Zhang Xiaohong profiles the work of three prominent Chinese writers who live and work in the remote Yunnan province of China. The interview with Hai Nan is extracted from a series of conversations on contemporary Chinese literary trends and women’s writing, which took place in Kunming in 2002.

Far and Away: Three Authors from Yunnan

By Zhang Xiaohong

Yunnan province lies on the Yungui plateau, at an average altitude of 2,000 meters. The remote Chinese province is reputed for its beautiful landscape, rich natural resources, mild climate, and above all, for its ethnic diversities. Its mysticism has been a continuous source of inspiration for authors from home and abroad.

Kunming, Yunnan’s capital city, is home to many renowned writers, artists and composers. Three prominent young authors, Li Sen, Hai Nan and Chen Chuan have an unusual solidarity. They share the same passion for and commitment to their literature. They meet regularly in a shabby, mud-floor restaurant close to Yunnan University campus to exchange books, opinions, and perspectives. Well informed on foreign literature and art, they share an admiration for foreign authors such as Borges, T.S. Eliot, Kafka and Kunling Guin and many others.

Li Sen

Li Sen, the group’s unsung leader, is deputy dean of the College of Art at Yunnan University. Li Sen writes poetry, fables and critiques. He is best known for his two poem-series ‘Rip It Off’ (Siulan) and ‘The Chinese Windmill’ (Zhongguo fengche), commended by critics as among the best Chinese poetry of the 1990s. Influenced by Wallace Stevens, Li Sen’s poetry strikes a balance between classicism and modernism, intellectualism and lyricism. He uses fables to present his views on life, society, politics and history. Like Kafka’s allegorical rendering of animals, Li Sen often uses animals to represent bureaucratic political figures, speculative poets, seasoned scholars or social underdogs. Li Sen is also an established columnist and reviewer of foreign writers and artists for the Guangzhou-based literary journal Flower City (Huacheng). His essay collection Shadows on the Canvas (Huabu shang de yinying, 2000) provides lyrical interpretations of paintings by Millet, Monet, Van Gogh, Cézanne, Gausgin and many others.

Chen Chuan

Born into a tradition where white hair is symbolic capital, Chen Chuan’s youth somewhat works against his literary aspirations. Following his ‘discovery’ by the editor of Kunlun Press, his prose works East Village Pastoral Song and Knock Open the City’s Door (Qiaokaizi chengshi de men) carried such critical praise that scattered city scenes of popular Chinese cultural imagination. His characters represent abstract symbols rather than living beings. The countryside is a mixed site of memories, fantasies, perceptions and nostalgia.

Having grown up in the country, he assumes the role of an observer or discoverer in Knock Open the City’s Door (Qiaokaizi chengshi de men). His narrator captures a grey, monotonous, lifeless shantytown city, in which trivial and shadowy figures roam on the margins or within subculture groups. Chen Chuan’s renderings are reminiscent of Baudelaire’s The Flowers of Evil (Les Fleurs du Mal), albeit with a milder tone. Nevertheless, much of his representation is characterized by a desire to discern the bright in the grey, the beautiful in the ugly and the kind in the brutal. This gives Chen Chuan’s prose a humanist aspect.

Hai Nan

Hai Nan has been a controversial public figure since the publication of her poem series ‘Womani’ (Wnen) in 1987. A prolific poet, Hai Nan has published four poetry collections: Organ and Woman (1992), Fabricated Roses (1995), What Lies Behind (1997) and The Colour of Lips (2000). Fabricated Roses is the finest and most illustrative of her collections. Hai Nan’s poetry is characterized by seeming nonsense and non-sense, semantic gaps, repetition, the collage of disjointed contexts, fragmentary syntax and allegories.

Hai Nan has also published fifteen novels. Her most radical fictional work, A Man’s Biography (Nanren zhuan) (2000), is a language game that challenges established Chinese literary conventions and frustrates interpretative efforts. Her novels have become more realistic, however. How Has a Butterfly Become a Sample (2000) maintains a closer link with external reality than A Man’s Biography. The female narrator closely examines the story-making or creative process. The image of butterflies chains the entire narrative and constitutes its thematic core of psychosis, love and destiny.

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Hai: This has to do with the Butterfly Spring in Dalí, Yunnan province. I was attracted by the beauty of the samples exhibited at the Butterfly Sample Museum. In Dalí, no other animal specimens are as beautiful as butterfly samples. The museum is virtually a prison for the life and beauty of butterflies. The living butterflies’ indeterminate beauty is not at all free; their samples are displayed as ‘beautiful captives’ in a prison-like museum. Human existence is as fragile and vulnerable as the fate of butterflies.

Zhang: Your most famous poem-series ‘Woman’ imposes a strong psychological shock on readers. I felt that you turned psychological impulses into natural linguistic impulses. I also have the impression that you employ the medium of language to cure psychological wounds. Do you agree?

Hai: You are perhaps right, though I have never thought about it. In fact, the therapeutic effect of language is not confined to unhappy childhood experiences. Human beings suffer from wounds throughout their lives, especially women, who experience pain almost daily. Language is indeed the best therapy. Women can use writing to cure all sorts of wounds.

Zhang: Current Chinese poetry criticism attaches great importance to the thematic/semantic content of women’s poetry, rather than form and structure. Do you see any gender-specific poetic form in women’s poetry?

Hai: Zhai Yongming has her own ‘gendered specificity’, as do Yu Yi and Lei. No woman poet can avoid talking about her own gender experience. Only on the basis of experience can guesses, hypotheses and fictionalized things be represented.

Zhang: Thank you for your time and insights.