

In contemporary Chinese literature we are reminded of the theory of the Middle that rejects boundaries and duality. Take for example the image of the night. Hai Zi, Bei Dao, Bai Lin and Zhai Yongming depict in their writings a time of darkness full of light, a time when the disappearing reappears. Disappearing and appearing are ONE. The one of multiplicity.

It is very telling that the poet Duo Duo should feel the need to date each and every one of his poems. In so doing he challenges any organised system, any collective cause committed writers would be likely to identify to, body and soul. Duo Duo wants to reveal birth and life in a world of atypical personalities. He wants to become an authentic *I*, with its own date and time, which is achieved by means of an absolute break with the present of the established society, where every word to be acceptable must refer back to the collective. The dated poems do not erase the memory of the *I* and its attachment to the ancestors. This need for a permanence of the *I* bears witness to the course followed by Chinese subjective writing in the last thirty years.

Subjective writing shows a fragmentation of the *I* confronted with the misleading occurrences of time. It confronts the figuration and abstraction of the *self*. In Lin Bai's writing, all in parentheses, the *I* is in fragmentation. Similarly, night for Zhai Yongming is the abyss of the *I* facing the *self*—a time of fragmentation or rebirth.

The chronology of the works under discussion is revealing: Writing is subjective, it constitutes a phenomenon not only literary but also cultural and social. I believe that a crucial event in the development of subjective writing was the birth of the magazine *Jintian* 今天 (Today).

Young Chinese writers set off in search of a totally new writing to rediscover subjectivity. Such subjectivity is in no way limited to literature; it also covers areas such as the law, and the expression of the *I* confronted with an overpowering *we*. What we are dealing with here is a claim to subjectivity from the individual against the totalitarian system of the *we*. The *I* refuses to be overwhelmed by the *we*, and to let itself be engulfed in a life devoid of any individuality. The *I* wants to be itself, and asserts itself in this regard.

The problem of the *I* arises constantly in twentieth-century Chinese literature. Writers immerse themselves in writing to seek or express *ziwo* 自我 (*I*), *xiaowo* 小我 (small *I*), *dawo* 大我 (big *I*), *wangwo* 忘我 (*I* to be forgotten), as well as *wuwo* 無我 (no *I*). The “big *I*” and the “*I* to be forgotten” were heavily promoted and applied in writing advocating “art for life,” which reached its

zenith in the 1950s and 1960s. Whereas the *ziwo* and *xiaowo* are both expressions of the “art for art’s sake” and the *ziwo de zhutixing* (the subjectivity of the *I*), movement of the late 1970s.

For Chinese writers, writing is a way of moving towards the discovery of the *I*. The path taken is much more important than the goal which is to access this *I* as object. To them however, there is only a difference of emphasis between path and goal: the release of the *I* through writing, or rather, release through the writing of the *I*.

The aim of this book is to trace this *I* which, nowadays, shatters words pieced back only too quickly by the *we* into conventional clichés through memory and its inner time. It attempts to answer some fundamental questions in the study of Chinese literary history during this period, such as:

How does contemporary Chinese literature go from historical narrative to the narrative of the *I*, where rhythm and epic merge into writing, and where the instinctive load of the rhythm substantiates the epic?

What are the steps and the forms of mediation that allow such a transition?

Is the subject the only agent of the transition? What is its status?

What is the role of poetic language that led to the birth of the subject and which separates it from empiricism?

What are the difficulties faced by Chinese writers nowadays?

Before answering these questions, however, we must face up to the first difficulty: the definition of subjectivity. Is it a subject? The *self*? An individual? The answer is far from obvious. This subject, this *self* may very well be “collectivised,” that is to say, absorbed by *we*. *I* is a *we*, the individual is part of the workings of a huge machine (in Western literature we find two examples: *We* by Yevgeny Zamyatin and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell), and as clearly demonstrated in the first three decades of China’s contemporary literature. The identification of the subjective function depends on its relationship with language, through which the notion of subject is defined, and thus that of subjectivity.

In his book *The Conflict of Interpretations*, Paul Ricoeur addresses the question of the *I*. According to him, the *I* is currently caught between two expressions that may be conflicting. On the one hand, the question of the subject involves phenomenology and the position of the *I* in society, and on the other hand, it concerns the expression of the *I*. This double reference of the subject can cause difficulties with respect to its position *vis-à-vis* itself and reality.

John E. Jackson in *La Question du Moi* (The question of the self) deals with

the subject in its historical and literary dimension, and questions the mediating role of language: Is it no longer the pure medium? Jackson stresses the specificity of poetic language concerning the problem of the *I* and of subjectivity: “Literary language, poetry at least, is also ‘what refers to itself in reference to reality.’”¹⁶

This book aims to provide new insights to this problem starting from contemporary Chinese literature as belonging to a specific culture and mentality, quite different from the referents used in the works of Ricœur and Jackson.

More than a medium revealing the ambiguity of the subject, writing gives a formal genesis to this ambiguous subjectivity.

Suffering, desire, loss accumulate in the course to become *I*. The poet will dismiss words, instruments of treachery and, to escape from them, will use apparently indifferent, smooth ones. Poem and poet will escape the reader’s intelligence for the benefit of his sensitivity. Ultimately, the poem will take place when its author has disappeared as subject, so that the words will exalt themselves in multiple figures. A diluted *I* will hope to embrace the whole universe. The poem will want to act on the other and thus the problem of the other will arise from outside and from within. The poem can become vertigo, summoning the mystic. Poets will dream of transparency where acoustic image—psychological sound—meaning and the writing of literary expression come together in virtual imitation, the *I*’s other. Others will think up places where signs merge with things.

Chinese ideograms circulate in an associative derivation, because of their graphics, unlike the alphabet which is linear. Chinese characters are hidden and apparent in their design, their multiple signifiers, and often shun consistency. Hence, the slippery, blurry, fluid, or evanescent *I* in a game of multiple codes.

In China the ideogram is strongly rooted in the social. It is preserved, hence the tendency to a sociological historicism. The *I* may become judgemental. Literature is meaning, meaning of good and bad, since the *I* enters into the secrets of the workings of the social. The becoming-*I* is a becoming-*we*.

In classical Chinese, the *I* is mainly expressed by two characters: *wu* and *wo*. In modern Chinese only *wo* remains in use. It calls to mind the problem of the distinction between *wu* and *wo* and that of the impact on the evolution of Chinese mentality in the twentieth century.

Wu and *wo* do not share the same disposition of soul and body, which in a sense, saves the distinction of thought. *Wo* allows the knowledge of *wu*. There is a small mirror. Between the two a dynamic of the subject is created.

According to the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, *wu* means protection. This is the way the *I* refers to itself. The character five *wu* 五 has two horizontal lines symbolizing heaven and earth. *Wu* refers to the subjectivity of an important person such as the King of the Western Zhou dynasty. It also implies resistance, opposition. The *wu I* is thus the permanence of humanity in particular human beings. Such *I* is a density, the engine of a particular act of becoming *I*. Doubled, this character means to “keep a certain distance,” avoid familiarity, as in the expression *zhizhiwuwu* 支支吾吾. Individualism associated with plurality. This *I* is more internal, it is ONE inside plurality. It is a distanced *I*, psychological and internal which, associated with the number five, enters the inner workings of the universe.

Wo is as old a character as *wu*. Both appeared on oracle bones. *Wo* consists of two spears or one spear and a hand—an old script that suggests killing, or more specifically sacrificing a victim with a weapon. During the Shang dynasty, *wo* meant a *we*, a group of people led by the king to battle, hunt, or perform a ritual. By extension, it may take the meaning of “territory” and imply favourable circumstances in the fight against others through favours granted by ancestors or protective gods.

In this *I*, there is really a sense of *we*, as in *wo guo* (我國 our country), *wo tu* (我土 our territory), *wo jia* (我家 our ancestral temple, the ancestral temple of the king), *wo jia nei wai* (我家內外 inside and outside our royal household), *wo bang wo jia* (我邦我家 my country and my royal house). The *wo* appears to be recognised. It bows and kowtows for the same purpose.

The double-speared *I* expresses more the external and ephemeral individual. While *wu*, with the meeting of its five mouths is based on the constancy of humanity in individuals, on the substantialization of the subject. The five-mouthed *I* differs from the *I* through the struggle of two spears. The external *wo* in a group of warriors is more physical.

Therefore, it becomes clear why, in Chinese Buddhism, there exists a person composed of five perishable aggregates (Pañcaskandhas, *wuyun* 五蘊). These five aggregates—material body, feeling, perception, mental formations, acts of consciousness—make a conventional and illusory *self*, and give the illusion of a permanent *self*; that is to say a *self* that imagines and feels itself in an illusory way, as the source of truth. It is a selfhood which moves in the wheels of existence without seeing and therefore without the means to reach enlightenment.

Tampalawela Dhammaratana in *Quelques Aspects de la doctrine d'Anattā (non-soi) dans le canon pali* (Some aspects of the doctrine of anattā (non-self) in the pali canon) (PhD diss., University of Sorbonne, Paris IV, 1994), and Kamaleswar Bhattacharya, in his book *L'Ātman-Brahman dans le bouddhisme ancien* (The Ātman-Brahman in Ancient Buddhism) (Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1973) conducted an in-depth study of the problem of the *I*.

They wonder if the *I*, in sensation, perception, mental forms and consciousness, is contingent, being changing and impermanent, can there be an "I am"? In this consecutive series of changes over endless moments, the *I* recognises that this is not me, I am not this, this is not myself.

Dependence and release are also contingent. If the *self* does not exist, who precisely is prey to illusion, who is released? Is there no *me* in the *self* itself, the *I* being just a series of elements disappearing as soon as they appear? In this impermanence, material form is not the *self*, feeling is not the *self*, perception is not the *self*, habits are not the *self*, consciousness is not the *self*. Any conditioning is permanent, all things are insubstantial. Is the *self* material, since it is sensation, perception, habits, consciousness, like a tree, like plants that cannot live or grow without the help of the earth? Buddha classifies this material *self* in *me*: a material form that is *me*. This material and impermanent *me* is the ephemeral Chinese *wo*, external and fighting.