

# Nativism Overseas

Contemporary Chinese Women Writers

Edited By  
Hsin-sheng C. Kao

中國海外作品的本土性：當代女作家評論



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To Leslie

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## A Note on the Text

Except for proper names and places, the *Pinyin* romanization system has been adopted throughout this book. In the *Selected Bibliography*, both the *Pinyin* romanization and Chinese characters are given.

All translations in this book from the writings of Chen Ruoxi, Yu Lihua, Nie Hualing, Li Li, and Zhong Xiaoyang are translated from the Chinese originals for the first time by the contributors, as are the citations and quotations from Chinese sources. Unless otherwise indicated, all other passages, comments, and translations in this book are mine, and of course whatever error is found in these pages is a responsibility of my own.

H. C. K.

*Los Angeles, California*

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# Preface

Several years ago, I embarked upon this project at the suggestion of my mentor and dear friend, Angela Jung Palandri, a theorist on modern Chinese women's writing. During one of our many conversations, she urged me to consider the need to direct serious critical attention toward the creative expertise and aesthetics of the large body of overseas Chinese women writers who have enriched contemporary Chinese literature with some of its most enduring, multifaceted themes and narratives. Steady interest in Chinese women's studies is a fact; she reminded me, however, that there are only a few scattered criticisms or translations available to sustain this enthusiasm. Her insightful suggestions have been most constructive with regard to the shaping of this project, and I am thrilled to respond to her calling with the completion of this edited volume of research and translation.

In essence, the word overseas (*haiwai*) conveys the idea of a physical separation and geographic absence from one's home soil, culture, society, people, and roots. Literally, going overseas means going yonder, over "the China seas," which in itself has had a long history. However, as far as its relationship with the West is concerned, only in the middle and late nineteenth century did a large number of Chinese, mostly from the lower working classes, immigrate to the United States and other Western countries in order to escape poverty or hardship. It was not until the late fifties and early sixties that a sizable group of Chinese intellectuals and professionals left their homeland for America in pursuit of freedom and opportunity to carry on their search for what they idealized as their traditional culture. Since that time a new type of literary writing has come into existence.

This type of writing has its origins in the writers' quests for personal identity. Living abroad, they have experienced the dynamic processes of conflict between assimilation and resistance. This conflict or tension has compelled them to choose an independent and autonomous attitude toward the act of creative writing. This is not to say that before then there was no such kind of literary production. In fact, during the first half of the twentieth century in the United States, a number of works were produced by writers of Chinese descent, both written and published in English. Writers such as Lin Yutang, Chiang

Yee, Han Suyin, and more recently Maxine Hong Kingston, Frank Chin, and Amy Tan, are a few famous examples.

However, the Chinese overseas writers that emerged during the second half of this century are different from the above-mentioned Chinese-American writers. The difference lies not only in their writing in the Chinese language instead of English, but also in their efforts to remain identified with contemporary and historical Chinese culture. They also continue to publish in Chinese journals, periodicals, and newspapers in China, Taiwan, and abroad. Many of these writers originally came to the United States as overseas students or professionals. Thus, because of their unique nature, the works written by them are collectively called "Chinese student overseas literature" (*Lixuesheng wenxue*), "Chinese overseas elite/intellectual literature" (*Haiwai zhishi fenzi wenxue*), and finally, "Chinese overseas literature" (*Haiwai wenxue*).

Compared to works written by many Chinese-American authors, works of the fifties and sixties by Chinese overseas writers stress the themes of rootlessness and the search for self-identity, as well as the concepts of assimilation and rejection, inclusion and exclusion, and internal and external exile. Overseas literature has continued to thrive from the seventies onward, though it does not necessarily have the same form, scope, and literary themes as its predecessors. These more recent works have been enriched by the import of political issues and the broadening of many writers' philosophical outlooks through interactions among diversified schools of thought, human psychology, and social transformations. Thus, these works have evolved as an assiduous exploration of Chinese reality. Taken in their totality, they attempt to react or focus upon Chinese issues, and their contents reflect a distinctive Chinese sociopolitical consciousness as they employ a wide range of narrative strategies and techniques.

*Nativism Overseas: Contemporary Chinese Women Writers* is an anthology of critical essays and newly translated short stories on five representative women writers: Chen Ruoxi, Yu Lihua, Nie Hualing, Li Li, and Zhong Xiaoyang. Though their works are varied in their stylistic intensity and thematic scope, they nonetheless tie together discussions of some of the most compelling issues broached in overseas Chinese literature today. The issues deliberated upon include nativism and expatriation, the poetics of displacement and redemption, the aesthetics of exile within and without, and multicultural polarities and assimilation processes.

The opening article, the "Prologue," is a translation of Chen Ruoxi's discussion of nativism and Chinese overseas writers. It was

purposely chosen to both set the tone for the essays and translated stories and to help build the conceptual framework within which the nature of this volume's thematic stresses can be understood. In this article, Chen Ruoxi gives her own definition of the term Chinese overseas writer, attempting to articulate its historic and literary interpretation. At the same time, she persuasively responds to questions posed by various critics by situating the questions in relation to her own personal convictions. Not only is her essay a straightforward philosophical observation of the relationship between overseas writers and their homeland, but it is also a forceful piece that chronicles overseas writers' ties with their native land, justifying their place in the mainstream of today's Chinese literature.

Chen Ruoxi's short story "In and Outside the Wall" assembles a provocative range of perspectives from the two sides of China, symbolized by the antitheses *in* and *out*, and by the word *wall*, implying the Great Wall or China herself. These perspectives raise important questions about the relationship between fiction and reality, and Chen Ruoxi uses her fiction to resolve the fear of overseas Chinese regarding the political division that exists between China and Taiwan and the resulting identity crisis. Thus this story shows the internal and external Chinese sociopolitical struggles of the seventies, which were as urgent as they were controversial.

One of the hallmarks of Chinese overseas writing is the pleasure it takes in its own poetic form while still remaining within the general corpus of Chinese literature. Yu Lihua's writing is most exceptional in this regard and has been included in this collection for two specific reasons. First, from the literary historian's point of view, Yu Lihua is considered a foremost spokesperson for Chinese intellectuals in the United States, and her works are popularly regarded as precursors to the overseas Chinese literary movement as well. Second, from a critical point of view, Yu Lihua is noted both as a particularly vigorous explorer of the boundaries of fictional style and as a theoretical proponent of overseas Chinese literature. Ever since her arrival in America in 1953, her satirical and gloomy visions of this "land of plenty" have not been aimed merely at demythification, but also at rendering a more credible, and at times scathingly pathetic, portrayal of historical reality.

Yu Lihua's writings consciously entwine the concepts of nostalgia, alienation, and the effects of assimilation into American life, and express the fusion and clashes of the two cultures and traditions that nurture her characters. My article, "Yu Lihua's Blueprint for the Development of a New Poetics: Chinese Literature Overseas," specifically addresses the interplay and profusion of these two different traditions,

comparing the dichotomies ensconced in the collective layers of the overseas Chinese psyche. On a thematic level, such as in the story included in this collection, "Two Sisters," this interplay usually manifests itself as a taut allegorical device that probes into human complexities and actions, the passage of time, and cultural influences. It is in this sense that the adjective *two* in the story's title can be read, not as a mathematical number, but rather as a dichotomized metaphor that emphasizes the thematic irony in the comparison of the two worlds symbolized by the two sisters.

For author Nie Hualing, the reality of war, death, repression, hypocrisy, and intolerance are not grotesque metaphors for the literary imagination. Instead, she has grown up among them. Having been closely connected with and suffered personally from the devastations of twentieth-century Chinese history, Nie Hualing has become one of the very few and best Chinese writers to bring literature and history into conjunction. Her advocacy of the mobilization of history to serve as an ideological cause has encouraged her to write with complex ideological consciousness and engaging intensity. In an interview conducted by Peter Nazareth of *World Literature Today* (Winter 1981), she outlines her basic premise: "To be Chinese in the twentieth century is to suffer all the wars, revolutions and family tragedies, but the Chinese survived. Of course there are reasons for that survival, but I think one of the reasons is the primitive life force of the Chinese" (p. 12).

In her essay entitled "The Themes of Exile and Identity Crisis in Nie Hualing's Fiction," Shiao-ling Yu discusses Nie's works in terms of the political and social turmoil her characters undergo as they attempt to adjust psychologically and emotionally to an alien sociopolitical and geographic environment. It is their "life force" that allows them to survive and nourish their wounded selves. From the short story "A Day in Wang Dalian's Life" to the novel *Lotus*, Shiao-ling Yu explores Nie's infinitely complex web of human interrelationships, the interplay between the individual and history, and the conflict between personal desire and social responsibility.

"Many Things to Tell, but Hard to Tell," an excerpt from Nie's epic-like novel *Lotus*, gives the reader an opportunity to see the intricate interplays between self and family, and action and reaction to history. It is a high-spirited exposé of the marginalized identity crisis experienced by the young half-American and half-Chinese heroine, Lotus, and the results of the historical chaos caused by the Chinese Cultural Revolution. In the story, Lotus equates the sense of self with one's motherland and the source of paternal lineage; however, the denial she receives from her American paternal grandmother and her

Chinese countrymen ontologically breaks her away from her relatives and homeland and from her social ties and cultural continuity, symbolizing a break with the collective history of which she is supposed to be a part. Throughout the novel, the double narrative moves the story artfully back and forth through two distinct kinds of reality: the reality of Lotus's parents of the late forties, a reality "there" in China, and the reality of Lotus in the seventies, the reality "here" in her and her inner world. The intertwining and fusion of these realities exhibits Nie's literary sophistication and masterful skills.

On the whole, what distinguishes many overseas Chinese writers from native Chinese writers, besides their geographic separation, is the former's obsession with their cultural roots. It is a new mode of consciousness, not experienced simply *by* overseas Chinese, but also *of* them and *about* them, standing apart from their own tradition and its audience. Writers like Bai Xianyong, Cong Shu, Guo Songfen, Li Yu, and Liu Daren fall back on this timely kind of experience to make their literary impact. They are all student-intellectual emigrés from Taiwan who write in response to the ever-increasing fervor over China's recognition and identity. Li Li is one of those writers who shares with them a sense of cultural and personal mission and a devotion to "Chineseness" as a starting point. Her writings vary thematically from the trials and tribulations of the Diaoyutai incident, to the joy over China's admission to the United Nations, to an understanding of the anguish over their own survival, and to the commitment and acceptance of the writers' Chinese roots. She refers to her native roots as the "Chinese knot" (*Zhongguo jie*), an ever-present and deeply felt cultural connection linking each of her characters' inward journeys to the search for cultural identity. It is through this "Chinese knot" that Li Li's characters find their most basic and enduring source for self-fulfillment. In the essay "The Divided Self and the Search for Redemption: A Study of Li Li's Fiction," Michelle Yeh explicates this connection, along with the concept of the "divided self," through her detailed analysis of Li Li's short stories. Yeh demonstrates that beneath the surface of Li Li's characters exist layers of doubt and insecurity over the permanence of existential reality itself. This insecurity is intensified and condensed into a dichotomized existence, in which Li Li's characters are constantly torn by their perception of time, by their memory of a China torn apart into two separate political entities, and by their maladjustment to the conflict between two cultures, the East and the West. Nonetheless, the characters in Li Li's fiction rise above the struggles on a moral or spiritual plane, and transcend these troubling political, ideological, and gender-based dichotomies.

Although the concept of internal or metaphorical exile in literature is sometimes not as widely accepted as external exile because of the lack of true physical separation or uprootedness, it is nonetheless a historical reality and an existing condition of man on this earth. Thus I have chosen to include Zhong Xiaoyang for her astute ability to connect with her native Chinese heritage and explore the realms of existential exile, even though she is not in fact classified as an exile or overseas writer in the physical sense.

It is perhaps one of the most challenging tasks for a writer to write about the alienation of the inner self, a sphere that is most private, intangible, elusive, and intense. The dichotomized boundaries between home soil and foreign land can be internalized either as the self perceived in a temporal and spatial time frame, or as the polarized contrasts between here-there, I-thou, or the differentiation between this and that. The oscillation between these extremities forces the exile to mediate the inner transaction represented by the world of presentation and the world of perception. This creates an infinite set of existential clashes and anguish, hopefully leading to the birth of ontological awareness and resolution.

All of these aspects can be found at the center of Zhong Xiaoyang's works. The youngest of our five selected women writers, Zhong is currently residing in Hong Kong, and is considered by some the Zhang Ailing (Chang Ai-ling, or Eileen Chang) of this generation. Although Zhong's alienated heroes and heroines are capable of love and living, they are perpetually trapped in their isolation, waging a battle against the apprehension of death-in-life. In Samuel Hung-nin Cheung's essay "Beyond the Bridal Veil: The Romantic Vision of Zhong Xiaoyang," he discusses the prevailing tone of pessimism in Zhong's stories which concern themselves mainly with the ardent efforts of youth in the often unfulfilling pursuit of love. Cheung points out that Zhong repeatedly tries to convey to the reader the banality of everyday life, in which her characters attempt to conceal from themselves the meaninglessness of their existence. These characters are neither capable of growing to explain the meaning of existence, nor capable of comprehending the significance of self-definition, though they are adept at indulging in private pleasures and the illusiveness of their fantasies. In their best introspective moments, they are only capable of revealing their awe at the "inexplicable mystery of life" and their despair with the "futility" of purposeful striving.

"The Wedding Night" typifies the gloomy vision of Zhong as it is revealed through the fear and suspicions felt by two nameless newlyweds. The exchange of marriage vows and the sharing of the

romantic bridal chamber do not in any way sanctify their matrimonial union. Just like exiles stepping onto foreign soil, the bride and groom suffer feelings of physical and ontological displacement in this bridal chamber. The double-voiced accounts rendered by the bride and groom narrators, along with the double construction of historical and factual nuances, suggest the equivalence of internal alienation and the flight from the old and familiar, a salient characteristic of the disjointed exile. Occasionally, these two protagonists “almost” perceive a Joyce-like epiphany, but unfortunately, the multiplicity of the world of appearances overwhelms and drowns their senses and perceptions. In this respect, Zhong is the least optimistic, both in tone and ideology, of the five women writers discussed here.

In sum, putting these five writers in the context of contemporary Chinese literature, we are able to find a consistent voice in line with the literature of exile and self-discovery and of nativism. Their writing asks us to redefine the complex issues of human existence and significance. The multifaceted topics examined by these writers—be it the sociopolitical consciousness of Chen Ruoxi, Yu Lihua’s focus on roots, the historical continuity of Nie Hualing, Li Li’s cultural knot, or the alienated self of Zhong Xiaoyang— show a social consciousness, a knowledge of essence, culture, and self, and an awareness of their own individual contributions to the continuity of Chinese history.



