

‘Poetry and the Contemporary Symposium’

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<http://www.deakin.edu.au/arts-ed/scca/events/poetry-symposium/index.php>

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Janet Charman

“An Encounter With Chen Li’s ‘*Wooden Fish Ballad*’ - As Translated by Chang Fen-Ling”

After his first talk I approach the Analyst from The Lacanian Institute. Are you going to say something about Brarka? I ask. Quoi? He says. Brarka, I say, Brarka Ettinger. Oh! You mean *Brarsha*. Do I? I say. Yes! He says: But how do *you* know about her? From the internet. (Weeks ago, I’d looked up ‘matrix’ to see if it described the way we writers were scattered about the hotel: So near and yet so far...Further down the page, there it was: ‘Matrixial Borderspace’) She’s the artist, The Analyst says, I *know* her, I have one of her paintings. *Do you?* I said. But, will you talk about her ideas? (He gives a Gallic shrug.) (He didn’t, I made that up.) She went off in her own direction, he says. I nudge him with my elbow: Is she Trotsky to your Lenin? He doesn’t smile so I go back to my seat. Suddenly, in *The Matrixial Borderspace*, there’s a knock at my hotel door: It’s Chen Li! With Chang Fen-Ling’s translation of his ‘*Wooden Fish Ballad*.’ It makes me so mad!

Wooden Fish Ballad

This is the seventh autumn of my visit here.
 The cool wind comes as usual; the autumn typhoon conceives no mercy.
 My sentiment in recollecting you is like the flooded MRT system, where no trains
 are available, and thus
 people can go nowhere. 5

I am stranded in the memories of the past, which are
 deeper than the flood in this city,
 picturing you looking casually at the twilight reflected on the pair of Hello Kitty by the window.
 As I am seated alone at the computer desk thinking quietly,
 the cell phone with newly-set tone 10
 rings like birds chirping, and the news-thread rolls on the TV:
 The airport is closed, transport both by land and air blockaded.
 All these add to my sorrow and annoyance in missing you.

The past testament is hard to break. What I have hoarded is a coverless,
 wordless Bible, which, like an ever-turning waterwheel 15
 carrying last night's nocturnal emissions and leaking from the upstairs, drips on my heart. They've
 got all wet—these pages of the scripture about ecstasy of fish and water:
 Poetry and music, our sacred swimming pool.

My shining silver-scaled swimming choir,
 tapped out in rows from the electronic wooden fish, 20
 pass through the flooded city, through the spongy-wrinkly
 moonbeams, and swim to your computer screen.

I know how to recall the merry hours:
 I remember the day we met for the first time at the theater.
 I was a wretched and penniless traveler, 25
 yet you showed your affection toward me, because of an unaccompanied aria
 composed simply of meaningless syllables.
 You kept me loving company by the hotel bedside lamp, inquiring in detail about
 what the aria was about. I narrated to you the romantic tale
 underlying "The Traveler's Autumn Rue," telling you about 30
 Miu Lian-xian, how his memory of the songstress Mai Qiu-juan
 left him feeling remorse on the journey, passing days as if they were years,
 writing poems, lost in reminiscence, trying to find outlets for sorrow.

After listening to my narrative, you heaved plenty of sighs and said,
 "You were actually narrating the story about us, how the memory 35
 bred music and images for poetry to recite about, how you, a poet, courted me, chanting
 on similar yet different themes
 with subtly varied postures and tones; I
 was meant to be a songbird whose mission
 was to sing, but in front of poetry, another 40
 more melodious songbird,
 I now choose to be silent in response to voices."

You said I was equipped with pearls of words, with priceless abilities to create something out of nothing. I knew that you not merely appreciated my talent compassionately but felt no contempt for my poverty. My only possession was fabrication. 45

Oh, mistress of mistresses, your attentive listening is singing in itself. I write, because you are there. You are not a songbird; you are all the singing and non-singing birds: robins, bluebirds, red falcons, sandpipers, snow-owls, and swifts... 50

You are music incarnated, existing before poetry exists. Attracting poetry, accepting poetry, you are the supporting scaffold for words that have got lost, my lodging house on the journey, and in the aquarium of your screen, my shining silver-scaled swimming team and chanting choir. 55

Author's note:

- "Wooden fish ballad" is a form of oral literature popular in the province of Guangdong, China.
- "Wooden fish" is a wooden percussion instrument used to keep time and rhythm in chanting or singing.
- "The Traveler's Autumn Rue" is one of the most famous in the repertoire of Wooden Fish ballads.
- "I know how to recall the merry hours" is a translation of a line from Baudelaire's poem "Le Balcon."

Chen Li

Translated by Chang Fen-ling (2001)



Additional References:

Chen Li's website: <http://www.hgjh.hlc.edu.tw/~chenli/book8.htm>

Janet Charman's review essay on, 'Intimate Letters', *The Selected Poems of Chen Li: Introduced and Translated by Chang Fen-Ling*, may be read at:

[http://www.mascarareview.com/article/338/Janet Charman reviews Intimate Letters%3A Selected Poems of Chen Li /](http://www.mascarareview.com/article/338/Janet%20Charman%20reviews%20Intimate%20Letters%3A%20Selected%20Poems%20of%20Chen%20Li/)

Janet Charman's poem '*prepare for some endangering*' bends to her own shape many sentences from: '*Weaving a Woman Artist with-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event*', P.173.4-197.8: Chapter six of Bracha Ettinger's essay collection: '*The Matrixial Borderspace*', University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Additional sources:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maneki_Neko

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wooden_fish

<http://wenku.baidu.com/view/037a4d0b79563c1ec5da71c6.html> Marjorie K.M. Chan, '*Cantonese Opera and the Growth and Spread of Vernacular Written Cantonese in the Twentieth Century*', Proceedings of the North American Conference on Chinese Linguistics (NACCL-17) Ed. Qian Gao 2005 GSIL Publications, University of Southern California, (P6.)

prepare for some endangering

they say a little knowledge is a dangerous thing
prepare for some endangering

i'm a fan of Bracha Ettinger
i nearly said disciple
that term *is* more accurate
because Bracha's theories aren't scientific
you have to read them as metaphysics
but for an unreconstructed feminist
like myself
she offers an alternative
to arguing with Dad for the rest of my life
and now
when i hear the Freudian quoted as gospel
i check into Bracha's alternative hostel
i haven't entirely suspended my disbelief
but as i navigate '*Wooden Fish Ballad*' by Chen Li
i'll carry Bracha's theoretical map with me

my anxiety about this poem
is based on its depiction of the poet's relation
to his muse
i'm a resistant reader of any text
that refuses woman as poetry *practitioner*
to prefer her as an *enabler*
peak-fear reached in stanza four
where Chen Li quotes from 'Le Balcon' by Baudelaire
a famous poem
which in case you've forgotten
expresses its writer's adoration for Jeanne Duval
but doesn't mention her as an actor at all
so in our consciousness
she has an exclusively sexual role
as '*Mère des souvenirs, maîtresse des maîtresses*'
then reading Chen Li's account of the self reproachful poems of Miu Lian-xian
'Mother of memories, mistress of mistresses' [line 46]
there filters in from 'Le Balcon' a *companion* scent
to heighten his retelling of the lamplit abandonment of *smoke flower* 'songstress'
Mai Qui-juan
this where Chen Li picks up on Baudelaire's narrative avowal:
that 'I know how to recall the merry hours' [line 23]

'Je sais l'art d'évoquer les minutes heureuses!'

implies
that across cultures
and down through history
like Baudelaire
like Miu Lian-xian
whatever the murmurs of his heart
a poet who properly digests his muse's femininity
via his art
gets to live on in the starlight

but Bracha Ettinger's texts
suggest that this consumption
reduces a woman's creative functions
to only two possibilities

either she's the nurturer who cleans my pens and cooks my supper
or
as the woman copulative: *her* lips are intended
for the weeping pip
at the tip
of my penis

such *designations*
suppress the *begetting* aspect of the feminine
that third channel to our creativity which Bracha says
is naively
but necessarily obstructed
in the complex producing the *Artist's* ego
which Freud theorised as 'Genius-God-Hero'

this is because in phallogocentric discourse
anyone who wants to take on the role of artistic creator
must eradicate the m/Other to give birth to *him*-self as a '*male* begetter'

and as 'he' overcomes the conflict
of rebellion
rivalry and admiration 'he' harbours
towards his own ex-hero father
there arises
for aesthetic expression
an exclusively *male* filiation

Ettinger says that in the phallus: 'the elimination of the archaic m/Other
is necessary
for heroic male sexuality to become productive'
so those *women* who aspire to enter the 'Hero-God-Genius' fraternity

must *also*: 'participate in that denial
 which allows for the secretive burial and appropriation of maternal gestation'
 yet 'the price to be paid for this is very high if you are a female artist whose sexuality
 fits badly in
 to Oedipal father-son circulation'
 and that 'for female narcissistic development
 such an elimination of the feminine
 is dangerous
 for it is precisely this process
 that constitutes her as "the sacrifice"
 so destroying the 'she-hero'
 -not even from outside
 but from within'

however in Bracha's adjacently theorised realm
 there is a supplement to this phallogentric paradigm
 a way in which creativity for women and men
 can be rethought through the feminine
 so that an artist of any gender
 may be understood
 as emerging from a field of Encounter and Event
 where
 in a psychic web composed of limited severalties of connections
 matrixial traces function
 as transgressive links
 between self fragilising partial subjects

and so it was for me last year
 meeting Chen Li
 in a limited severality of 'unknown others'
 enjoying the 'compassionate hospitality'
 of a writers workshop at Hong Kong Baptist University

the poet came knocking on my hotel room door
 not to say 'where's the cocaine?' [apologies to rock star Jackson Brown]
 but in the *poet's* drug of choice
 to reveal that he was in the process of translating some of my work
 i was astounded by this affirmation
 high on thinking that in his language
 'other' people might read some of what i'd written

and so
 invited to a restaurant
 a few days later
 listening in a small group
 to Chen Li read 'Wooden Fish Ballad'

my chagrin was the more intense
 as his poem seemed
 to me
 to be anatomising
 the evacuation of the generative feminine

it was not till months after
 coming across the theories of Bracha Ettinger
 that i considered how acutely Chen Li's words
 dare to share those thoughts
 that regulate women artists

but in the restaurant
 in the face of his poem's reversals
 asserting my practitioner status
 seemed only to expose me as a counterfeit male

though actually
 who am i kidding?
 my poetics will never convince anyone
 resolved on the complexion of the Artist as Hero-God-Genius
 for Bracha says such a view rejects the m/Other
 as a 'Thing of no human significance'
 and -while not forgetting for an instant
 that
 'nothing guarantees the artistic'-
 for better or worse
 my work
 has always stayed restlessly domestic
 look
 here it is teatime and i'm still schlepping round in slippers and a dressing gown
 refusing to grow up
 and get myself an upper-case first person pronoun

caught out in this literary deshabelle
 Chen Li's poem
 read me
 like a robe falling open
 to expose
 the anguish a woman feels
 when she's expected to renounce
 the *begetting* creative aspect of herself

and though
 in the velvet of his humility and jouissance
 Chen Li's narrator

consoles The Beloved
 for the renunciation of her talent
 because of what's gone
 before his final hymn to her
 there's no way of releasing the iron grip of the Freudian schema

Bracha says
 that in the Hero-God-Genius Artist complex
 any feminine part-subject must be equally an abject
 a reduction which simmers in the first stanza of 'Wooden Fish Ballad'
 when The Beloved is first summoned up in The Narrator's imaginary
 here his own purposeful alertness: 'thinking quietly'
 reveals him as a compositional strategist
 yet in his vision *she* is conjured passively
 only 'looking casually' [line 7]
 its 'the twilight' coming in the window that has '*reflected*'
 so The Beloved's agency is displaced into spectatorship
 she is audience
 not actor
 a bystander
 in the absence of her active participation
 the focus shifts
 to that pair of feminine (part) objects
 for whose abjection
 Bracha has prepared us

*'in the move from Thing to Object and into representation'
 the Woman Other Thing is constituted as a fetish
 an inanimate object
 first absent and desired
 and later inspired
 by some imagined breath
 to come to life
 now present
 and possessed'*

the process whereby The Beloved's identity
 has come to be framed with 'Hello Kitty's'
 is given in a flashback
 where the reader learns
 that in their original hotel meeting
 The Narrator's critical appreciation of an obscure lyric
 got The Beloved thinking
 that in the light of his poetics
 her own pale to insignificance

[lines 37-41]

at the end of 'Wooden Fish Ballad'

The Narrator

revives The Beloved's "*Bare ruin'd choirs*"

[cf. *Shakespeare's Sonnet 73*]

as his 'supporting scaffold'

[line 53]

consoling her for her silence

he praises her 'attentive listening' as: 'all the birds singing
and non-singing'

but his exquisite listening

fragments The Beloved's identity

dispersing her subjectivity in the phallogentric binary of 'the one' versus 'infinity'

contrast the finality of her creative renunciation

with the narrator's own resilience

this is apparent from the start of the poem

when 'the autumn typhoon conceives no mercy' [line 2]

its weather presages his midlife crisis

yet even with the city in lockdown

and despite the fact that he's at an emotional impasse

the poet is able to compose

his creative energy channeling the richness

of the 'Wooden Fish' fetish

whose spherical shape and size

mimics 'Hello Kitty's womb symbolism

but mute ornament

she lacks a mouth

while *his* 'Wooden Fish'

as a musical instrument: the slit drum: can speak out

her silence all the more poignant if we think of how

even before they featured in Cantonese Opera

'Wooden Fish' were a traditional folk genre

chanted and sung communally in small groups by peasant women

<http://wenku.baidu.com/view/037a4d0b79563c1ec5da71c6.html>

Chen Li also renders 'Wooden Fish' metaphorically

as the computer keyboard

his narrator's personal instrument

[line 20]

so we see all the hits of his aesthetics

his intellect

and his historical references

in the tap tap tapping of its ideographic characters

but wait

there's more

these hits

reference the story of the *original* 'Wooden Fish' slit drum's invention

in this tale a monk of centuries past
 memorialises in carved wood
 the fish that carried him across a river
 but because he displeased it halfway over
 that fish dumped him in the water
 thereby erasing a manuscript he'd written
 which meant he arrived home from his Indian pilgrimage
 wringing his hands
 over the loss of seventeen years worth of sutras
 one day
 looking at the carved wooden replica of the fish
 whose submergence has obliterated his texts
 the monk
 is gripped by fury
 and hits the wooden fetish
 which
 to his astonishment
 coughs up one of the characters from his lost work
 after that
 reviving his foreclosed aspirations
 he hits it
 till every word he's lost is beaten out of the slit drum's mouth
 this
 then
 is what Bracha foretells:
 the moment when the appropriated feminine
 can: 'come to life now present and possessed'

and so it is in Chen Li's poem
 that whatever's abandoned in the 'ecstasy of fish and water'
 can be retrieved from the riverbed the morning after
 as
 like the monk
 the narrator hits his keyboard
 to reinstate his professed testament

[line 16]

allowing him this resilience
 what might redeem the talent of The Beloved?
must she still say: 'I choose now to be silent'?
 in the face of a seemingly permanent phallogocentric reversal
 may she reclaim her creative potential?

here i want to borderlink the fact
 that some read 'Hello Kitty'
 as a back-translation of the *beckoning cat*
 'Maneki Neko'

an extraordinary puss
 from the Japanese folk tale
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maneki_Neko
 where there is a woman who can't get over the loss of her companion animal
 so the swordsman who killed it
 attempts to console her
 with a carved wooden replica
 this is because he feels responsible
 for her depression at the demise of her feline
 as its end came about
 when
 in the process of claiming his beloved's attention
 he spied the cat pawing and clawing her kimono
 and sliced off its head
 the force of his blow
 made that head fly up to the rafter
 where
 it completed its warning intent
 by sinking its teeth
 into a venomous snake
 that was lying in wait

from this tale
 i take the moral
 that there may be substantial risks
 in any attempt
 to warn of a phallic ambush
 but nevertheless an articulate pussy mouth
 commits
 to revealing the m/Other
 as more important than 'the self'

here i swerve to register such a métier
 in the voice of 'Wooden Fish Ballad's' translator
 for Chen Li's spouse
 is Chang Fen-Ling
 it is she who makes it possible for me
 to examine
 in English
 a poem composed originally in Mandarin

i think that in her rendition of 'Wooden Fish Ballad'
 Fen-Ling privileges Chen Li's 'blackware' poetics:
 -as the eleventh century resident remarked of the Jian tea bowls of their region:
 'Being of rather thick fabric
 they retain the heat

so that
 when once warmed through
 they cool very slowly
 and on this account
 are valued additionally'

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_ceramics

in Chang Fen-Ling's translation
 'Wooden Fish Ballad' retains the heat of all a reader may pour into it
 and what better example could there be
 of the *impossibility of not sharing*
 than Chang Fen-Ling's co-emergence 'with-in' the expression of Chen Li's poem

for her 'compassionate hospitality'
 borderlinks the limited severality of Chen Li
 as author
 to an English speaking reader
 her act of translator's wit(h)nessing
 exemplifies the human potentiality all of us have
 for access to a *different* difference
 that is not subject to phallogocentric discourse

if i could point to one new way of operating
 that i've gained from Bracha Ettinger's Matrixial thinking
 i'd say that the opening of my lower case first person pronoun
 which always symbolised for me
 the interrupted narratives of women's lives
 now
 ideographically
 also acknowledges the partial subjectivity of self fragilisation
 in women *and men*
 when 'each exchange between matrixial several grains'
 opens a threshold
 across which the dot of the self transmits and receives along its trembled threads
 'that *co-poiesis*
 where
in the aesthetical
and ethical
creative potential
of borderlinking
and metramorphic weaving
 no "hero"
 can become creative
 alone'

[if you want to know more about this](#)

you can read it yourself
 in Bracha Ettinger's essay collection *'The Matrixial Borderspace'*
 and if you do
 you'll find
 that in my discussion of 'Wooden Fish Ballad' i've bent to my shape
 many sentences from Ettinger's chapter six:
'Weaving a Woman Artist with-in the Matrixial Encounter-Event'

Additional Sources:

Chen Li, 'Wooden Fish Ballad', translated by Chang Fen-Ling
[http://dcc.ndhu.edu.tw/chenli/book8.htm#Wooden Fish Ballad](http://dcc.ndhu.edu.tw/chenli/book8.htm#Wooden_Fish_Ballad) or
[http://www.hgjh.hlc.edu.tw/~chenli/book8.htm#Wooden Fish Ballad](http://www.hgjh.hlc.edu.tw/~chenli/book8.htm#Wooden_Fish_Ballad)

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_ceramics

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