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# Post-Mao Chinese Literary Women's Rhetoric Revisited: A Case for an *Enlightened* Feminist Rhetorical Theory

Hui Wu

When asked which foreign writer she could best relate to, Wang Anyi answered, "Toni Morrison. Her feminism is most appealing to me for she takes into account not only gender but also race and class" (278). The connection between two of the best-known women writers in the United States and China demonstrates the inevitability of transnational literary encounters. Separated by the Pacific, Morrison and Wang do not speak each other's language nor write directly to each other, but their literary works have been transmitted through worldwide media, translations, and conferences. Their connection illustrates how effective feminist criticism would be, if writers and critics could connect through dialogues. Better still, if feminist literary critics could take it as a serious enterprise to listen to the writers under study, they could further enrich already gendered reading of world literature. In Wang's case, if all Western critics had interpreted her fiction in accordance with her writing philosophy and the cultural and historical specificities in her works, then she would not have singled out Morrison's feminism as the only type she could relate to. Instead, she and her cohort, Post-Mao women writers,<sup>1</sup> would have appreciated Western feminist representations of their literature.

Since the late 1980s, Western critics' interest in Chinese women's life, history, and writing has exploded (see, for example, Barlow; Dooling; Edwards; Larson; Duke; Gilmartin; Ko and Wang; Hershatter; Liu; McDougall; Croll; Shih; Thakur). Recognized as milestones in modern Chinese literature, Post-Mao women's novels have

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become classics in American colleges for teaching about Chinese women. Anyone who wishes to study Chinese women and their literature ends up reading these writers.<sup>2</sup> More important, Post-Mao women's writing careers spanning three decades have put them at the forefront of Chinese literary evolution. Also called *nuxing zuojia* (female writers 女性作家),<sup>3</sup> these writers have been writing passionately about women in their fiction, speaking for women in other forms, and vehemently criticizing gender discrimination. Almost all of their works can be considered feminist in the sense that they showcase Chinese women's issues and daily material lives.

Yet baffling their Western sisters, almost all Post-Mao women writers deny that they are feminists. For example, Wang Anyi declares that she is not a feminist (Z. Wang 165), and reflects on her contact with feminism: "The feminist standpoint I know is mostly imported from the West. Consequently, many feminists look at China from a Western point of view. Their standpoints are different. Truly different" (qtd. in Li, *Literature, Art, and Gender* 31). Similarly, of the seven women writers of Wang's immediate cohort whose essays on gender I have anthologized,<sup>4</sup> four of them deny that they are feminists. The ostensible contradiction between their "antifeminist" position and their feminist writing has confounded Western critics. Since the early 1990s, their rejection of Western feminism has undergone intensive examination, but with little agreement.

Post-Mao women writers and their viewpoints remain one of the most complex, challenging cases for Western feminist critics. Although not a monolithic and hegemonic group, Post-Mao women writers do share the same lived experience during and after Mao, an experience hardly identical to that of women of other generations, nations, or ethnicities. They have developed a kind of feminist thinking that differs from that of their white, middle-class counterparts. Feminism was translated in the early twentieth century as *nüquan zhuayi* (female-power/right-ism), then changed to *nüxing zhuayi* (female gender-ism) in the 1980s. The former term reminds Post-Mao women of the suffrage rhetoric in early twentieth-century China and earlier Western feminism, which they believe to be incompatible with the reality under Mao, who granted Chinese women equal rights (see next section). On the other hand, Post-Mao women writers feel, not without limitation, that *nüquan zhuayi*, or Western feminism, in promoting gender equality, also promotes gender *sameness*; they feel this rhetoric is similar to that of Maoist women's liberation, which denies womanhood and female dignity. The term *nüxing zhuayi* emphasizes gender difference; Chinese women writers feel that through an emphasis on femininity, this term downplays women's intellectuality and capability. Thus, they refuse to have their works associated with either term. Western literary critics who use "established" frameworks to read Post-Mao women's writing often conclude by manufacturing misinterpretations. As the misread and misrepresented Other, Post-Mao women writers serve as a case in point to address problems in transnational literary studies.

I propose an *enlightened* feminist rhetorical theory that can both clarify and unravel cultural and political complexities in other women's literature, and can strengthen transnational connectivity of feminist ideas about world women's literature. By characterizing one feminist rhetorical theory as enlightened, I am not implying that other feminist literary theories are necessarily unenlightening. They are indeed enlightening in terms of, for example, transforming our readings of literary history and canons. Rather, my use of *enlightened* seeks to foreground issues of power in theory building. For a long time, enlightenment has chiefly moved in a one-way direction: the centralized enlightens the marginalized. Rarely is it the other way around. As the boundaries of world literature and readership disappear along with globalization, theoretical enlightenment by the Other becomes crucial to reconstructing feminist theory because of its effectiveness in the reading of other women's literature.

In this essay, the enlightened feminist rhetorical theory is inspired by Post-Mao women's rhetoric born of its specific historical and cultural milieu. The proposed theory asks critics to practice responsible, respectful, and reflective research through rhetorical inquiry into the writer's literary creation. Responsible critical studies stem from respect for non-mainstream, non-Western women's philosophy of writing, and end with reflection on the dominant interpretive framework traditionally believed to be superior. The enlightened feminist rhetorical theory embraces and integrates diverse women's writing philosophies into the study of texts, whether by non-white, non-Western women or by white middle-class or privileged women. This conceptual framework aims to move marginalized feminist theories and rhetorics to the center, and applies enlightened thoughts to transform the centrally positioned mainstream interpretive framework.

Further, an enlightened feminist rhetorical theory inspires caution about employing Western feminism central concepts to analyze other women's literature. By situating Post-Mao women's literature in its sociopolitical context, I examine these writers' purpose and philosophy to shed light on their rhetoric and to demonstrate how and why Western feminist critics, confined by the dominant theoretical framework, have repeatedly misread this literature. My analysis undoubtedly addresses problems that literary studies have raised, particularly in terms of methodology and conceptual framework. These problems, however, present inspiring opportunities for theoretical reflection and transformation in an era when transnational encounters, like international travel, are inevitably frequent.

#### WHY POST-MAO LITERARY WOMEN?

As a constituent of world literature, Post-Mao women's writing cannot be overlooked on this side of the Pacific, where we study and teach world literature in increasingly

globalized curricula. At the same time, this literature embodies so many cultural and political variables that anyone who neglects these would put feminist literary criticism at risk. Leading Chinese literary progress, Post-Mao women writers have become urban legends and developed new styles, genres, and themes in response to social, economic, and political changes since the early 1980s. However, despite the changes, these writers have never deviated from their original goal—a literature by women, of women, and for women. This is, in its essence, a feminist goal. To understand in depth the problems that alienate Post-Mao writers from Western academic feminists, we need to attend to the lived experiences of the writers. Only then can we fully understand their writing.

Post-Mao literary women made their debut in the late 1970s, along with male authors of “wound literature,” to expose the political purges of intellectuals and the interrupted lives under Mao during, for example, the Anti-Rightist Campaign in the late 1950s and the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. To some of the writers, these political persecutions and turmoil were personal. Their parents were put under house arrest for political reasons; they had no chance to receive formal education during the Cultural Revolution, when literature and academic learning were banned; and immediately after middle or high school, they were sent to the countryside to make a living as peasants. Life in remote rural areas was brutal and harsh, involving them, with no defense, in heavy labor under primitive, even toxic and dangerous conditions. In terms of personal life, the constitution protected marriages of personal choice, but couples who wanted to marry had to obtain endorsement from their employers. Arranged marriages, for both sexes, by parents or bosses in the workplace were typically taken for granted privately and officially, and free-choice dating was kept secret until the marriage had been planned.

Though material and political life was a harsh reality for both sexes, Post-Mao women had endured a “double jeopardy” (Denard xvii) of political oppression and gender discrimination. As documented by many scholars (including Elizabeth Croll; Gail Hershatter; Emily Honig; Li Xiaojiang), Post-Mao women’s lives were tested by Mao’s strange rhetoric that desexualized women in order for them to be liberated. Officially, equal rights were written into the constitution to ensure equal education and equal pay for equal work. Women were told that they were the same as men and could do whatever men could do. All women were required to join the workforce to hold up *half of the sky* as *iron girls*. During the Cultural Revolution, a woman had to eliminate signs of femininity to look, act, and work just like a man. Female-specific apparel—skirts, dresses, high heels, handbags, makeup—were banned as symbols of *petit bourgeois*. It was even a risk to a woman’s life to grow long hair. All women, old and young, dressed like men in olive-green military uniforms and canvas shoes. Chinese women lived a life supposedly without sexual identity and difference for more than four decades (Z. Wang 166). For a long time, China was

a society where “woman” existed as a revolutionary symbol, but not as a “human concept” (Zhang 265).

Mao’s movement indeed liberated Chinese women in the sense that they gained strong confidence in their intellect, professional development, academic performance, and leadership. This has been particularly true since 1977, the year following Mao’s death, when universities reinstated admissions based on college entrance test scores rather than on individuals’ family background. College-educated women discovered that they are not only as intellectually capable as men, but in many ways smarter and more competent because they are able to juggle a full-time job and a full load of housework. Unlike the stereotypical American woman, they have never felt that women are less capable than men to meet challenges in math and science. Women doctors and scientists are common. The one-child policy does not allow them to give birth again, but with support from parents or in-laws, it allows them to end reproduction and focus on their careers after reproduction. Not only are urban women liberated, but many educated urban men are strong believers in gender equity and equal pay. Many male professionals share domestic housework and respect their wives’ decisions on family finances, children’s education, and relationships with relatives.

This part of Chinese women’s history has been controversial among researchers for some time. Wang Zheng believes that “the CCP [Chinese Communist Party]-created presumption that ‘Chinese women were liberated’ was a fact beyond questioning” (“Research” 2). Li Xiaojing and others argue that Mao’s liberation of women was mainly meant to mobilize them as a labor force for national goals, for it held male standards as the norm and required women to meet men’s criteria (X. Li, “Economic”; Stacey 238–39; Wu, “Alternative Discourse”). Like Wang, Li and I are also Post-Mao women. We conclude that Chinese women are liberated legally and theoretically, but not institutionally. Deep down, sexist ideology still controls both male and female minds. Post-Mao women were dissociated from centuries-long gender ideology, only to find that we were still sexually unequal, despite our confidence and our equal, or even stronger, professional competence.

Most Post-Mao women’s writing, therefore, responds to what has happened to women socially and politically. After the Cultural Revolution, women realized that the Maoist liberation placed their generation at a disadvantage, because of the loss of female dignity and sexual identity. This awakening gave birth to Post-Mao women’s literature, in which female characters interact with real-life situations in a distinct voice. These literary works focus on the right to enjoy romantic love and to be women—rights that Mao denied women. Expressed in the writing is the strong desire to regain femininity as *human dignity*, so devalued and lost during the Cultural Revolution. Vividly detailing the pain that scarred women’s lives, the literary works of Post-Mao women, such as Chen Rong, Cheng Naishan, Wang Anyi, Zhang Jie, Zhang Xinxing, and Zhang Kangkang, have exercised phenomenal influence on

society and on the Chinese people. For example, Zhang Kangkang's novella, *The Right to Love*, expresses strong resentment toward the suppression of women's desires and emotions. Hu Xin's "Four Women of Forty" pours out anger at institutionalized gender inequality. In Lu Xing'er's "The Sun Is Not Out Today," a group of women share anguish and insecurity while waiting for mandatory abortions in a women's hospital. Shu Ting's poem "Ode to the Oak Tree" expresses desire for romantic love on an equal basis. These authors inspired people of their generation during the Maoist era, and are inspiring Chinese of all generations, including male writers such as Wang Meng, Yu Hua, and Jia Pingwa.

Since the 1980s, China's economic reforms and free market have brought to the fore Western capitalist practices. The search for lost femininity ironically has been accompanied by the return to a sexist ideology (Zhong 235). The female body, after regaining its femininity, is vastly abused for commercial purposes. The tension between the role of liberated woman and the traditional role of daughter, wife, or mother has resurfaced with new problems and dilemmas. Under Mao, urban women were required to work outside the home, but now a majority, particularly Post-Mao women without college degrees, have been laid off under the readjusted economic policy. Marriage, conventionally perceived as women's main life component, now imposes extra restraints on women. An urban man would not marry a woman without a decent job; yet a woman with an advanced degree and successful career encounters men's rejection of "super women." A married woman may also find herself in a hopeless situation, exhausted by the double burden, or abandoned when her husband has achieved success or when there are conflicts between her career and family. She who succeeds professionally is frequently reminded of her motherly or wifely duties.

This new dilemma has compelled women to break into the essay (*sanwen*), a highly esteemed male-dominated genre. *Sanwen* stands for most short, non-metric prose except fiction, poetry, drama, and scholarly writing; it includes expressive prose (*shuqing sanwen*), narrative prose (*xushi sanwen*), occasional jottings (*suibi*), critical prose (*zawen*), travel writing (*youji*), biographies, brief comments (*xiao pingwen*), prefaces, and letters. The Chinese essay draws mainly on personal experience and is marked by expressive, metaphorical, and poetic characteristics. The core value lies in the freedom that this genre grants to the writer to speak his or her mind, a mind liberated from rules and conventions. Using the essay as their foremothers did in the May Fourth period (see Bo Wang in this issue), Post-Mao writers address women's issues in their own true voices, and not through their characters. They discuss the philosophy behind their literature and women's issues as their will takes them—a freedom that only the essay can offer.

Post-Mao women's literature, then, has evolved from lived experiences as well as from concerns about women amid socioeconomic changes. These works, to borrow Morrison's words, "seek to clarify the roles that have become obscured; they ought

to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not; and they ought to give nourishment” (qtd. in Denard xiii). Post-Mao women write to respond to the ways in which Chinese women have endured double jeopardy (in Carolyn Denard’s words) under and after Mao. Although both men and women have been deprived of human rights by a state machine, women have been exposed to an additional jeopardy—gender discrimination. In their literature is a feminist rhetoric that transcends the gender binary, a rhetoric about educating men and emancipating women, and about a world equally shared between male and female.

#### WHAT CONSTITUTES POST-MAO LITERARY WOMEN’S RHETORIC?

The rhetoric of Post-Mao female writers is about developing a literature of women and for women: a literature that empowers women, including women with or without choices, working women, impoverished women, married or unmarried women, and old or young women. This literature purports to educate men and emancipate women from traditional ideology, and to develop China into a society respectful of women’s human rights and free of gender discrimination. In her correspondence, Han Xiaohui writes that women writers must bear the responsibility for women’s liberation by thinking about gender equality and emphasizing it in their writing. She believes, “Women’s literature must tell the truth about women’s material lives.”<sup>5</sup> Fang Fang says, “Although I am not a feminist, I am definitely a ‘super-womanist.’ [. . .] I believe in women’s wisdom, and I write about women living at the bottom of society”. Zhang Kangkang makes it clear that her novel *Woman on the Edge* questions women’s positions defined by the centuries-long history and traditional culture. As a character, Zhuo’er’s desire is not to collect material gains or change her fate as a woman, but to live a life true to herself, to enhance her spirit, and to fulfill her dreams” (“Zuonü”).

Post-Mao women write to prevent women’s essential spirit and sense of liberation from being trampled. Explaining her novel *Women Workers* (2004), Bi Shumin says, “I was criticized for losing my sight in writing *Women Workers*. In such a fast-paced modern society, women workers have faded out of sight and live in the shadow. [. . .] As a writer, I am bound to write about their resilience, courage, and optimism. I write to show my respect.” Hu Xin wants women to know their importance as half of humankind. She writes, “In reality, it is women, not men, who are protectors and guardians of the human race. Almost all heroes in literature [. . .] do not rise above their misfortunes unless women render their love altruistically” (306).

Post-Mao women write to win women’s human rights. Expressing her concerns about gender inequality, Hu Xin’s essays emphasize basic human values and celebrate female-male differences, in contrast to the tradition of using differences to oppress. Her concept of human equality speaks to a notion of feminism that asks women not

to blame men, and men not to blame their female counterparts, but to acknowledge how difference is historically used as a weapon against women (320–21). Transcending male–female dualism in her prose on gender, Zhang Kangkang recognizes that both men and women were deprived of human rights under Mao. Proposing a gender-neutral feminism that asks for more than women's liberation, she envisions an ideal society where women and men live as equal human beings, harmoniously and with mutual respect, and play reciprocal not separate roles.

Encouraging women to be self-determined and independent, Lu Xing'er connects women's lot to human rights, stating, "As women we need to consider the same issue as men—the human issue—human integrity, human quality, human morale, human responsibility, human life, human sensation, and human thought" (7). Shu Ting believes that she belongs to "the third generation of Chinese poets" emerging after the Cultural Revolution. She writes, "Undergoing a peculiar historical period makes us responsive to the history, mission, and values of our country. Understanding the burden, we are more conscious of social problems, collectivity, and humanity than the newer generation of poets whose works center more on individuality, perplexity, restlessness, and mysteriousness to transcend cultural bounds" (qtd. in Q. Lu 673). This noble thought about humanity enables Post-Mao literary women to move beyond gender binary and individualism, concepts inherited from the Western white male tradition of independent pursuit of the self, and to see the patriarchal nature of these terms.

Although they write indeed as women, about women, and for women, Post-Mao women's feminist thinking is progressive and enlightening to women in other nations. These writers recognize that they are women, and that womankind is half of humankind (Hu 320). Women, then, are first and foremost human beings, and they are entitled to all the human rights that men hold. This feminist viewpoint also recognizes that a state machine may deprive both men and women of human rights, as illustrated in Maoist China and in black slavery and segregation in the United States. In such a society, women endure this double jeopardy, which calls for human rights, not sexual rights. As Morrison posits, women see "something real: women talking about human rights rather than sexual rights" (30).

The Post-Mao literary women's paradigm suggests that they write with a different philosophy, in a different sociocultural context, for a different purpose, to a different audience—differences that construct the rhetorical dimensions of their work. These differences also constitute African American feminist literary rhetoric. Morrison "does not write to engage her private indulgence of her imagination. Hers is not art for art's sake. [. . .] Each of her novels is an artistic creation imbued with the culture and the life stories of real people at real times in history" (Denard xiii–xiv). Morrison writes, "Black women are different from white women because they view themselves differently, are viewed differently and lead a different kind of

life. Describing this difference is the objective of several black women writers and scholars” (22). Many Western critics, however, haven’t reached the understanding that Post-Mao women—like many African American women who write about their experience—write to respond to the ways in which Chinese women have endured this double jeopardy under and after Mao. Feminist literary critics without a full cognizance of the cultural differences in Post-Mao women’s writing do not understand their writing purposes and philosophies that, to a large degree, transcend gender binary thinking and embrace *human* concerns rather than only *women’s* concerns. The rhetorical dimensions of Post-Mao women’s literature—the purpose of writing, the philosophy of writing, and the target audience—are mostly missing from Western feminist literary critiques of their works.

#### WHO GETS TO SAY WHAT CHINESE FEMINISM IS?

Are Post-Mao women writers feminists? My analysis has provided an affirmative answer to this question. Their feminism is culturally and politically different from Western mainstream feminism. Unfortunately, Western critics perpetuated the dominant feminist literary theory without transnational feminist rhetorical sensitivity. As a result, since the 1980s they have been misinterpreting Post-Mao women’s literature. Wang Anyi’s “Brothers” is interpreted as a short story about homosexuality. *Self*, a concept in literary analysis, is also employed to characterize her writing. For example, Bonnie McDougall suggests that Wang’s novels are about “self-glorification” and “her fantasy of self-love” (*Fictional Authors* 63–64). Using the gendered lens of *privacy* to reflect the ideas of *self* and *individual*, McDougall claims that Wang subordinates “sexual politics to national issues such as the social position of intellectuals.” She adds that Wang’s 1987 novella, *Jingxiugu zhi lian* (*Love in Brocade Valley*, part of her love trilogy), elevates “narcissism and willful self-interest” into “positive values through the identification of the individual self with the interests of the group to which that self belonged” (“Discourse” 99).

But homosexuality, a central concept in the exploration of identity and sexuality in the West, is not how Wang deals with sexual relationships (Liu 43). Wang says again and again that “Brothers” is not about homosexuality, nor is it about the three women’s relationships to sex, children, or family (40–46). Rather, Wang wants to explore how far a platonic friendship can go if humans are deeply connected (46–47). In *Love in Brocade Valley*, Wang explores love and sex as part of humanity (Wang 26). When she depicts love, she wants to examine how the two sexes reach harmony and balance in a natural state that is unaffected by financial stress or hierarchy (80). Indeed, the trilogy is about the individual self, but this self is placed in relation to others. Writing about sex and love, to Wang, is writing about humanity, a humanity of “many unexplored mystiques” (10). Therefore, she seldom uses her writing

to indulge her private fantasy about her self. Wang says, "I seldom project myself as the protagonist. To me, writing is creativity. Should I use myself as a character, I would be deprived of rich writing materials, and the world depicted would be too small" (262). The self serves as a starting point for Wang to understand the purpose of writing (10). To her, writing serves as a way to explore the relationship between humans, between others and oneself, and between humans and the world (81).

Further, the frustration of Zhang Kangkang's female character, Cencen,<sup>6</sup> in *Northern Lights*, is not primarily about male-female relationships and miscommunication between the sexes, as Daniel Bryant interprets (127), but mainly about Cencen's helplessness at being a female socially pressured to date and marry a man she cannot bring herself to love. This is because in the 1980s, and largely today, single women over age twenty-five are often discriminated against and isolated (and sometimes sexually harassed) at work, in society, and in the family. Zhang's story depicts women's lot as part of humanity and part of women's lack of human rights. Her purpose is to emancipate both sexes from traditional gender ideology. She says, "After reading my fiction, *Northern Lights*, a young man wrote to me that Cencen's persistence in pursuing her dream reflects his values" (*Say No* 261). Her comments prove that women's literary works also "help male readers understand women's thoughtful, sensitive minds and, in turn, understand themselves as humans" (*Say No* 261).

To further demonstrate the problem of the mainstream feminist framework in assessing other women's writing, let us compare the response of some major Western critics of Chinese literature with that of Post-Mao literary women regarding a type of semi-autobiographical fiction circulated in the late 1990s. We will examine *Shanghai Baby* by Wei Hui and *Candy* by Mian Mian. Born in the 1970s, both Wei Hui and Mian Mian were glamorous college students, or the "Glam Lit writers," who claimed to be feminists and "China's first banned pornographic female novelists" (Ferry 658). These glamorous writers (*meinü zuojia*) used the new genre of semi-autobiography to unabashedly boast about drug use, sexual fantasies, multiple sex partners, and sex with expatriates. Hot for about five weeks in China, the genre's book sales and accompanying buzz had dropped from any radar by the time the sales were banned, not because of the sexual or subversive content of the books, but because parents complained en masse to the government that these books sent the wrong message to teenage girls: it's cool to take drugs and go to sleazy bars to bop middle-aged white men. An expatriate who knows the bars and restaurants in *Shanghai Baby* writes, "The lifestyle it documents is unique to the anorexic, gaudily made-up gals who lurk in expatriate bars hoping to snare Caucasian sugar daddies who will provide them with visas, condos, cars and/or cash. They'll sleep with a rock musician or artist once in a while to prove that they're 'alternative' and not just party girls" (Movius).

The *body writing* by "problem girls" living in an atmosphere of drugs, prostitution, and bisexuality has drawn attention from both sides of the Pacific. Chinese

writers and critics remain ambivalent about its literary worth. Wang Anyi says, “Hers [Wei Hui’s] is not a novel, but pulp fiction” (217). On this side of the Pacific, almost all critics are ambivalent about the quality of this *meinu linglei wenxue* (beauty writer’s alternative literature), and they disagree on whether it is feminist writing. Megan Ferry points out that “while their [beauty writers’] writing brings discussion of female sexuality to a public forum that previously denied such discussion, they also reinforce stereotyped notions of female sexuality.” She questions “whether the public consumption of female sexuality, as witnessed in the sensation these young writers have caused, undermines women’s literary agency and self-representation.” Ferry sees how female body writing commercializes women’s sexuality for public consumption, arguing that “while the authors seek to manipulate the market and cultural forces to achieve self-representation they paradoxically support the very same essentialized understanding of female sexuality that the market, critics, and publishers uphold” (655).

However, other feminist critics, including even those of Chinese origin who were academically trained in the West, call *Shanghai Baby* literature nonetheless, praising beauty writers for their contribution to the intellectual and cultural transformation of women’s writing “through their personal sensibility to the urban public sphere while they are also exploring an interior female private space” (Jiang 5). Deploying *privacy* as a gendered viewpoint, McDougall suggests that “they [beauty writers] have attributed a wide and varied range of meanings and values to the experience and awareness of privacy” (“Discourse” 110). Kay Shaffer and Xianlin Song interpret the beauty writer’s alternative literature as a voice for their autonomy and agency (24). Politicized as defiance of traditional ideology in its open expressions of suppressed female sexuality, the body writing of Wei Hui and Mian Mian is compared to Xin Ran’s *Good Women in China* (Zhong, 242), an entirely different journalistic writing, similar to Post-Mao writing that advocates human rights for voiceless and frustrated women constrained by tradition and faced with dilemma amid social and economic changes. Consequently, Western feminist critics, confused by their own analyses, are unable to tell who is a feminist (Zhong). Examining beauty writers’ feminist claim and Chinese women intellectuals’ reaction, Xueping Zhong even concludes, “Given the various (sometime contradictory) textbook definition of feminism, one can identify all these Chinese women writers and scholars as ‘feminist’ regardless of their personal claims” (240).

Lumping all women writers together under “feminism,” regardless of their writing philosophy, social impact, and readership is what Morrison calls “lump thinking” —“a dangerous misconception” wherein “we are so accustomed to that in our laboratories that it seems only natural to confront all human situations, direct all human discourse, in the same way” (19). This is exactly the reason that Post-Mao women

writers disavow Western-style feminism. They know with conviction that they write about sex not to sell the female body for public consumption. They write about women's private lives not to satisfy male voyeurs. They write not to chase personal opportunities at the expense of womankind. Shu Ting, acclaimed poet, uses metaphors to warn beauty writers: "Nowadays, the criteria for women's literature function like a net to catch butterflies. Those who want to be caught by the net would submissively fold their colorful wings to be marked as samples, which, in consequence, would be overstocked and sold cheaply by vendors" (2). Fang Fang's advice to female college students: "[W]hen people tell you marrying rich is better than working your way up, don't believe them." Talking to young women writers, Hu Xin advises,

When in the open, the heart of a free-spirited young woman is vulnerable because she still lives in the same old world as that her mother has lived. Maybe the young heart needs to be armored with abstinence, which is not chastity developed and reinforced by patriarchy to imprison and yoke women. Crushing chastity defined by patriarchy, women may want to keep the armor, not to abandon it, to gain independence. (321)

Lump thinking is also the reason for other non-Western women writers' disassociation from Western feminism. Nigerian womanist literary critic Chikwenye Ogunyemi and Kenyan writer and feminist activist Wanjira Muthoni have each declared, "I am not a feminist" (Arndt 710). Most African American womanists believe, "Privileged feminists have largely been unable to speak to, with, and for diverse groups of women because they either do not understand fully the interrelatedness of sex, race, and class oppression or refuse to take this interrelatedness seriously. Feminist analyses of women's lot tend to focus exclusively on gender and do not provide a solid foundation on which to construct feminist theory" (hooks 15). The gender binary—gender versus sex, male versus female, and culture versus nurture—often results in inaccurate assessment of women's rhetoric in history and in other cultures (Wu, "Paradigm").<sup>7</sup> Dong Limin argues, "Chinese feminism differs from its Western counterpart, because the concepts and frames, such as male/female, center/margin, or collectivity/individuality, which constitute Western feminism, are ineffective and misleading, when applied to the understanding of Chinese feminism" (95).

The misreading of Post-Mao women is an exigency from a rhetorical viewpoint, which calls into question established conceptual frameworks, traditional or mainstream feminist. This exigency not only contests the critical categories in dominant masculinist and feminist literary theories, but also calls for a different rhetorical theory to understand and clarify the cultural and social meanings in a literary work, because "postcolonial, neocolonial, and transnational situations demand rhetorical sensitivity" (Bahri 523).

### THEORIZING POST-MAO FEMINIST RHETORIC

Mainstream Western feminist literary criticism, constrained by established theories, misses the rhetorical dimensions of other women's literature—the purpose of writing, the philosophy of writing, and the readership, all of which determine the theme, value, and voice of the work. Therefore, an enlightened rhetoric must be adopted. Rhetorical analysis, argues Deepike Bahri, answers the questions associated with text, audience, and purpose: “Who speaks? For whom? Who listens? Why? What is being said? What has gone without saying? What has been suppressed?” (523). This line of rhetorical questioning prioritizes the critic's responsibility for research and respect for a writer's rationale of her work.

*Enlightenment* embodies special meanings to feminists in the West and China alike. In the West, enlightenment encapsulates the historicity of women's equality. Its ideals triggered the women's rights movement in the eighteenth century (Ratcliffe 10; Dooling 17). In the twenty-first century, the investigation of women's equal pay has also developed from the enlightenment philosophy (Ratcliffe 10–11). To the Chinese, enlightenment refers to the influence of Western humanism on China's rethinking about humanity in the May Fourth period from 1919 to the 1930s. Enlightened by the West, Chinese intelligentsia consider their own tradition outmoded and unsuited for modernization, as in women's footbinding and men's queue wearing. It was during this period that China witnessed the first women's movement launched jointly by both sexes. To Chinese intellectuals, enlightenment connoted the value of humanity, freedom from feudalism, and free-choice marriage by both sexes. In the Post-Mao era, when China began its open-door policy toward the West, enlightenment was reenacted by Chinese feminists. Li Xiaojiang, a leading feminist critic and founder of the first women's studies center in China, used enlightenment to awaken women's consciousness in the late 1980s, reflecting the influence of Western literature and feminism presented by such writers as Gustave Flaubert, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Victor Hugo, Henrik Ibsen, and Simone de Beauvoir. She posits, “If the collective consciousness of Chinese women were awakened, then we would definitely see *enlightened* women actively involved in society” (qtd. in Shih 105; emphasis added). When Tani Barlow discusses enlightenment in relation to Chinese feminist theory, she contends that enlightenment marks the beginning of modern Chinese male and female feminist thinking and signals “the priorities that theorists tend to accord to intellect” (*Question of Women* 13). In terms of literature, Barlow believes that enlightenment is about “negotiating its colonial heritage,” a task that has fallen largely to literary theorists (*Question of Women* 12).

I add another meaning to the word: the enlightenment gained from the Post-Mao Chinese woman, an Other at the margin—to develop for literary studies an *enlightened feminist rhetorical theory* characterized by responsible research for accurate literary criticism; unreserved respect for the Other's feminist insights that enrich

research; and critical reflection on the dominant conceptual framework for theoretical transformation. Feminist literary critics, who bear responsibility for their research, should ask rhetorical (or writerly) questions: What does it mean to be a woman writer in a specific social, economic, political, and cultural milieu? For what and for whom does she write? How does a woman writer's life experience impact her writing? What is the social, cultural, and aesthetic impact of her writing? These rhetorical questions about literary creation naturally direct a feminist critic's attention to the writer's insights and to the cultural components of her work.

For example, Barlow's scholarship on the Chinese woman question draws heavily on women's literature and Chinese feminist literary theory (*Question of Women; I Myself*), as does the work of Amy Dooling and Wendy Larson. These scholars' examinations of the historical, social, and cultural impact of women's writing, including Chinese native feminist critiques, have transcended the boundary of literary interpretation understood in the narrow sense of the text largely isolated from the author's writing philosophy. Their recognition of the cultural specifics, in turn, has brought to the fore a vision of international feminism. Barlow concludes, "Once enlightened feminism is recognized to be international, then its depth and multiplicity become more clear. It is significant that the historical flexibility of colloquial Chinese has allowed for so many ways to phrase the name feminism or the movement to center female subjects" (*Question of Women* 14). Inspired by Chinese women's feminist insights, Barlow, Dooling, and Larson show unreserved respect for the feminist writers they study, without being obstructed by Western methods or conceptualization.

Respect for the Other, the second rationale for an enlightened feminist rhetorical theory, helps critics accurately unearth feminist ideas from women's literature. The hope of Barlow and others is that conducting research with responsibility and respect will motivate other feminist critics to incorporate into their research perspectives the woman writer's own feminist philosophy, as well as the specific social or historical context from which her work has evolved. This approach ties rhetoric, feminism, and literary values together, offering multidimensional viewpoints—aesthetical, ethical, and sociocultural—to strengthen human values reflected in the true, the good, and the beautiful. In transnational contexts, the enlightened feminist rhetorical theory I propose can encourage critics to respect the other woman's voice without replacing it with theirs for research's sake. This respect naturally makes critics engage rhetoric in literature, consequently enhancing their sensation of artistic expression as well as their sensitivity to the aesthetic values and standards held by the Other. Bahri suggests that "we might seek a double session and couple our sense of the purposive purposelessness of art, which is its value and perhaps the most political of all of its purposes, with a more sober awareness of the complete dominance of a market sensibility and the commodification of all things, including ethics" (528).

The simultaneity of ethics, aesthetics, and politics reframed in the analysis steers it away from misreading the Other.

Adopting responsibility and respect, the critic can now read a literary text as a rhetorical act. Feminist rhetorical critics fully understand “how a rhetorical act has the potential to teach, to delight, to move, to flatter, to alienate, or to hearten because of its capabilities of discerning the connections among the rhetorical situation, audience, purpose, and strategies embodied in a particular discourse” (Campbell 2). In these ways, rhetoric has already engaged literature. Steven Mailloux’s examination of the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* demonstrates the significance of the novel in its treatment of race and the competing voices. *Rhetorical hermeneutics*, to borrow Mailloux’s term, moves us beyond interpretations of meanings and aesthetic appreciation to Mark Twain’s writing philosophy, the target audience, and the social and cultural impact of the text. Rhetorical analysis delves into the depth of the text that literary theory often fails to fathom. Literary critics have approached *Women Warrior* from many standpoints—feminist, cultural, and historical. Recently, LuMing Mao has suggested that the voice Maxine Hong Kingston has chosen to tell stories may result from a hybrid rhetoric, the interlocking tension between Chinese and American rhetorical traditions (79–83). What Mailloux and Mao have accomplished is what feminist studies of women’s literary rhetoric should aim for: enlightenment—“an understanding of the ways symbols can be used by analyzing the ways they were used in a particular time and place and the ways such usage appealed [. . .] to other human beings” (Campbell 2).

Western feminist critics of middle-class white backgrounds have broken the male theoretical frame, but until recently, few of them have transcended their own race, culture, or class to use theories of the non-white, non-middle class, and non-Western to reflect on their own practices or theories. It is quite common to see feminist critics of non-Western cultures being trained in the dominant Western theory, but it is rare to see non-Western theories being part of the training unless the course title has some distinguishing Other words: *African American* or *third world*. Therefore, a third rationale—critical reflection on established theoretical categories, such as gender, sexuality, and self—is needed to question, criticize, and transform the dominant methodology. For instance, what can mainstream Western feminism gain from Post-Mao women’s responsibility to advocate women’s human rights rather than sexual rights? What can it gain from Post-Mao women’s rhetoric that celebrates sexual difference but does not use it to oppress? What can it gain from Post-Mao women’s practice of a gender-neutral feminism that aims for harmonious society for both sexes? Respectful of other feminisms, critical reflection enables mainstream Western feminists to communicate better with others and with the general populace. It also enables critics to detect the oppressive nature of the dominant framework. Critical reflection showcases how cross-cultural and cross-ethnic perspectives bring

“togetherness-in-difference” (Mao). Compositionists have adopted Gloria Anzaldúa's feminist theory for transnational connectivity (Hesford and Schell). Enlightened by African American womanists, Krista Ratcliffe braves racial boundaries by making an open confession about her refusal to include Alice Walker in her previous book, *Anglo-American Feminist Challenges to the Rhetorical Traditions* (3–8), setting up a model for this reversed enlightenment from the Other.

These approaches testify that marginalized non-Western feminist theory is useful in transforming established ideas about feminist discourse. It cannot remain an alternative theory, for this lesser status has kept it outside the establishment, insignificant and powerless. It must move to the center, to empower the marginalized, enlighten the centralized, and reshape the dominant. Embracing cultural and ethnic matters, an enlightened feminist rhetorical theory introduces an effective feminist rhetorical framework to transnational literary and theoretical studies. Rereading Post-Mao Chinese literary women's rhetoric brings forth an enlightening and illuminating feminism, a feminism that transcends gender dualism to win human rights for women and to educate men. Adopting theories of the non-Western Other, rather than exploiting her to fulfill a research agenda, is the message the enlightened feminist rhetorical theory sends. Instrumental to both those in the center and at the margin, this feminist theory offers useful conceptual coordinates to inform the study of diverse women's literatures and, in turn, transforms the dominant theoretic framework into broader discursive knowledge-making space for different rhetorics.

## NOTES

1. The name *Post-Mao writer* is given by Western critics to those who grew up under Mao (1949–1976) and came of age in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In China, they are called *wenge hou zuojia* (文革后作家 post-Cultural Revolutionary writers) or *zhiqing zuojia* (知青作家 educated youth writers) who, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1978), were sent to the countryside or to manufacturers to make a living as peasants or factory workers. Many American critics group them together with those who became known in the 1990s after Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms. But the younger generations should not be confused with Post-Mao writers, because of their different sociopolitical experiences.

2. Not until recently has translation of Post-Mao women's literature accelerated. Wang Anyi's *The Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (长恨歌 *chang hen ge*), a 2004 Mao Dun Literature Prize winner originally published in 1996, is already available in English. Wolfgang Kubin notes, “All Chinese writers of any era already ha[s] German editions of their works. [. . .] But it is a problem in the United States where [. . .] they have done fewer translations” (Welle sic).

3. Or *écriture féminine*, as Tani Barlow names them (*Question of Women* 328). Although this transplanted French term may apply to Chinese feminist critics, as Barlow applies it, it may mislead literary criticism of Post-Mao women writers because its focus on sexuality does not entirely fit their literary philosophy and context.

4. The critical anthology in translation is forthcoming from Lexington Books under the title *Once Iron Girls: Essays on Gender by Post-Mao Chinese Literary Women*. Included are Bi Shumin, Fang Fang, Han Xiaohui, Hu Xin, Lu Xing'er, Shu Ting, and Zhang Kangkang, all major established literary figures.

5. Dated December 6, 1999.

6. Bryant mis-transliterates it as Qinqin.

7. For a complete analysis of Post-Mao women writers' feminist rhetoric, also see my "Alternative Feminist Discourse of Post-Mao Chinese Writers."

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