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Zhu Xiaoyan, Chinese Canadian Writer¹

Leung Yiu-nam

The present writer had the privilege of making the acquaintance of Zhu Xiaoyan and discussing issues related to her writings while he was engaged in research at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, in 1993. Subsequently he also had further conversations involving her creative writings at the 1997 Taiwan International Conference on Canadian Studies held at Hsinchu, Taipei.

Although Zhu is now associated with both Canada and Taiwan, she serialized her works in the literary sections of several newspapers, such as *World Journal*, *United Daily News*, and *Central Daily News*. Graduating with a bachelor's degree from National Cheng Chi University, she found employment as a journalist and soon embarked on her writing career with the publication of her first novel in 1965 entitled *Yansuo chonglou* [Chamber in the mist], a highly controversial work which captured public attention with its daring disclosure of the corruption and vice within the mass media industry. She later wrote *Qingchun* [Youth] and *Xingxing zai nali* [Where the stars are].

Her life witnessed a dramatic turn in 1969 when she gave up her promising career in Taiwan and moved with her family to Canada, a country not only distant but also strange to her. Despite the fact that the odds were against her, she coped with adversity by studying accounting and taxation at evening

朱小燕



煙鎖重樓

青春
星星在哪裡

¹ I would like to express my special thanks to Zhu Xiaoyan and A. O. Aldridge for reading and revising the draft of the present interview.

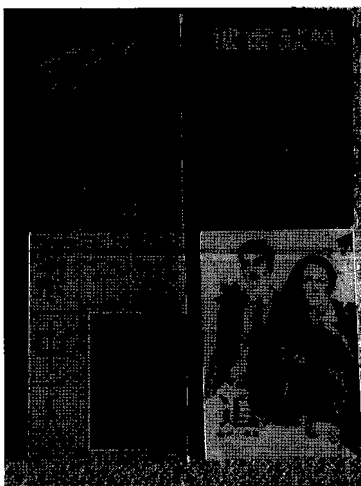
追逐 浪中人
 情凋
 我的靈魂不在家
 與上帝合作的人
 移民路上萬事通
 節稅錦囊妙計
 住在溫哥華，時
 光飛逝
 像琥珀的女人

schools. She eventually began earning her living as a Certified General Accountant and then as a senior officer for Revenue Canada (now known as Canada Customs & Revenue Agency). Adhering to a firm conviction that "once a writer, always a writer" (Zhu 1988: 319), she resumed her writing on a part-time basis and published three novels—*Zhuizhu* [In pursuit], *Lang zhong ren* [In the waves] and *Qingdiao* [Intimacy]; five collections of prose works—*Wode linghun buzai jia* [My soul is not at home], *Yu Shangdi hezuo de ren* [Those in cooperation with God], *Yiminlu shang wanshi tong* [Various ways to go through immigration], *Jie shui jinnang miaoji* [Know-how for savings on tax] and *Zhuzai Wengehua, shiguang feishi* [Time flies while living in Vancouver]; and a collection of short stories, *Xiang hubo de nüren* [Amber-like women].

Zhu is best known for her in-depth and subtle psychological portrayal of female characters, refined and smooth writing style, pictorial depiction of scenes, and stark sense of wit and humor. The subject matter of her prose works covers diverse aspects of social phenomena, such as relations with her family, friends and relatives, professional activities, and the problems of immigrants. Devoted to creative writing and community service, she has received considerable recognition, including the Overseas Dedication for Literature and Arts Award in 2000.²

The interviewer's third and most intensive encounter with Zhu took place in Vancouver and was made possible by a sabbatical leave from National Tsing Hua University to carry out a research project at the University of British Columbia. The interview below grew out of a series of discussions and email exchanges.

Leung: It is quite natural for you as a devoted Christian to infuse religious belief and doctrine into



² For a biographical sketch of Zhu Xiaoyan, please visit the website of the National Central Library (Taiwan), <http://www.ncl.edu.tw>, and the bibliography listed at the end of the present interview.

your works. For example, Manyun, the female protagonist in *In Pursuit*, faces an intense struggle in which she finds herself torn between innate sexual desire and rigid religious constraint, both before and after her betrayal of her husband in carrying on an extra-marital affair with a smart and handsome architect. Here Reverend Jim Kens appears as a spokesman of religion (Lin 1988). The concept of heaven and hell in *In the Waves* is also a case in point.

曼雲

Zhu: In the course of composing *In Pursuit*, I raised some questions with regard to Christian doctrine resulting from my insufficient comprehension of the Bible. I strove to find a golden mean which would allow for the co-existence of human desire and Biblical teachings. My effort proved to be fruitless. It is, in my opinion, difficult for us to abstain from sin and deny Confucius's motto that human beings have as strong a desire for sex as for food (*shise xing ye*). *In the Waves* addresses two other major issues: Should a painful and spiteful marriage be continued under imposed social and religious pressure? Or should we end it with divorce?

食色性也

Leung: You once admitted that you were not well-versed in literary theory. In spite of your in-depth and subtle characterizations, you seldom use the technique of stream of consciousness to penetrate into the psyche of the characters you have created. Why is that so?

Zhu: Instead of answering your question directly, I should like to raise another question: Did Cao Xueqin, Tolstoy, Maupassant, Dumas fils, and Dickens ever use the technique of stream of consciousness to render the inner world of their characters? I am by no means a believer in various "isms." Should I have to follow trends blindly? What I want to say cannot be conveyed through the methods of a particular school or movement. This does not necessarily mean that I am disrespectful toward those writers who pay special attention to established modes of writing.

曹雪芹

Leung: You seldom use recurrent symbols as a linking device or to convey certain messages in your works. For example, although the very title of *In the Waves* leads readers to anticipate that "the waves" will be of symbolic

importance, the cursory treatment they receive in the last chapter, as well as the abrupt ending of the novel, contradict readers' expectations. Can you explain why?

Zhu: The avoidance of symbolism in my writings may be attributed to my journalistic training. I regret that "the waves" as a symbol has not been thoroughly treated or fully developed in *In the Waves*. The editor imposed a limit of eighty thousand words, and I was forced to conclude the novel abruptly.

Leung: Autobiographical elements prevail in your works. You once noted, "My writings reveal my presence and I am present in my writings" (Zhu 1988: 230), when describing the close relationship between yourself and your creative writings. Does this statement, to a certain extent, reduce the element of suspense? Will readers misread your works? Will they consider, for example, Mengyun as an incarnation of the author narrating an extra-marital affair? How do you perceive the pronounced autobiographical elements in your works?

Zhu: Although most readers can differentiate the protagonist from the author, there are still exceptions. As a writer, I must live with external circumstances. If I cannot stand the heat, I should not be in the kitchen. This, of course, pertains mainly to my convictions about writing, not necessarily to actual incidents in my life. Plots and episodes in my works do embody ideas and concepts. I sincerely hope that I have succeeded in conveying a personal philosophy to readers. Moreover, my feelings for a given character or event have always been true. I share with him/her such emotions as joy, sorrow, laughter, and anger. Although I have not been writing autobiographies, the emotions of my characters have dwelt in me over the entire period of creation. In other words, I have been fully immersed in my work. I have repeatedly asked myself, "How could readers be touched by the story if I were not moved by it?"

Leung: To what extent do your undergraduate training, your working experience as a journalist, and your hosting of the late night TV program *Wenyi yetan* [Discussions on literature and the arts] influence your writing style and technique?

Zhu: It is my desire that literary and poetic elements may be found in my journalistic writings. As for my short stories and novels, I hope my background in journalism has equipped me not only with analytical skills but also with narrative facility.

Leung: You grew up in Taiwan, received an education there, and eventually moved to Canada. How do you deal with your identity problem? All of your works were published in Chinese. How do you characterize your writings? Taiwanese literature? Overseas literature in Chinese? "World Chinese literature"? How do you incorporate your sense of being in "diaspora" (*piaoliu*) and of "belonging" (*guishu*) (Chen 2002:1-3) into the portrayal of your characters?

漂流
歸屬

Zhu: As you say, I was educated in Taiwan and most of my writings were published there. Since 1995, I have lived in both Canada and Taiwan. Prior to 1969, the characters, events, and settings in my works were primarily a reflection of Taiwanese society at the time. In recent years, however, East and West coexist in my works. I view my writings as a duet of the two hemispheres. My intention is to entertain readers with aspects of multiculturalism. I wish I could relate to Taiwan and Canada in the same way that V.S. Naipaul, the Nobel Prize laureate of 2001, related to the United Kingdom, where he was naturalized, and India, the land of his ancestry.

The "diaspora" is exemplified in several of my works. In *In the Waves*, Meiyi, a teenager from Hong Kong, is on a student visa, studying in Canada without parental supervision. As the story unfolds, she becomes confronted by a different culture while she experiences the loss of her innocence and identity. "Chan'er" [Little cicada], on the other hand, is a short story about the problems of patriarchy and subordination to a husband in a highly modernized society in the West. The female protagonist of "Meng'er yi duanhun" [A vanishing dream], after wandering abroad for thirty years, returns to her mother country for good, in order to search for her roots as well as childhood memories. "Banshan fengyu banshan yun" [Windy, rainy, and cloudy halfway

美儀

蟬兒

夢兒已斷魂

半山風雨半山雲

聽聽那雲雀

around the mountain] treats the marriage and love affair of a female foreign student. “Tingting na yunque” [Hark! Listen to the skylark] deals with the struggle of an artist from the Orient to conform to Western culture.

祖母 東方騎士

I should like to consider myself as a resident of both Taiwan and Canada rather than as a sojourner in either of these two countries. Most of the first-generation immigrants in Canada, in my opinion, have experienced some sort of identity confusion. This experience has extended to those of the second and third generations. It is my hope that the theme of belonging, as presented in my most recent works like “Zumu” [Grandma] and “Dongfang qishi” [A cavalier from the East], can provide you with some insights on this matter.

Leung: Your writings have been serialized in the literary sections of several kinds of newspapers. Does this have a negative impact on the way they are structured?

Zhu: Serialization does have a negative impact—most obviously, on the ending.

Leung: You are very conscious of the comments of editors and publishers. The best example is *In the Waves*. In your Postscript to that novel, you revealed that since you had been condemned for producing an unhealthy novel—*In Pursuit*—you saw *In the Waves* as an example of the “literature of disinfection” (*xiaodu wenxue*).³ As a writer, do you think you have to cater to the taste of the editors and publishers so as to survive and succeed?

消毒文學

Zhu: The market for serious literary works in Taiwan has been depressed for quite some time, and I have tried very hard not to lose sight of this harsh reality. I had taken the advice of the editors of a major newspaper in which my work was later serialized. Of course, I would not have complied with their standards if I were indifferent toward the acceptance or rejection of my manuscripts.

³ In response to a request from the publisher of a major newspaper in which her work was serialized, Zhu Xiaoyan used the expression “literature of disinfection” in a light-hearted and playful manner to describe *In the Waves* (see Zhu 1998: 230).

Leung: As a writer and an auditor, you possess a double personality: you are expected to be creative and imaginative on the one hand, rational and logical on the other. How do you manage to deal with these opposing aspects of yourself?

Zhu: Your observation is correct. I am creative and imaginative; I am also rational and logical. Yet I do not see those as conflicts of a "split personality." In fact, these aspects can go hand in hand, in a kind of complementary relationship. Various topics requiring rational and logical understanding have been incorporated into my creative writing, for instance, Canadian politics, social structure, multiculturalism and taxation.

Responses from my readers have made me confident that my career in accounting, as well as my knowledge of social and cultural structures, have in fact enriched my writings. These are extra assets to my works. Besides, I am by nature not good at writing in a dream-like way.

Leung: You said your stories were built upon anecdotes your friends told you. You worked on these anecdotes and expanded on them, establishing links between them and giving them imaginative coloring. Would you consider discarding this way of constructing your stories in the future?

Zhu: I would like to explain my creative process. I first chose the theme of a story and then added to it some familiar and interesting episodes. Not the other way round, as you have suggested. Take *Intimacy* for an example. After deciding on the basic framework of the story and its two major characters, I filled in the details concerning the secondary characters, putting aside issues of plot development. Subplots and episodes were added almost simultaneously as I wrote.

Some of the episodes are true to life. Others are pure fabrications. Youfen is a fictional character in *In the Waves* that I created against the background of the disgusting Vikings and my fascination with the seashore at White Rock, Vancouver. I have always been familiar

幼芬

珍妮

with the setting of my novels. If I were not, I would do some research. I think I will never write such science fantasies as *Star Wars*. The episodes involving Jenny's breast implants and adulterous affairs are fictitious. They are used to demonstrate a fact—"falling madly in love" is risky and impractical. Women lacking confidence, too, won't be lovely. It is, in my opinion, most pathetic that women should have breast implants just to please the opposite sex.

Research plays a critical role in my writing process. I have done extensive research on taxation, jungle laws in the prison, the National Parole System in Canada, the acquisition of antiques, and the lifestyle of Westerners. Despite the fact that my plots are fictitious, I pay special attention to what's probable and what's not.

羅志遠 易華欣
愛蓮 陶亞麗
朴明理 柳映紅

Leung: Your works often involve extra-marital affairs (Manyun and Luo Zhiyuan in *In Pursuit*; Yi Huaxin and Irene; Tao Yali and Mark Douglas in *Intimacy*) and infidelity (Pu Mingli's infidelity to Liu Yinghong in "Hark! Listen to the Skylark!"). What are your views on love, sex, and marriage?

Zhu: *In Pursuit* presents a tug-of-war between morality, religion, and man's sinful nature. *Intimacy* explores the possibilities for raising women's self-esteem. While "Hark! Listen to the Skylark!" deals with an immigrant woman artist's struggle in her new homeland, *Amber-like Women* describes how jealousy can bring out the worst in a woman. I sincerely hope that I have not raised these issues in vain.

Yes, gender relations and feminist issues are explored in depth in most of my works. In regard to love, my humble opinion is that women are forever in pursuit of it. Sexual desire, however, is just like a tide, which comes and goes. Is marriage very important? According to the Bible, it certainly is.

Leung: You have so far published six novels, four of which came out before your move to Canada. While in Canada, you have finished five collections of prose writings. Have spatial and temporal changes affected your choice of subject matter, use of language, writing style, and characterization?

Zhu: Yes. After landing in Canada in 1969, I studied and worked. I abandoned my writing for a period of eighteen years while in pursuit of some professional accountancy qualifications as well as a respectable career with Revenue Canada. In 1987 I reassumed writing. By then my knowledge had increased; my life experiences had been enhanced. I had a clear vision of the integration of East and West in my literary works.

Since I do not think of myself as a sojourner either in Taiwan or in Canada, I do not write like a tourist. The humorous approach to multiculturalism in my prose works is a reflection of my enthusiasm about life.

Because Chinese is used as a medium of my writing, I try to manifest the beauty and aesthetics of the Chinese language to its fullest extent. I have never mixed Chinese with English in my writings because I see no point in doing so.

Leung: A scholar once commented that your style is too “smooth” (Leung 1994: 18). For him, your works lack complication and surprises in terms of plot development. Do you agree with this comment?

Zhu: Thank you so much for giving me an opportunity to respond to this comment. This remark was made with reference to two collections of my prose works: *My Soul Is Not at Home* and *Those in Cooperation with God*. The majority of these works were written at the invitation of the Editor of the *Binfen* section of *United Daily News*. He suggested that my contributions should be stylistically different from other pieces in the section, that their content should be interesting, and that they should not be too serious. If judged from a literary point of view, this scholar is correct.

Leung: Your description of scenes and your treatment of nature are refined and detailed. This seems to me to be what happened: First, you visualize a scene and then store it in your memory. Then, the stored information undergoes creative transformation. Finally, it is retrieved later through “recollection in tranquility.” Do you agree with my observations? Why are you so captivated by scenic elements?

續紛

Zhu: You are right. "Recollection in tranquility" works well for me not only in the depiction of scenery but also in plot construction. I have always been helplessly attracted to magnificent natural scenes. Some people worship money and jewelry, while others fall for fame and power. Yet, I am enamored of the beauty of nature.

My home is right beside a national park, and so I can enjoy the scenery of blue, snow-covered mountains the year round. Simply watching the clouds of mist floating among the bushes would bring me joy and peace. When the birds start singing on the evergreen trees in my backyard early in the morning, I can't help but thank God for His abundant blessing and grace.

Leung: Why are the male characters in your works always presented in a negative light? Your characters—male and female—are either too villainous or too innocent. Do they represent your optimism about human nature?

Zhu: Mankind is imperfect. All of us have personality flaws. The two sexes are different. When it comes to exploring the issues of gender equality, I must admit that I have been more sympathetic towards women, as they have been placed for ages in an inferior position, both culturally and socially.

Leung: As compared to *In Pursuit*, *Intimacy* shows that you pay a lot of attention to plot development, using techniques such as foreshadowing, flashback, tightly-woven episodes, suspense, and coherence. You have narrated the scene of rape and the female body quite explicitly, and you use colloquial expressions quite frequently. In addition to its treatment of the themes of love, marriage, sex, and sexuality, *Intimacy* deals with feminist issues. Can you tell us something about these new departures?

Zhu: Different approaches have been adopted in *In Pursuit* and *Intimacy*. While the author is the narrator in the former, the latter novel switches back and forth between the characters and the author as narrators. This is an attempt to reduce the distance between the readers and the characters by providing them with an opportunity for direct interaction.

Intimacy explores gender relations from various angles. Through the story, I want to tell readers that a woman equipped with confidence is beautiful and lovely and that she does not live only when loved by the opposite sex. For example, Jenny, one of the characters in this novel, undergoes breast implants to please her husband and win his attention; she fails. It proves that love cannot be sought deliberately, and a woman should strive to discover the meaning of her life. Once she has done so, she has the right to enjoy her life in a dignified manner.

Leung: What do you intend to achieve in your writings?

Zhu: Although I am not a social worker, I have always been concerned about various social issues. I hope that, through my writings, I can express my views on environmental protection, on tolerance and understanding among different ethnic groups, and on women's issues.

Leung: What kinds of writings or authors have had a great impact on your writing career?

Zhu: As far as I am concerned, writing is an on-going learning process. Reading is what I do every day. I read and write at the same time.

Over the last couple of years I had the pleasure of reading *A Year in Provence* by Peter Mayle; *Life and Times of Michael K.* and *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee; *Angela's Ashes* and *'Tis* by Frank McCourt; *In a Free State*, *A Bend in the River*, *Tell Me Who to Kill*, and *One out of Many* by V. S. Naipaul. I have great admiration for their talents, and for their dedication to literature.

I relate particularly well to V. S. Naipaul's work. Having read a number of his writings, I am inclined to conclude that he did not go with the trend set by the mainstream literary community in the twentieth century,



since I do not find the popular “post-modernistic” style of writing in his works. Yet he did solid research on the politics and culture of India and Africa. If I remember correctly, during his younger days Naipaul worked briefly for BBC as a reporter. He writes with substance and with a great sense of humor. He observes closely the lives of people in exile. Naipaul is the voice of rootlessness; he is against all forms of prejudice. Peter Mayle, whose work also displays a delightful sense of humor, was once a copywriter, and he worked in the advertising industry before becoming a writer.

Leung: How do your prose writings intersect with your novels? Was your accounting career of help in your writing?

Zhu: I think my prose writings intersect well with my novels. I have tried to write my novels in a style that would make them more poetic and interesting. I try not to include meaningless banter in my novels. I believe that my professional training in accounting and auditing has enriched my writing; it also has enlarged the scope of my creativity.

Leung: Essays take up a greater part of your writings. Will you concentrate more on novellas and novels in the future? Will you attempt to write a novel in English? Will you attempt any breakthroughs in terms of subject matter, technique, and structure?

Zhu: Before launching a new writing project, I often pray to God for wisdom and inspiration. As a matter of fact, I crave for a breakthrough every time, in terms of language, dialogue, and theme. In the future, I will concentrate on writing novels. I also welcome the challenge of writing in English. Feasible as it is, it is in the making. Thank you for your interview.

Leung: I also would like to thank you for your time and assistance. It has been my great pleasure talking to you. Please don't let readers wait too long for the birth of your next novel.

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