

Interview with Chen Ran by Lin Songyu

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Cutting Free or Reconciliation?

Lin Songyu:

As I remember, 'individualized writing' was first used by a Chinese critic in a dialogue titled 'Feminism and individualized writing' between Wang Gan and Dai Jinhua in *Dajia* Issue 1, 1996. In the dialogue, Wang Gan referred to you, Lin Bai and Hai Nan as 'the Three New Witches' of the 1990s. He thought that the language and materials you used greatly distinguished the three of you from other female writers of the past. He described the style as 'tearing apart one's own spiritual and physical selves. [...] In *Yu Wangshi Ganbei* [Toasting with the Past], Chen Ran had this feature of tearing herself apart'. When Wang Gan said this, you were popular in China's literary world. Nineteen Ninety-Five was the 'year of the woman' in China when the World Congress on Women was held in the country. Several years before and after that, the literary scene saw a burst of women's literature, writings on women and heated discussion on feminism and gendered writings, in which your writings had caught a lot of attention. Now ten years have passed. When you look back, what are your reflections on the state of your writing at that time?

Chen Ran:

Some critics say that, as my writing has influenced and triggered keen debate, I have become the initiator of 'individualized writing'. But this is the critics' business. I just listen to this, but will still insist on, and develop, my own way of writing.

Sometimes when I look back at my adolescent situation, I find it a bit inconceivable. I feel that I was really torturing myself with some serious philosophical problems of life, such as 'Who am I?', 'Where am I?', 'Who are the others?', 'Where are the others?', 'Why should I be like them?', 'How are the others related to me?', 'Why am I seeking such relationships?', 'What is the world?', 'men and women', 'life or death', 'At what age should I commit suicide?', 'In which way?' and so on. My sensitive and thoughtful 20-year-old spirit had to shoulder too many heavy problems without even one minute's break. These problems seemed to have become an obsession of my life at that time. My adolescence came along - stumbling, blundering, half-crazy-half-sober and almost collapsing. There had been too many detours and too much crankiness. Now it seems like a past life.

Lin Songyu:

Among the books you gave me, one is very interesting—*Zhipian'er* [Pieces of Paper], which might be your earliest book. You wrote on the front page, 'The stories in this booklet were written when I was 23 or 24 years old. When I was young, I thought, spoke and wrote daringly. Therefore this book is full of naivety. You don't really need to read this. It is just a memorial. My functions of speaking and writing are gradually declining. Now I seem to be less able to speak and my stories have become more and more obscure. It seems that my mind is surrounded by inspectors. To live like this is very exhausting. I'm afraid I will never find a way out...' This was dated on November 12, 1992, when you were less than 30 years old. According to the criteria of the contemporary literary world, your writings at that time could probably be categorized as 'youth writing' or 'beauty writing'. And your words seem to have predicted your 'more and more obscure' individualized writing style. At that time, your important works of *Siren Shenghuo* [Personal Life], *Pokai* [Cutting Free], *Ling Yizhi Erduo de Qiaojisheng* [The Knocking Sound in the Other Ear] and so on were all unfinished. This book is actually a collection of your early works, among which there is a series of mystery stories based in small towns. Later on, such a mysterious and magical style has almost been shattered and scattered in your works, but you have not written another story as such, which continues the tradition of Chinese supernatural fictions and at the same time bears features of Latin American magical realism. I'm wondering why you have given up this style.

Chen Ran:

I always hold a deep suspicion towards writing itself. The longest lasting suspicion occurred around 2001. My life at that time was also messy, with troubles that could not be shaken off. For a very long period, I didn't even write one single word. I was so depressed that I had to undertake treatment at a hospital for months to recover.

To be honest, my mental state is not exactly the same as is demonstrated in my stories. I'm living an ordinary daily life now. I neither put pressure on myself nor make it hard for others. In fact, nobody can put me under pressure, except me!

Now my style of expression in my stories has become more indirect, profound and mature. I like to deliberately create a sense of 'vagueness'. Maybe some people will not sense it in my writings, but those sensitive ones should be able to catch the core of such thoughts.

Lin Songyu:

The subtle description of hetero- or even homo- sexual relationships has always occupied a very important position in your works. In your recent

publications, for example the stories collection 'Liyi de ren' ['The divorced person'], even the illustrations and design were full of illicit sexual temptation. But as far as I know, you are living a secluded, simple and quiet life. How do you look at the relationships between writing and publication, literature and life?

Chen Ran:

The issuing departments of publication houses prefer illustrated editions. In publishing a book, the author can only control his/her words, while all the rest is left to the publisher. Readers who know the procedure of publication would understand (about the illustrations). Those pictures are serious art, not pornography.

In the illustrated edition of *Siren Shenghuo*, the illustrations are works of famous female painter Shen Ling. They are sexy, modern, varied, rich in color, ahead of their time and full of visual impact. According to my aesthetic taste, I prefer the varied modes, lines and colors in pictures that show people's nervousness, anxiety, horror, depression, outburst, distortion and so on; for example, the famous *Huhan de Lian* [Shouting Face] probably by Meng Ke. I like big patches of black and gray, which implies depth. And I also prefer a sense of emptiness and intangibility. Sheng Ling's pictures are too down-to-earth. They have a feeling of exaggerated mediocrity, extremely sexy laziness and eye-catching colors. But this is also a deep understanding of life. The pictures differ with [my] words, but they bring out the best in each other.

In my own experience, when one is in the writing mood, he/she is at distance from real life. If one is too easily affected by real life, it will be difficult for him/her to get in a the writing mood. Writing demands devotion. It is like playing with oneself. On the other hand, in daily life, when with family and friends, one is very relaxed. Certainly it is possible to live and write at the same time, on the same day. Both are important, but require different moods.

Lin Songyu:

Bu Ke Yan Shuo [Unspeakable] is a collection of dialogues between you and Chinese and overseas journalists and critics. Some of their questions, as well as your answers, are rather sharp, straightforward and intelligent. I find that the questioners have shown a common concern with one issue: homosexual relationships in your works. In fact, I wrote a review on your writing years ago, 'Liulang de qinggan—xi Chen Ran xiaoshuoji *Zuchun Li de Yangguang*' ['Drifting feelings: an analysis on Chen Ran's story collection *Sunshine in Lips*'] (*Xiaoshuo Pinglun* [Novel Reviews], 1993 issue 6), in which I mentioned the different types of homosexual friendships that appeared in your writings. At that time, I argued that 'the different types of

friendship, even the inclination towards homosexuality, are an artistic extension of the author's solitary spiritual journey'. However, nowadays I am not very sure about my argument. Maybe this is only a type of writing strategy of yours? Or could it be a more internal and more genuine description of your mind?

Chen Ran:

For a long time, two things have been happening in parallel in my life—writing and my personal life. Those with a basic knowledge about literature all know that writing is different from the reality of personal life. For example, I have experienced sincere and deep homosexual friendships. But unfortunately I haven't tried real homosexuality so far. In my opinion, I think that homosexuality enjoys the same beautiful rights as heterosexuality. But to have certain rights doesn't mean that one has to make choices accordingly. When homosexuality has become a marginalized minority group, my mental inclination is obvious, which comes from my always marginalized thoughts. All my writings that touch upon this topic are a reflection of my point of view. Hereby, I would like to asseverate that I understand, respect and vindicate all civilized homosexual rights in the world, as much as I vindicate all civilized heterosexual rights. I do not reject any possibility of the happening of any beautiful things in the future. For me, love should not be confined by sex and age. In this sense, I am unconventional and unlimited. I don't hold any mundane prejudice and am not narrow-minded. The more I learn, grow and develop, the more I am able to comprehensively understand and feel the richness of human nature with an open mind. I would like to respect my own thoughts of life and follow my own way of living it. This is and will always be my point.

I have made my statement regarding this (issue of homosexuality). I hope this would answer and put an end to certain senseless unfriendly 'rumors'. This also reminds me of a story. A man wanted to commit suicide by throwing himself out of the window of the ninth floor of a building. The bored onlookers on the ground guffawed every now and then. Several times when the man reached out a leg to make an attempt to jump, the onlookers even mocked at him, 'Jump if you really want...'. Finally the man pointed at the 'theatregoing' mockers with an angry finger and threw himself out of the window...

Sigh! He shouldn't have helped to confirm the evil of human nature at the cost of his life.

This is not an issue of 'masculinism' or 'feminism', rather an issue of human nature. I am neither a 'masculinist' nor a 'feminist'.¹ If I have to be categorized, I would rather call myself a 'humanist'.

¹ The terms here, 'masculism' and 'masculinist', are employed to denote a concept that is descriptive and analytical, rather than the more political and potentially pejorative 'patriarchy', or the more corporeal 'masculinity'.

Lin Songyu:

Pokai is a very important work of yours so far. It was published as the first novella in *Huancheng* [Flower City] 1995 issue 5. In this novel there were lengthy 'brilliant views' on the gender issue made by the heroine Yun Nan. Looking at them after ten years, they are still 'wise'. For example, 'The weakening of gender consciousness should be regarded as a progress of human civilization. We are firstly human, and then women. [...] The gap of genders will be the greatest debate of humanity in the future.' 'We will never promote the discourse of "feminism". What we are pursuing is real gender equality beyond gender consciousness [...]'. Do these 'brilliant views' have any deeper connection with your speech in England in 1994 ('Gender-transcendent consciousness and my creative writing', published on *Zhongshan* [Zhong Mountain] 1995 issue 2)? I would like to know whether your opinions are a direct result of western feminist theories or individual life experience?

Chen Ran:

I think there is only a distinction between good and bad writers, which cannot be determined by gender. If female writers' books sell better in the market, you cannot help if the publisher advertise it as such. But if you input words such as 'female writer' or 'actress' on a western computer search, a window would pop up to remind you whether there is gender discrimination involved. They really emphasize this. Normally I don't think there is any substantial difference whether people call me a writer or a female writer. And I don't think being called a female writer is a disparagement or degradation. It is only a gender symbol. I find my gender beautiful and am proud of it!

To me, a female writer should not only have touchable sensitivity, but also sensible, logical and factual ways of thinking. In other words, she writes not only with her body and heart, but also her brain. Woolf said in *A Room of One's Own* that 'a great mind is androgynous'. I think it has reason. Only when a female writer combines the excellent characteristics of male and female, can she perfectly convey feelings and thoughts with no barrier. This does not mean to decrease or hide our features as women. On the contrary, I think this extends and amplifies our glory as women.

Lin Songyu:

Is *Pokai* feminists' declaration of war against masculine culture? Have you ever imagined the path after 'cutting free'?

Chen Ran:

Actually I'm not interested in 'masculinism' and 'feminism' and have never dabbled in theories on these. So there is no such declaration of war. As to getting along with the world, I have finally come out of the adolescent route

of 'giving myself a hard time'. And I find that the world is still what it is. Today I face many problems with a calm smile. I leave them, and put them to one side, rather than anxiously worrying about the results.

Lin Songyu:

Shortly afterwards, you published your leading work, novel *Siren Shenghuo* (*Huacheng* [Flower City], 1996 issue 2), triggering a heated discussion in the Chinese literary world about 'personal writing' and 'individualized writing', which produced a strong reaction. I remember at that time many readers called the editorial office to get in touch with you. This novel has also become a classic of contemporary Chinese feminist literature. There have been many editions published ever since. For nearly ten years, in the edition of *Siren Shenghuo* published by Zuojia Chubanshe [The Writers Publishing House] (April 2004 edition), you had an article used as an initial preface, 'Huise de jiazhi' ['The value of gray']. You said, 'Black is a coldness, rejection and an absoluteness. [...] Black is a color of youth! Gray is more flexible. It leaves room. But gray is not discouraging and pessimistic. It has even more potential strength than black. [...] *Siren Shenghuo* is a product of my "blackness"'. Does this mean that nowadays Chen Ran has achieved certain reconciliation with life? Today, how do you cut free from 'personal life'?

Chen Ran:

As I'm gaining experience, I'm gradually calming a lot of my past aggressiveness. I used to be rebellious. But as I see more, I'm able to restrain such things. Life requires constant 'compromises'. You need to work it out with a philosophical and humorous attitude. The world is not designed for myself. Many years ago I wrote about 'compromising with life', which actually means to compromise with myself. However, this is not easy—it means to cling to one's own principles and remain happily courageous after giving up something. Maybe this is a higher level. This is the experience and also the cost of growing up.

Lin Songyu:

I read an article before, 'Chen Ran: negative narration—against Phallogentrism' (Wang Lu, *Wenyi Zhengming* [Literature and Art Contending], 2005 issue 6). The author thought that you 'always direct your writings at patriarchy and its cultural conventions and are consciously subverting and negating the idea of Phallogentrism'. The author concluded that "'My' deep 'self-reflection' indicates the crisis of patriarchal families. Rebellious against patriarchy and coming out of the family would be the only choice of awakening women'. Do you agree with this argument? Why or why not?

Chen Ran:

Basically China has a patriarchal structure. So I'm doubtful about this argument. This is due to my special experiences of growing up and my usual way of thinking. Especially in my adolescent years, I was too rebellious. I felt that all tyrants, male or female, should be strongly resisted. To me, patriarchy bears a sense of gender, but cannot be covered by gender alone. I have witnessed the verbal violence of female tyrants and the power violence of male tyrants. We should only compromise to tenderness and submit to civilization.

Of course I don't completely agree with the critic's conclusion of 'coming out of the family'. I advocate building and maintaining a harmonious and beautiful family. But if the family is not harmonious and beautiful anymore, if we are psychologically depressed (by it), we will not succumb to it. This is not only every woman's right, but also every man's right. Of course there is a premise—one's economic independence.

Lin Songyu:

In 'Chen Ran chronicle memorabilia' (in *Siren Shenghuo*, Zuoja Chubanshe, 2004), you wrote, 'During the SARS outbreak in 2003, I destroyed all personal correspondence, diaries, some photos and manuscripts to become a person without "history"'. Why did you take such a resolute action? Will it have any profound influence on your future writing and life?

Chen Ran:

Actually I'm a woman who lacks a sense of security. I don't want to leave behind any personal item or many manuscripts after my death. As to life, I will treasure in my heart all the beautiful feelings as well as the not so beautiful memories. As to writing, I think I have said enough.

I make a very clear distinction between life and writing. I have to do so. I cannot have writing make me exhausted, heavy-hearted, pessimistic and unhappy everyday. I'm longing to live a peaceful normal life in a normal way.

Lin Songyu:

As your works in the new century, 'Dreaming back' (*Shouhuo* [Harvest]) and 'Liyi de ren' (Huacheng, 2003 issue4) continue women's solitude and despair about men. However, we don't see images of aloof, self-proud and world-weary intellectual women like the Dai Er series. Instead, there were the subtle warlike relationships between men and women and a down-to-earth description of daily life. Even the heroines were endowed with the identity of middle-aged accountants. These could not be found in your previous works. Does this indicate a new style in your writing? Do you have any expectations for your future writing? Why?

Chen Ran:

According to my current understanding of life, to live an ordinary, even boring, life, is a normal status, which is also the essence of life. Life full of passion and excitement is temporary and abnormal. A mature person has to face and accept a normal and even boring life.

As to writing, I take it as it is. I've not been writing much recently. I always want to find a new breakthrough, which is very difficult. Now I write short stories and essays. I feel that the older I am, the less I want to say. Quite often, after thinking, I feel that I don't have to say (write) it and just let it go. Maybe my mind is getting old ahead of my body. I more and more understand why Eileen Chang (Zhang Ailing) didn't write a single word and lived an aloof life in her late years. I don't like to commit to long-term plans, but I believe I will keep writing, for a long time!

Lin Songyu:

'Sheng sheng duan duan' ['Voices and fractions'] is a diary-style essay. To read it in combination with your other writings might help to better understand your mental state while writing. In the same book, you have an article titled 'Women nengfou yu shenghuo hejie' ['Can we reconcile with life'], in which you wrote, 'I understand very well that deep in this reconciliation, there is much helplessness, compromise, self-disintegration and loss. I feel that little by little I'm losing the significant things in my life. So I can't tell whether it's a happy reconciliation. [...] Does it mean that to be a split person—reconcilable on the surface but irreconcilable deep in the spirit—is the only way out?' This indicates that till now you are still in a Hamlet kind of conflict. To cut free? Or to reconcile? This is the problem. What are you going to do?

Chen Ran:

Yes, such conflict still exists in my heart. The only difference is I used to be very sharp inside and my conflict with the reality was shown in a very pungent way. However, as I experience more, I am gradually hiding away a lot of my edges. The world is not tailored for you, so don't emphasize yourself too much. When I said 'to reconcile with life' several years ago, this is what I roughly meant.

The biggest enemy of oneself, is the growing narrowness, selfishness, malignity and desire within. This is the limit of human nature and the first enemy to overcome. Sometimes people are too busy fighting against external 'enemies', but I think it's more important to defeat the weakness of human nature, as you might find the external 'enemies' are not so fearful as imagined. I think a person need to seek perfection even when they are 100 years old. I hope I can keep perfecting myself.

Lin Songyu:

Do you have any opinion on feminism, or Chinese feminism? What is it?

Chen Ran:

When *Siren Shenghuo* was published at the end of 1995, Chinese critics were saying that individualized writing, together with feminism, applied to me.

Some critics are respectable. They have independent intellectual standpoints and well-developed personalities. But some—how should I describe them—in a joking way, they are there to generate new terminology and theories for us to admire. You have to be convinced! Some are even speculators or drones. But on the other hand, writers should write what they want to write and critics criticize what they want to criticize. It's good that they do their own things. Feminism or Chinese feminism, it should be left to critics.

I will never be a mainstream writer.

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(This article has been examined by the interviewee)