schedule, then she would have greater reason to do so, as the double burden of maternal duties and her exhausting professional work will destroy her physical beauty – an artwork of nature which should be protected and preserved for what it is.

Her friend Su Mi is such a beautiful woman, who works as a nurse and is often exhausted. As she enters her middle age, when a woman needs to take greater care to maintain her beauty, she gives birth to twin babies, and this makes her life more tiring than ever. Thus, implicitly, Su Mi has reason to escape her motherhood because, as a beautiful woman, she would not want to see her beauty decay in the toil of mothering on top of exhausting herself in the hospital. Su Mi kills her two babies and is consequently sentenced to death. In this way she avoids disfiguring herself in maternity. The underlining logic of Su Mi's extraordinary anti-motherhood behaviour follows the reasoning of "nature". On the one hand, mothering is seen as in women's nature; on the other, a woman's natural beauty (not the artificial beauty obtained by way of cosmetic surgery) is also a gift of nature.

As a woman endowed with both attributes of nature which conflict, Su Mi follows the rudimentary call of nature, namely, self preservation – she keeps the natural endowment of her beautiful body and destroys the infants who are no longer part of her body. In addition to this natural tendency for self-preservation, women's natural beauty for centuries has been an aesthetic object to be treasured and praised. Deliberately stretched from such an aesthetic point of view, her death is seen as good. As the narrator says, "I congratulate her that she has departed in a perfect state. Since Heaven and Earth endowed her with perfect beauty, she should not live in a depraved way."<sup>55</sup> Su Mi's death severs the self-erasing maternity, and her murder sounds almost justified.

But the ethical problem of murder seems to be unexplored. Does the writer approve killing the innocent? One thing noticeable in the texts discussed above is that the babies are all male. This is not just a coincidence but should be seen as crucial not only to the refutation of the "blissful mother/son symbiosis", but also to the textual subversion of patriarchy.

Despite her previous abhorrence to the foetus that turns out to be her son, near the end of "Waiting for Dusk", the narrator says:

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<sup>55</sup> Jiang Zidan "Dengdai huanghun" (Waiting for dusk) in *Jiang Zidan xiaoshuo jingcui* [Selected stories by Jiang Zidan], p. 52.

Our erstwhile struggle has been sealed, secretly stored, and guarded by both of us. It has become a private secret never to be let out. He still lords over my life and regulates my life according to the norm he considers as good. I prove myself a good mother by showing my love to him every day. Enchanted by the fantasy of mother/son love [...] I have forgotten my essential opposition to him.<sup>56</sup>

The mother's "essential opposition" to the son, at a symbolic level, is women's essential opposition to patriarchy. At this level, the word "son" in the quoted passage represents the patriarchal values and the symbolic father. In this light the murder of the sons amounts to a patricide, a gesture of refusal to carry on the patriarchal line. Informed by such female consciousness, the narrative does not bring up any moral condemnation of the murderer.

The female consciousness of the "essential opposition" comes out more explicitly in the narrator's occasional fits of amnesia, times at which she "forgets the meaning of 'son', suspects his history, and cannot remember who he is and where he comes from".<sup>57</sup> This "forgetting" is, paradoxically, a virtual memory of the "essential opposition". Because of the memory, every time when her son calls her "Mum" she feels it is an "extremely vicious hint". She would rather that he call her by her name or not address her by any epithet, because the very word "Mum" reminds her that he is "flesh and bones from [her] own body".<sup>58</sup> The narrative thus evokes again the narrator's initial mother/son struggle. The epithet "mum" not only hints at her surrender but also demands her to behave like a mother according to the established norm.

As the mother/son relationship is depicted in a language hinting at the conflicting values of the two sexes, the text points to a female collective dilemma: while women consciously or unconsciously rebel against patriarchal ideology they are at the same time perpetrators of patriarchal society in procreation and in forgetting the "essential opposition".

### **The Anti-Mother Narrative**

The mother who has forgotten her essential opposition to patriarchy and has identified with the latter is the so-called "patriarchal mother". The patriarchal mother becomes another target in women writers' texts, which constitutes another kind of resistance to the idealization of the mother. The mothers in this narrative range from the revolutionary to the traditional, as victims or/and victimizers.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

In the context of China's socialist revolution, the heroine Mother Han in Fang Fang's "One Singing Three Sighings" (Yi chang san tan) reaps momentary glory but endless sorrow.<sup>59</sup> In the story Mother Han encourages all her children to answer the Chinese Communist Party's call and packs them off to settle down in either frontiers or remote mountainous areas. As a reward, she is given the "glory" of a "revolutionary mother" but her children lose what better future they may have. Mother Han is thus shown as vain and gullible if not entirely selfish. In Zhu Lin's "The Festival Graves" the mother works as a cadre, who takes "the lead in implementing Party policy and never invites the disapproval from her superiors."<sup>60</sup> Thus she forces her stepdaughter into a third-trimester abortion at the risk of the latter's life. If these stories show that there is no such a thing as inherent "mother nature" in the "revolutionary" mother, other stories set the mother figure as a representative of the symbolic father in a more traditional light to expose "mother nature" as not a natural given but an expression modified by patriarchal ideology.

The mother in Jiang Yun's "The Plot at Sunset" (Luori qingjie) is depicted as a representative of the symbolic father.<sup>61</sup> The mother values her son more than her daughter, and blames her daughter for her son's accidental death in the fight of the Cultural Revolution. She makes herself a living reminder of the bereavement to torture her daughter. As a schoolteacher, the mother exercises strict maternal authority on the daughter and demands her absolute filial piety, which eventually erases all possibility of happiness in the latter's life. Significantly, the daughter becomes a high school teacher of Chinese grammar – the law of the Chinese language. The Chinese critic Chen Xiaoming reads her linguistic specialty as a metaphor, which implicitly points to the patriarchal law represented by the mother, who victimizes the daughter who, in turn, transmits the law down to the next generation.<sup>62</sup> However, the juxtaposition of another young woman in the story, who does not have such a patriarchal mother, and therefore lives a happy life with her husband, points to a liberating alternative in default of the patriarchal mother. Enhanced by such contrast, the extremely harsh mother image is conjured up as a reminder of the patriarchal spectre still lurking among women themselves.

The mother as a perpetuator of patriarchy is further castigated in Xu Kun's novella "Nüwa". The very title of the story "Nüwa" highlights reproductivity, whose conspicuity in the story, if not utterly pathetic, is anything but female pride. Previously I have mentioned that legend has it that Nüwa created human beings out of clay. According to another legend, Nüwa

<sup>59</sup> See Fang Fang *Fang Fang xiaoshuo jingcui* [Selected stories by Fang Fang] (Chengdu: Sichuan Renmin Chubanshe, 1998), pp. 168-193.

<sup>60</sup> Zhu Lin *Snake's Pillow*, ed. Howard Goldblatt; trans. Richard King (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1998), p. 105.

<sup>61</sup> Jiang Yun "Luori qingjie" (The plot at sunset) in Chen Xiaoming (ed.) *Zhongguo Nüxing xiaoshuo jingxuan* [Selected stories by Chinese female writers] (Lanzhou: Gansu Renmin Chubanshe, 1995), pp. 407-439.

<sup>62</sup> Chen Xiaoming, p. 438.

had a human head and body but a snake's tail and she begot the first human beings as the wife of her brother. Like the goddess, fertility and incest characterize the female protagonist Yuer's life. These two instinctual characteristics set Yuer in a modality of time, which Julia Kristeva named "women's time".<sup>63</sup> This "women's time" concerns responses to the problems of "reproduction, survival of species, life and death, the body, sex, and symbol." In other words, it is "a specific measure that retains repetition and eternity through cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which conforms to that of nature".<sup>64</sup> For Xu Kun, however, to confine a woman in such cycles does not conform to the cycle of nature. On the contrary, it is to deprive the woman of what is natural in her. This deprivation amounts to a symbolic "castration".

The early part of the novella introduces Yuer's "castration". A child bride, Yuer is bought into the Yu's house as a maid of the family, a farm laborer, and a tool of procreation. She is chosen for her healthy body, which promises fertility, and for her unbound feet that ensures good labour power. Like "a little animal" struggling against its cage, Yuer rebels and twice attempts to escape at the risk of her life, but is finally tamed and domesticated by the woman who is the virtual head of the family and would-be mother-in-law. She makes it her responsibility to bring Yuer into docility with ruthless beatings. When she finds Yuer pregnant (from seduction by her husband), she beats her half to death and then arranges a formal wedding between Yuer and her son. She forces her son to go to Yuer's bed and helps him rape Yuer by drugging the latter. In Yuer's toiling life she gives birth to ten children, and has sexual relations with four males: her father-in-law, her husband, the family farmhand and her idiot son sired by her father-in-law. Apart from her liaison with the farmhand, the other three involve rape. Yuer's maternal body is the pleasure object of men and ravaged by them. The ravaging that makes her a mother of ten children is an important part of "castration". As one child after another comes into her life, her position in the family changes from that of slave, to that of mother, and finally to that of mother-in-law. Motherhood here is nothing but a pathetic process of self-alienation.

As a mother who has never desired to have children, Yuer interferes with her children's marriages, forces her son to spend time with her so that he cannot be together with his wife, reports on her son-in-law's wrong doing so as to get her married daughter back to her side, demands her daughter-in-law to attend on her in the same manner she used to attend on her mother-in-law, and finally drives the couple away. As a country woman, she takes it for granted that her daughters are not as valuable as her sons, therefore helping her in housework is more important than their studies. Despite the fact that at a young age she hates her mother-in-law intensely, she eventually becomes a

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<sup>63</sup> Julia Kristeva "Women's Time" in Warhol, R. R. & Herdal, D. P. (ed.) *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996), pp. 443-462.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 445.



copy of her, a patriarchal mother, whose image forgoes any maternal idealization.

The patriarchal mother's love of the son displays her selfishness and her worship of the penis/phallus, to which her repressed libido is directed. This mother's worship of the penis/phallus is ingenuously represented in a realist picture of a familiar folk scene, in which Yuer's mother-in-law and Yuer are playing with Yuer's grandson, who is just old enough to speak a few sentences.

"Tell me, my grandson, whose words you obey most?"

"Grandma's."

"To whom will you give your money when you grow up and have earned money?"

"Grandma."

"Who else then?"

"Great Grandma."

"Good boy! Come on, let your Grandma have a taste of your little bird!"

The boy touched his penis with his little hand, and then stretched the hand to the two women to hear them make a sound between their gums as a show that they had eaten the delicious thing, whereupon the three of them opened their toothless mouths and smiled happily.<sup>65</sup>

In a crude way, the passage shows that the mothers (now grandmothers and great grandmothers) raise children consciously for their own benefit, but unconsciously they perpetuate the patriarchal order. The altruistic love of Mother Nature is again non-existent.

The spectrum encompassing stories of the "mother genre" also includes "mother-hating" themes, directed at making a parody of the patriarchal mother image. The short story "Soap Bubbles on Foul Waters" (Wushui shang de feizaopao) by Can Xue epitomises the "mother-hating" subject matter with a cruel stroke.<sup>66</sup>

The story opens with the statement "My mother disintegrated into a wooden basin of soapy water", followed by an indistinct impartation of the narrator's murder confession. The narrator is a middle-aged man living with his elderly mother, who is repetitively described as "moaning, nose-running, drooling and filthy". Appearances aside, a "mother tyrant" image evolves. As the narrator/son says: "Her moaning, nose running, and drooling is followed by cursing me as 'an ungrateful vindictive son, capable of appalling treatment of his own mother', and the tantrum always ends up with whole-hearted howling". The mother controls her son through tantrums with the expectation that the son become duteous and subservient under her; after all, she is the *mother*. The calculated controlling of her son is compounded by

<sup>65</sup> Xu Kun *Nüwa* (Zhengzhou: Hebei Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 1995), pp. 107-108.

<sup>66</sup> Can Xue "Wushui shang de feizaopao" [Soap bubbles on foul waters] in Li Duo & Huang Ziping (eds.) *Zhongguo xiaoshuo* [Chinese fiction] (Hong Kong: Sanlian Shudian, 1987), pp. 405-409.

guilt-trips in which she yells, “I knew it, you’ve been against me the whole time! You put the spittoon on the doorstep just to trip me over [...] Ooh, Lord!” When the son cautions her not to sleep in the kitchen because of the danger of gas poisoning, she pats his shoulder and says, “What a nice son!” which is followed by “That’s what you would like, isn’t it? That’s what you dream of every night. I know it all. Just you be patient, maybe your waiting won’t be in vain!”<sup>67</sup>

The mother/son opposition portrays the mother in an extremely negative fashion. Here the mother is a desperate woman clinging onto her son whom she has “spiritually” already lost. In this story the mother’s overwhelming dictatorship contrasts sharply with mainstream literature in which mothers are “gentle, loving and self-sacrificing”. The word *mother* is redefined in this text as a warping vicious force, whose death in a basin of black soapy water projects the rebellious psyche of a new generation of women.

## Conclusion

In an essay written after reading an anthology of contemporary women writers’ works, Zhang Kangkang writes: “Women writing on women create works from which readers can see contemporary women’s lives as well as the women writers themselves, from their representation of contemporary women’s lives.”<sup>68</sup> Apart from reflecting Chinese women’s general economic independence, the rewriting of motherhood manifests a consciousness of female self vis-a-vis a motherhood which is not a self-chosen engagement but an imposition. This points to the conception that motherhood should be a freely chosen commitment to another person that requires long-term self-sacrifice. This, in a way, also reinforces Elizabeth Badinton’s finding that “mother love is not a given but a gift”.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, even if there is a mother nature in women, as shown with some mammals for a limited time period after they give birth, that nature would inevitably go through cycles of ideological process to be relentlessly reshaped by existential needs and, therefore, mother love is not an innate characteristic of women but an acquired emotional commitment, depending on the mother’s access to ethical education, living circumstances, and many other personal and social factors.

In so far as the mother identity belongs exclusively to the female collective, the castigation of the mother in anti-mother narratives perhaps also betrays a deep-seated, unconscious self-hatred. While in many cultures a man would feel insulted if compared to a woman, in China even women writers

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Zhang Kangkang “Ni dui mingyun shuo ‘Bu!’” (Say “No!” to fate) in *Ni dui mingyun shuo “Bu!”* (Shanghai: Zhishi Chubanshe, 1995), p. 257.

<sup>69</sup> Francine du Plessix Gray “Forward” to *Mother Love, Myth and Reality: Motherhood in Modern History* by Elisabeth Badinton (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1981; originally published as *L’Amour en plus*), p. xvii.

may feel “disabled” when addressed as “women writers”.<sup>70</sup> Although they may display strong feminist consciousness in their works, many would “firmly deny” they are feminists.<sup>71</sup> The intense dislike of female identity can be seen as a reaction to a male chauvinist culture, whose misogynic root can be traced back to Chinese writing right from its start, as I have shown earlier in this paper.

Finally, the separation of the self of the mother from the mother/baby oneness and the deconstruction of the established mother image that restrains women may also destroy the last unselfish love in the cultural warehouse of emotions and sentiments. In a world where self-interest reigns, should we not keep a myth that may be conducive to better human relations? Yet if we should, its effect on women would contradict our aimed dream of a future world, where everyone, not just men, could better develop herself or himself. To some extent, the May Fourth dilemma of maternal idealization is still relevant in China today, and the contemporary women’s rewriting of motherhood is literary, ethical, moral, personal, and social, all at once.

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<sup>70</sup> Such self-hatred is manifest in Han Xiaohui’s essay “Bu xihuan zuo nüren” [Do not like being a woman]. See Lan Dizhi (ed.) *Meng Yao* [Dreaming of the demon] (Shenyang Chunfeng Wenyi Chubanshe, 1993), pp. 211-218.

<sup>71</sup> The Chinese feminist critic Dai Jinhua once commented on what it means to “openly declare oneself a feminist in China”. She said: “It means you get a double treatment from men. Men in the northern half of China, being macho in a more uptight way, treat you as this god-awful, untouchable thing, as if you are no longer female. Men in the south, being more loose and practical-minded, instantly think they can take advantage of you because you are this liberated woman, so anything goes. So outcast in the north, goods for all in the south. You wonder why all the Chinese women writers firmly deny that they are feminists?” See Jianying Cha *China Pop: How Soap Operas, Tabloids, and Bestsellers Are Transforming a Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1995), pp. 155-156.