Mingming Liu
Thinking Gender 2010

Mingming Liu is a 2nd year PhD student in Comparative Literature at University of California, Riverside. She received her MA in East Asian Studies from Washington University in St. Louis. She is interested in gender and religion in fantastic literature, such as ancient Chinese ghost stories and modern science fictions.

Écriture Féminine, Láadan and Nüshu
A Reassessment of the Postmodern Feminist Visions of a Female Language

“The question of gender is a question of language.”¹ Barbara Johnson’s perceptive formulation of the relationship between gender and language succinctly characterizes the approach of a group of feminists who draw upon the discourses of postmodernism. Yet what distinguishes them from their feminist predecessors and postmodern counterparts is the proposal of écrite féminine—feminine writing—as a path towards the most fundamental liberation of all: freedom from oppressive thought. This paper, therefore, centers on the idea of feminine writing in “The Laugh of the Medusa”, written by Hélène Cixous in 1976, and explores its experimental literalization, Láadan in Native Tongue, and its actual realization, nüshu in China. The project, I hope, can eventually shed some light on our understanding of the opaque postmodern feminist theories of female language.

I. Écriture Féminine: The Laugh of Hélène Cixous

Appropriating Derrida’s notions of difference to writing, Hélène Cixous, in her “The Laugh of the Medusa,” proposes that woman has been left unthematized and silenced in the void between language and reality, and that the time has come for her to emerge from this abyss. She objects to masculine writing – which is, psychoanalytically, rooted in a man’s genital and libidinal economy – on the ground that it is cast in binary oppositions, such as sun / moon, day /

¹ Quoted from Elam 1994 / 2005, 311.
night, activity / passivity, culture / nature, as well as speaking / writing, and parole / écriture, one of which is always privileged over the other.\(^2\) Moreover, each of these dichotomies finds its inspiration in the man-woman dyad, according to which man is always associated with the positive, while woman the negative. Therefore, the sexual opposition between male and female is set up in a relation not between “A” and “B”, but between “A” and “not A”. Reiterating Simone de Beauvoir’s essential question, “why is woman the second sex,” Cixous states that she is either the other for him, or she is unthought. Yet Cixous does not see disadvantages in women’s marginalization from the phallogocentric mainstream and does not consider women’s suppression as a stage of affairs to bemoan. Instead she takes the marginalization of women as a way of being, thinking, and speaking, allowing for openness, plurality, diversity and difference. Hence, Cixous espouses the feminine writing, not as an alternative or counterpart to the patriarchal discourse, but as an entirety in terms of bisexuality.

Cixous challenges women to write themselves out of the world men constructed for them, which is perpetuated with pallogocentrism and antinarcissism for women. By describing the physical (as opposed to metaphysical) sensations of a woman who is speaking for the first time in public, she urges women to put themselves into words through their bodies in order to make the huge resources of the unconscious burst out. For Cixous, feminine writing cannot be “theorized or defined, enclosed or encoded,”\(^3\) yet it can be understood as “the ideal harmony, reached by few, [which] would be genital, assembling everything and being capable of generosity, of spending.”\(^4\) Rosemarie Putman Tong captures the contrast between feminine writing and masculine writing as follows, “the kind of writing Cixous identifies as woman’s

---

\(^2\) Cixous et al. 1986, 63-65.
\(^3\) Cixous 1976 / 2001, 2046.
\(^4\) Ibid., 2046.
own—marking, scratching, scribbling, and jotting down—connotes the movements that bring to mind Heraclitus’ ever-changing river. In contrast, the kind of wiring Cixous associated with man composes the bulk of the so-called accumulated wisdom of humankind. Stamped the official approval, masculine wiring is too weighted down to move or change.\textsuperscript{5}

Hence, feminine writing is not merely a new writing style, but “the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structure.”\textsuperscript{6} Women can change the way the Western world thinks, speaks, and acts by developing feminine writing. If woman explore her body “with its thousand and one threshold of order,” writes Cixous, she “will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language.”\textsuperscript{7}

\section*{II. \textit{Láadan}: The Constructed Language in \textit{Native Tongue}}

Nearly a decade after “The Laugh of the Medusa”, Suzette Haden Elgin, a professional linguist, publishes a feminist science fiction, \textit{Native Tongue}, in 1984, which renders almost a fictional literalization of postmodern feminists’ vision of language. Being the first volume of a trilogy, \textit{Native Tongue} introduces us to a highly oppressive patriarchal culture of a future Earth, where a small number of linguistically skilled women are banding together in fight against their second-class status by secretly creating a women’s language, \textit{Láadan}, which evolves in the later two volumes, \textit{The Judas Rose} (1987) and \textit{Earthsong} (1994), from the private creation of a very few women to a shared language that subversively links women worldwide.

What bears significant pertinence to the discussion of postmodern feminists’ vision of language certainly lies in the creation of \textit{Láadan}. Subscribing to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis,

\textsuperscript{5} Tong, 1998, 200.
\textsuperscript{6} Cixous, 1976 / 2001, 2043.
\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Ibid.}, 2049.
according to which languages structure and constrain human perceptions of reality in significant and interesting ways, Elgin creates a women’s language to incorporate women’s concerns. The Láadan lexicon includes many words about, for example, the complexities of and feeling towards pregnancy, menstruation, and the failure of published histories to record accomplishments of women, and the varieties of love – concepts which exist at present only through lengthy explanation.

The consequences brought about by the creation and practice of Láadan is some fundamental changes in women, which are narrated through the perception of men in the novel. For example, due to the varieties of languages practiced among linguists, their male counterparts have not realized the subversive nature of the Láadan until one day when every man is celebrating the “recovery from the effects of the effing feminist corruption,”

“...Women, they tell me, do not nag any more. Do not whine. Do not complain. Do not demand things. Do not make idiot objections to everything a man proposes. Do not argue. Do not get sick—can you believe that, Thomas? No more headaches, no more monthlies, no more hysterics... or if there still are such things, at least they are never mentioned. So they say”

The delightful celebration is soon dampened by men’s boredom and anxiety resulted from a lack of the “other”,

“It used to be that a man could do something he was ashamed of, too, and then go home and talk to his women about it and be able to count on them to nag him and harangue him and carry on hysterically at him until he felt he’d paid in full for what he’d done. And then a man could count on the women to go right on past that point with their nonsense until he actually felt that he’d been justified in what he’d done. That had been important, too—and it never happened anymore. Never. No matter what you did, it would be met in just the same way. With respectful courtesy. With a total absence of complaint.”

---

9 Ibid., 290.
The male linguists in *Native Tongue* finally decide to exile their women, which perfectly meets the women’s wishes. Unlike many other feminist schools of thought, Elgin sides with the Cixous that marginalization in the barren house, or even exclusion from the society, is not necessarily a stage of affairs to bemoan, but a space of being, thinking, and speaking.

Another point that is in accordance with the Cixous’s vision of feminine writing is that the female linguists spread *Láadan* not only among little girls, but also boys. The detail is reminiscent of the seemingly scandalous contradiction in Cixous’s work. One the one hand, she claims that *écriture féminine* is characterized by the explicitly female body parts that had been repressed by traditional discourse, but on the other hand, she maintains that both men and women could write *écriture féminine*. In a similar line of thought, the female linguists in *Native Tongue*, by teaching *Láadan* to both girls and boys, are building the foundation for a more promising future.

Suzette Haden Elgin brilliantly portrays a depressing view of a future patriarch society, and creates the lexicon of *Láadan* with ingenious imagination, but the description of the changes of women as individuals and the society as a whole is encapsulated in a few breathless chapters. It might be true that women can change the way the Western world thinks, speaks, and acts by developing feminine writing, but this is no easy task. Trying to write the nonexistent into existence, to “foresee the unforeseeable,“\(^\text{10}\) may, after all, strain women writers to the breaking point.

**III. Nüshu: Women’s Writing in Rural China**

Around the same time when *Native Tongue* was published in the United States, a scholar in China, named Gong Zhebing, discovered the practice of *nüshu* in China in 1982. Gong learned

---

\(^{10}\) Cixous 1976/2001, 2040.
about the female-specific writing system from a male informant, whose deceased aunt was a
nüshu user in Jiangyong County, located near the borders of Huanan, Guangxi and Guangdong areas. Investigating further, Gong discovered that younger women knew very little of this script and that older women had stopped using it during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when nüshu was condemned as “witches’ writing.” With the aid of the retired local official named Zhou Shuoyi, Gong not only found a piece of cloth which was written a nüshu biographic lament, but he also located some women who could actually write in this script. Soon after, the female-specific writing was introduced to the outside world.\textsuperscript{11}

The women’s writing is composed almost entirely in highly formulaic verses. They could be employed by women of any age and for various purposes. Unmarried girls would make sisterhood pacts and write nüshu letters to one another. Brides performed laments, and their peers or female relative were obligated to prepare sanzhaoshu as bridal gifts. After marriage, women used nüshu to lament their miseries and to strengthen themselves, especially when male support was lacking. Those wanting offspring wrote nüshu prayers to fertility deities for supernatural intervention. Widows compose nüshu biographical laments to release their pent-up emotions and to evoke sympathy from the secular world. In summary, most nüshu materials project a sense of female helplessness and grievance in the face of departure from ones natal village, widowhood, and economic hardship. It would be too romantic and far-fetching to say that nüshu is an example of proto-women’s-liberation consciousness. It is not a discourse against gender oppression, but nüshu does offer an invaluable source for scholars in anthropology, literature and history who have their common interest in gender studies.

\textsuperscript{11} For a more complete description of nüshu, see Idema and Grant, 2004, 543-566.
Scholars have always been lamenting about the almost impossibility to retrieve the female voice in Chinese history because of the highly patriarchal discourses. Even the literary output of women trained in the classical traditional Chinese is hard to distinguish from those of their male counterparts. As writers, women had to define themselves in terms of a long established canonical literary tradition. The implication is that women were thus circumscribed by the need to compose within a canon that was quintessentially a male literati tradition. A woman trained in the classical genres would express herself within the constraints of those male genres. For instance, a young girl could even write a poem about the delights of women’s bound feet, the object of a male sexual fetish. The nüshu texts, on the other hand, are unambiguously “women’s literature” in that they are composed by and for women in a script that for the most part only women can read. They were not produced for publication markets and hence the practitioners did not have to mold their composition to fit male-controlled literary conventions; nor were they produced to erecting social moral—two tendencies common in elite women’s literature.

IV. Conclusion

Helene Cixous, together other postmodern feminists such as Lucy Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, have been criticized as for their “feminism for academicians.” Cixous’ wiring is deliberately opaque, viewing clarity as one of the deadly sins of the phallogocentric order. The language of “The Laugh of the Medusa” is mythic, performative, and critical rather than descriptive. She works in language, in theoretical speculation, rather than the empirical world. Suzette Haden Elgin renders a science-fictional literalization of her theory by constructing the female language, Láadan. Yet the difficulty to foresee the unforeseeable strains her creativity in Native Tongue. When the French feminists and professional linguists were rationalizing or
speculating on a possible female language, women in an isolated county in rural China have been practicing their own script and writing for centuries. Scholars in the elitist academia in the West have been lamenting the lack of a female language, but the discovery of niushu may suggest that the female voices may be missing not because they never existed, but because we failed to recognize their existence. Voice can be found everywhere. What is important is that we broaden our minds and listen to voices in stereo.

Bibliography


