

LIKE SNOW LIKE MOUNTAIN: NARRATING GENDER VIOLENCE IN THE ERA OF #METOO ACTIVISM

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Like Snow Like Mountain (2022) is a short story collection by the emerging Chinese woman writer Zhang Tianyi (1984–). The collection explores women's embodied experiences of pain, physical and emotional, paying special attention to harassment and violence. In the era of #MeToo movements, *Like Snow Like Mountain* emerges as both a testimony of women's suffering and a critical intervention into discourses and practices of gender violence in post-socialist, neoliberal China. Drawing on gender theories, feminist approaches, and literary studies, this chapter interrogates the collection's contribution to understandings of gender violence and the relationship between women, violence, and agency in the backdrop of #MeToo activism. The analysis of representations of sexual harassment and the figure of the battered woman shows how Zhang's fiction destabilizes gendered dichotomies such as public/private, passivity/agency or victim/perpetrator, underscoring the intersection of gender-based violence and other forms of inequality formed along gender, sexual, age, class, and racial lines.

Keywords: contemporary Chinese literature, gender violence, #MeToo activism, embodied experience, intersectionality

1. Introduction

Like Snow Like Mountain (如雪如山 *Ru xue ru shan*, 2022) is a short story collection by the emerging Chinese woman writer Zhang Tianyi (张天翼, 1984–). Published by The People's Literature Publishing House, the collection has been a success: it received the fourth PAGEONE Literary Award and has reached a score of 8.5

on the rating platform Douban (豆瓣).¹ Pushing further Zhang Tianyi's former explorations of love, sexuality, bodies, and interpersonal relationships, as developed for instance in *Love of Patients with Sexual Blindness* (性盲患者的爱情 *Xingmangzheng huanzhe de aiqing*, 2018), *Like Snow Like Mountain* offers a critical reflection on women's experiences of pain, gender violence, and their impact upon women's everyday lives.

Such reflection demands attention in the era of #MeToo activism spreading inside and outside China. Although the #MeToo movement reached a stalemate in China in late 2019–early 2020, sexual scandals have continued to surface, with or without the #MeToo hashtag (Han and Liu 2023), thrusting academics, entertainment celebrities, as well as leaders of religious and charity organizations into the national and international spotlight.² Most recently, in late April–early May 2023, the Chinese and non-Chinese media overflowed with news of sexual allegations against screenwriter Shi Hang (史航, 1971–), ushering in a new wave of #MeToo reactions and manifestations of solidarity. Shi Hang had made a reputation for himself as a supporter of women's campaigns, and had endorsed Lin Yi-han's (林奕含, 1991–2017) *Fang Siqi's First Love Paradise* (房思琪的初恋乐园 *Fang Siqi de chulian leyuan*, 2017), a novel on sexual abuse that has become a hallmark of Taiwan's #MeToo movement. The fact that Motie Library (磨铁图书 *Motie tushu*), in response to the accusations against Shi Hang, announced on the microblogging site Weibo that it would remove Shi Han's recommendation of Lin Yi-han's novel (Motie tushu 2023), attests to the pressures mounting around issues of gender-based violence in contemporary China. Against this backdrop, this chapter asks how literature has responded to the widely felt urgency to expose that which has systematically been concealed, neglected or naturalized. In particular, how does Zhang's *Like Snow Like Mountain* contribute to understandings of gender violence and the relationship between women, violence, and agency in the era of #MeToo activism?

Along with gender discrimination, sexual harassment and domestic violence have occupied a preeminent position in contemporary Chinese feminist discourses and activism. Over the past decade, a new cohort of feminists has capitalized on digital technologies and social media to mobilize people against gender

¹ Instituted in 2021, The PAGEONE Literary Award is cosponsored by the PAGEONE Bookstore (in Beijing), the Qinghua University Center for Literary Writing and Research, and the international publishing brand Astra House.

² #MeToo events, which occurred between January 2018 and July 2019, have been recorded in the *#MeToo Movement in China Archive*, available in Chinese and in English. The Chinese version comprises stories, media coverage, and opinions that appeared in Chinese online platforms before, in most cases, being erased. The English version focuses on reports and opinions published in the English media.

discrimination and gender-based violence. Visibility is key to these feminists, who resort to public performances and protests to raise a feminist consciousness and democratize the discussion online and offline. Indeed, Chinese feminists' spontaneous, intentionally dispersed and decentered activism has been constrained by multiple hurdles including state censorship, corporate interests, and over-politicization by the Western media (Li 2022, 5), but it has nonetheless succeeded at bringing to awareness the urgency of redefining gender-based violence as "part of a larger institutional system of patriarchal oppression" (Han and Liu 2023, 2). The pressures that their activism has exercised on Chinese civil society have reached even into the domain of legislation. In 2015, in the context of growing mobilization against sexual harassment, China passed its first law on domestic violence (Hong Fincher 2018, 80). In 2020, the concept of "sexual harassment" (性骚扰 *xing saorao*), which had appeared only superficially in the 2005 revision of the 1992 PRC Law on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Women (中华人民共和国妇女权益保障法 *Zhonghua renmin gongheguo funü quanyi baozhangfa*), entered the Civil Code. It was defined by Article 1010 as the situation of "a person who has been sexually harassed against his/her will by another person through speech, writing, image, physical conduct, or the like" (Wan et al. 2023, 272).³ These achievements, however limited in scope and effect, cannot be separated from the unwavering, resilient activism of contemporary feminists.

Feminist discourses and practices in China are heterogeneous and plural (Zhu and Xiao 2021). Scholarship has variously investigated their (Chinese) characteristics (Lin 2023), their inherent contradictions, their promises and pitfalls, from a variety of angles and theoretical perspectives. Some studies have focused on the actors and their strategies (Wang 2021), on understandings and applications of the concept of "gender" (Spakowski 2021), or the place of "class" in contemporary feminist discourses (Wang 2010; Zhong 2021; He and Zhang 2021). Other studies have examined the relationship between feminisms and technologies (Chen and Wang 2020; Han and Liu 2023), as well as the complex interactions between global and local forces (Hong Fincher 2018; Wang 2010; Wang 2021; Li 2022). These studies have expanded our understanding of contemporary Chinese feminisms, situating them not solely within the specific historical, cultural, political, economic and legal contexts that engendered them, but also within a long history of women's rights movements in modern China.

Building on their insights, this chapter analyzes how contemporary Chinese literature relates to feminist discourses and practices. While feminist and gender

³ The PRC Law on the Protection of the Interests and Rights of Women was further revised in late 2022. The amended text devotes much space to sexual assault and sexual harassment, strongly urging institutions to establish adequate mechanisms to prevent and address those phenomena (Quanguo renmin daibiao dahui 2022).

perspectives have been crucial to the study of modern and contemporary Chinese literature, I am aware of only a few works that have focused on literature's engagement with discourses of sexual harassment and gender violence brought to light by #MeToo activism (Chau 2019; Liu 2022). In her article, Angie Chau (2019) analyzes English translations of late 1920s-early 1930s Chinese fiction to show that even though translations, like the original texts, tend to "smooth over" scenes of sex and abuse, they nonetheless offer productive opportunities to problematize literary representations of gendered violence. Moving to the contemporary literary scene, Xi Liu (2022) identifies different articulations of gender violence in Chinese science fiction. Neither Chau's inquiry into the pedagogical value of teaching Chinese literature in translation for the purpose of reinterpreting scenes of abuse, nor Liu's mapping of representations of gendered violence in science fiction novels offer an exhaustive account of the multiple ways in which Chinese literature has responded and/or can help respond to gender violence in the era of #MeToo movements. Drawing upon gender and queer theories (Fahs 2016; Freeman 2010), feminist approaches (Burke 2019; Fraser 2009), and literary studies (Xiao 2022), my close reading of Zhang Tianyi's heretofore unstudied collection integrates former studies and shows that *Like Snow Like Mountain* offers at once a testimony of women's suffering and a critical intervention into discourses and practices of violence against women in post-socialist, neoliberal China.

The analysis is organized around episodes of sexual harassment and the figure of the battered woman as recurrent themes and/or images that help elucidate the collection's take on the very issues (sexual harassment and domestic violence) that have been central to contemporary feminist discourses and activism. Each of the stories included in Zhang's collection features a female protagonist named Lili, but in each story Zhang uses different Chinese characters for "Lili" (立立, 粒粒, 沥沥, etc.). The returning sound, albeit differently visualized, establishes a connection among the stories beyond the thematization of women's pain. Each Lili is a different individual undergoing different experiences of suffering across multiple spaces, both public and private. Yet they are also the same woman whose subjectivity is constituted in experiences of violence and pain that point to the female body as a site where a plurality of oppressive gender ideologies and practices are embodied and temporally structured. In the stories, menstruation, marriage, childbirth, menopause, and aging are events that highlight a woman's relation to temporalities that are historically and culturally signified. As Megan Burke aptly notes, "sexual domination is anchored into feminine existence through temporality" (Burke 2019, 5). Women's embodied experience of time is inscribed with systemic violence and oppression. And yet, as my analysis of episodes of sexual harassment and the figure of the battered woman will show, Zhang's stories do not present Lili merely as a passive victim of an oppressive heterosexual normative

system. These stories, I argue, destabilize gendered dichotomies such as male/female, active/passive, mind/body, inside/outside, and public/private, underscoring the intersection of gender-based violence and other forms of suffering and inequality formed along gender, sexual, age, class, and even racial lines.

In order to tease out the convergence of different systems of power, my close reading of Zhang's stories will be informed by an intersectional mode of critical inquiry. As an approach, intersectionality was first introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) to demonstrate that "the violence many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions, such as race and class" (Crenshaw 1991, 1242). Since then, intersectionality has gained enormous traction in scholarship committed to exposing the connectedness of different systems of power in the production and experience of inequalities and injustice. Furthermore, by revealing "how various social positions (occupied by actors, systems, and political/economic structural arrangements) necessarily acquire meaning and power (or a lack thereof) in relation to other social positions" (Collins 2020, 121), the intersectional paradigm is useful in attending to the relational nature of the identities of the female (and male) characters in Zhang's stories. From the intersectional perspective, then, one can effectively appreciate the ways in which Zhang's texts strive to present women's experience of suffering and violence as heterogeneous and mediated by different dimensions that include class, gender, age, and so on. As a whole, these texts remind us that identity politics can hardly provide an adequate solution to women's pain if it is not complemented with a critique of intersecting unjust systems (Fraser 2003).

Finally, a note on terminology: scholars have shown the limits and the shifting understandings of the terms "victim" and "survivor" to address individuals who have experienced abuse (Lamb 1999; Field 2020, 21–25; Lazard 2020, 43–68). In the absence of a satisfactory, inclusive term, I retain "victim" to refer to individuals, fictional and otherwise, who have experienced some form of violence, and "survivor" to designate individuals who are undergoing or have undergone a process of healing. Throughout, however, I do not intend these terms as stigmatizing labels that dichotomize passivity and agency, but as descriptions of fluid identities that exist on a continuum between passivity and agency.

2. Sexual harassment

Like Snow Like Mountain is made up of seven short stories. In order, "I Only Want to Sit Down" (我只想坐下 *Wo zhi xiang zuoxia*), "The Blood on the Floor" (地上的血 *Dishang de xue*), "Swimmers" (游客 *Youke*), "Anniversary" (纪念日 *Jinianri*), "Salt of Spring" (春之盐 *Chun zhi yan*), "Snow Mountain" (雪山 *Xue shan*), and "New Year's Visit" (拜年 *Bainian*) constitute autonomous narrative units. However, their

sequence traces a temporal trajectory punctuated not only by events that characterize women's gendered life experience such as menstruation, marriage or childbirth, to name a few, but also by the multiple subject positions that each Lili occupies first as a college student, then as a young professional or as an achieved professional, and finally as a caring old mother and wife. In presenting feminine existence as a linear succession of moments oriented toward production and reproduction, these stories register its temporal constitution, that is, how woman embodies prescriptive, oppressive temporal legacies that bind her to a social (and national) scheme, undermining her agency and relation to freedom (Freeman 2010, 3–5; Burke 2019, 45–46). In Zhang's stories, as we will see, the embodiment of oppressive ideologies that are temporally woven in the female body-subject is complicated by women's efforts to carve out a space of self-determination and agency from within the very system that manipulates them. The dynamics between embodied gendered temporalities and resistance is especially evident in situations of sexual harassment and gendered violence.

Sexual harassment features in more than one short story. Here I focus on "I Only Want to Sit Down" and "Swimmers" because in these texts sexual harassment emerges as crucial to the unfolding of the story plot, lending interesting insights into discourses of sexual harassment, constructions of the female body-subject, as well as woman's agency. If in the first story sexual harassment lays bare the vulnerability of the female protagonist, revealing the intricate relationship between experiences of suffering and her positioning vis-à-vis not only the (male) predator but also a wide spectrum of characters, in the second story, harassment becomes an occasion to expose the language of "evidence" that harms victims of violence, and to forge empowering solidarities.

2.1 "I Only Want to Sit Down": vulnerability and agency

Set against the backdrop of the Spring Festival travel rush (春运 *chunyun*) that sees thousands of people, especially migrant workers and students, return to their hometowns, "I Only Want to Sit Down" narrates the humiliations and sexual harassment that a female student named Zhan Lili (詹立立) suffers on the train home.⁴ Sexual harassment occurs only at the end, but its occurrence is built in the story from the very beginning through a series of happenings and tensions that accumulate, like in a crescendo, and converge in the final scene of abuse that marks at once the apex and the end of the short story.

⁴ The story was first published in *October* (十月 *Shiyue*) in 2020 and later included in *A Collection of New Women's Writings: The Beautiful Changes* (Zhang 2021). Note that "Zhan Lili" sounds like "standing Lili" in Chinese, anticipating Lili's predicament on the train home. I thank the editor Martin Lavička for drawing my attention to the play with names in the story.

We meet Lili in the opening scene, in the middle of an overcrowded railway station: “in the steaming railway waiting room there are one thousand people, three thousand bags, and one Zhan Lili” (Zhang 2022, 3).⁵ The opening is particularly significant in the way it individualizes the female protagonist amidst an anonymous crowd of people, establishing a sense of alienation and non-belonging that will remain dominant throughout the story and will be key to understanding the character’s vicissitudes. From this point on, the events are narrated mainly from Lili’s perspective. In the following scene it is through her eyes that we take in details of the surroundings such as the “My Fair Princess” hair clip on a little girl’s head. The girl had caught sight of the clip named after the most popular TV show of the year—the Taiwanese costume drama *My Fair Princess* (还珠格格 *Huan zhu gege*)⁶—among the special items displayed on the shelves of the railway gift shop, and, spellbound, had been unable to leave the store until her parents bought one clip for her. Lili is drawn by this specific detail because “there is an identical princess hair clip in Lili’s suitcase; she has bought it for her cousin” (Zhang 2022, 3).

The narrative then zooms out to allow a view of Lili standing next to Sun Jiabao (孙家宝), a fellow schoolmate that is waiting for the same train as she nibbles on French fries. Lili is dutifully holding Jiabao’s bag. The sense of dutifulness that Lili displays toward her fellow student is clarified by a flashback that draws our attention to the fact that Lili has not been able to buy a ticket with a seat and has been hoping to take Jiabao’s seat on the train once Jiabao reaches her destination. The lack of a seat defines not only Lili’s socio-economic position but also her position within her own family. Upon learning from the class monitor that hard-seat tickets have been sold out, Lili has the option of buying either a ticket without a seat for the same price or a hard-sleeper ticket by adding one hundred fifty-two renminbi. The decision however “is not up to her, because it is her parents who fork the money out” (Zhang 2022, 4). The economic limitation overlaps with the low status that Lili occupies in the family as a daughter. When Lili makes a phone call to her parents to ask them if she can purchase the more expensive hard-sleeper ticket, she does not get a straight no for an answer, but her father’s point that young people can bear hardships does not leave room for negotiation. The denial, however, comes from the same parents who have spent a large sum of money to enroll Lili’s younger brother in a military academy and since then have been living mostly in Zhengzhou, in Henan province, specially to “accompany him during his studies” (陪读 *peidu*) (Zhang 2022, 4). From the outset, then, Lili’s economic and gender position puts into relief vulnerabilities and patterns

⁵ The edition I am using is a reprint by Lightning Source. Translations are my own.

⁶ The first season of the TV drama was aired in 1998. It was an instant success.

of discrimination that will be amplified and complicated in the encounters and events that she experiences on the train home.

The travel is too long and painful to be endured without a seat. Upon getting on the train, Jiabao exchanges her seat by the window with one by the aisle to squeeze in some room for Lili. "Sit down and don't move," Jiabao tells Lili, who soon understands the reason for that exhortation:

Every crevice on the train, big enough to hold a person, was going to be filled; if she did not take it, someone else would. Two minutes later, in the space left by her folded legs, a man without a seat squeezed in, his whole body cuddled up, the elbows resting on the back of the chair. Like a "thinker," he supported his cheeks with his hands, settling into a comfortable position. She could not sit down even if she had wanted to. She tapped the man with her knees, but he remained still. From his mouth held between his palms a few irritated words came out: "What the hell are you pushing for? I can't move either! Let's wait until the damn people have passed!" (Zhang 2022, 7–8)

Fully packed, the train becomes the stage not only for various activities that keep travelers busy during the long journey—playing cards, listening to music, cracking sunflower seeds, sleeping, and so on—but also for tensions and fights that inevitably arise when a large number of people from all walks of life find themselves crammed into a small space. At one point, it is Jiabao's seat that becomes an object of contention between Lili and an older man. As planned, Lili occupies Jiabao's seat when Jiabao gets off the train, immediately sinking into a state of "relaxation that comes from being 'supported'" ("有所托"的轻松 *yousuo tuo de qing-song*) (Zhang 2022, 18). That feeling, however, is short-lived. Lili soon realizes that she has been holding her urine for too long, so she runs to the toilet after leaving her down jacket on the seat. When she returns, she finds that her jacket has been tossed on the table. In her seat "a fat man with wide shoulders, wearing a camel-colored vest, legs spread apart, both palms facing up resting on the thighs, is sleeping with nostrils flaring with each breath" (Zhang 2022, 21). Lili tries to explain to him in vain that the seat belongs to her schoolmate who left it to her. To her arguments, the man coldly responds that "if she [your schoolmate] has gotten off the train, the seat belongs to whoever gets it first, right?" (Zhang 2022, 21). A frustrated Lili then turns to a man who has been traveling with her from the beginning, and begs him for support: "Old Uncle, please, please, you can confirm, didn't my schoolmate leave her seat to me? Wasn't I sitting here until a minute ago?" (Zhang 2022, 21). But the man, while cracking a hard-boiled egg on the edge of the table, unaffectedly, replies:

It is true that the seat was your schoolmate's but what that man says is also true; since your schoolmate has left, the seat doesn't belong to

anyone. You have a ticket without a seat, don't you? You, college students, have studied; you are reasonable, right? Letting you sit but not letting someone else sit? That is not reasonable. (Zhang 2022, 21)

Being female and young, Lili becomes an easy victim of the bullying at the hands of the two older men. But the episode discloses more than an unequal power dynamics determined by gender and age differentials. By addressing Lili with "you, college students," the man draws a separating line that conceals entrenched class divisions and social tensions. As a university student, arguably belonging to the educated middle-class, Lili is perceived as "other" by the surrounding people—mostly migrant workers. The scene recalls an earlier moment, at the beginning of the journey, when Jiabao proudly takes out her student ID for the train attendant to check. At the sight of the name of the prestigious college that Jiabao and Lili attend, the surrounding people react by putting on a fake smile, "their expression suggesting at once admiration, contempt, and sympathy—let the girl show off, college students can only enjoy these few years, once they enter society they'll become depressed workers (灰头土脸打工仔 *huitou tulian dagongzai*)" (Zhang 2022, 10).

After losing the seat, Lili moves to the gangway connection, the only place where, because of the cold, she can find a little empty spot on the floor and there she settles, her body in pain, until the train attendant gently invites her to take a seat in his cabin. Lili accepts the invitation without a second thought. From the beginning of the journey, the train attendant's gentle behavior toward the passengers as well as his ability to enforce rules in a professional and respectful manner have captured Lili's attention, eliciting feelings of admiration. But there is more: the inspector is a good-looking man. Throughout, the prospect of catching sight of him, of striking up a conversation with him, or of being watched by him becomes Lili's silver lining amid the dire circumstances, and a not-so-subtle narrative subtext that is catalyzed by Lili's gaze and desires:

All emotions are later deemed love at first sight, yet at this moment Lili could only see the right side of his face: a black eyebrow against the temple, a feminine full-lashed big eye, the entire fan-shaped upper face brightened by it. (Zhang 2022, 8)

The train attendant squeezed through, and positioned himself between the seats in the middle of two rows. Extending one hand, he picked the ticket and ID card. Lili tilted her head up and stared at him; she was finally able to see the whole picture under the brim of his cap. His two eyes were like two clear lakes, his full eyelashes like plants surrounding the lakes. His nose was at the center, a wide mountain ridge, and there was a round and plump mole nestled in his eyebrow. (Zhang 2022, 10)

The objectification and sexualization of the train attendant through Lili's gaze is interesting not only because it subverts the familiar trope of the male gaze and its inherent male subject-female object dyadic structure, conferring on Lili a certain degree of agency in a context in which her gendered and socio-economic positions have made her especially vulnerable, but also because it demands a more nuanced and responsible reading of the events ensuing Lili's acceptance of the train attendant's invitation to use his seat.

In the train attendant's cabin, Lili is sexually harassed. The predator turns out to be the very train attendant—his name is Zuo Yixia (左一夏)⁷—who touches Lili's leg while she is asleep. Lili's attraction toward Yixia throughout the narrative is by no means a justification for what she suffers. It is one thing to be the author of one's sexual desires, it is another to be assaulted without consent. The story makes this point clear, thus taking an unambiguous stance against victim-blaming discourses that delegitimize survivors' stories, inside and outside China.⁸ After guiding Lili into the cabin, reassuring her that she can use his seat while he is on duty, Yixia returns to his job. Left alone, Lili "hopes that he remains this busy until she gets off the train" (Zhang 2022, 25). Her former desire to exchange stares with Yixia morphs into the fear of unwanted, possible scenarios. When Yixia returns from a round of inspections, Lili, to avoid embarrassing silences, fills the space with conversation and tells him "train stories" that have been passed down in her family. The conversation, during which she learns that Yixia was forced by his parents to work in the railway and give up on his dream of becoming an actor, establishes an atmosphere of trust that dispels Lili's fears, reassuring her about his good intentions: "She guesses that he has helped many people like this; anyway he cannot sit down in the cabin, so he might as well do some good deed" (Zhang 2022, 28). Feeling safe, Lili falls sound asleep, but is soon awakened by Yixia's fondling:

That large hand, reaching under the down jacket folded on her legs, was touching her leg. Its five fingers moved with a gentle rhythm, tightening and loosening; when they loosened, the palm kneaded and pressed into the flesh. When they tightened, the fingertips sunk in, slightly pinching the flesh. It was like an experienced housewife kneading dough: she knows that strength is the essential yeast; calm and focused she carries

⁷ The name of the train attendant sounds like "Take a seat." Again, many thanks to Martin Lavička for noticing the pun.

⁸ Illustrative is the case against Liu Qiangdong (刘强东), the founding CEO of JD.com, China's second-largest e-commerce site, who was accused of raping a Chinese student at the University of Minnesota after a dinner. Liu's attorney, Jill Brisbois, and many other detractors insisted that the sexual act was consensual (Li 2019, 122–126; Zhongguo mitu zhi bianjizu 2019, 1277–1278).

on, one movement after another. Each movement was an unquestionable imperative. (Zhang 2022, 29)

The description goes on for several more paragraphs, marking a narrative slow-down that, I argue, registers Lili's subjective perception of time as dilated. Time dilation or paralysis is a recognized structure of sexual domination. In situations of harassment, violence, or creepiness, Burke explains, a woman's "capacity to exist beyond herself becomes reduced to that present" (Burke 2019, 33–34). Lili "remains still, her round eyes suspended in the air, the whole person suspended in the air" (Zhang 2022, 29) while he touches her, her thoughts fixated on what she is experiencing. Lili's temporal horizon shrinks into an expanded, almost frozen present that, by disconnecting her from her past and future, "diminishes her claim to her self as free" (Burke 2019, 120).

Lili's immobility then appears as a symptom of a denial of agency that Lili experiences as a temporal disconnect. Indeed, she does not push Yixia away, but Lili's apparent passivity is complicated by an inner dialogue where two opposite yet overlapping discourses are articulated. Here is an excerpt:

He must be thinking that he is touching his future girlfriend [...] but another kind of silent noise was growing louder and louder, a cry of humiliation and anger. She wanted to leap up, shout out loud, and even open her mouth to gasp, ahead of time, because of those hallucinations. But that suspended version of herself raised both hands and pressed her head firmly against the folded forearms.

[...] You must understand: if you have a fallout with him (撕破脸 *sipolian*), you will have to leave! You will have to walk away from this bright, cozy place, and return to that filthy place, where there is no support, no belonging; standing again on the two feet that have just recovered from swelling, standing in pain...the soul must learn to cut ties with the body, that is the new testing point of life science. Got it? Do you understand?

[...] Let's exchange (换吧 *huan ba*), it's worth it!

As her breathing slowly calms down, she thinks: it is not that bad, after all, here's another train story that can be passed down in the family.

Twenty years from now, when telling this story, with her lips curved downward in a smile, she will say: the girl sold half a leg in exchange for a compartment soft seat, it was worth it. Moreover, she was wearing thermal underwear beneath the jeans, what could that idiot touch? (Zhang 2022, 29–30)

The state of suspension Lili experiences does not interrupt her thoughts. She voices indignation and a sense of offense. She even prefigures her gasping when, later, she will relive the scene of abuse in her mind. But the fear of losing the seat and the memory of the nightmarish, painful travel trigger a change of perspective,

which is a change of language. The turning point can be located in the expression “let’s exchange,” which signals Lili’s decision to accept the harassment for the sake of keeping the seat. The language of outrage and indignation is thus replaced by an ironic, seemingly playful language that enables Lili to reframe what she is experiencing as one of those family “train stories” that she will recount with a smile on her face. On the surface, the discursive shift enables Lili to reassert herself as an active agent who *chooses* between keeping or losing the seat. In the attempt to re-interpret the situation and restore her agency, however, Lili internalizes a language that embodies the very violence and oppression that women experience in their everyday life. In particular, the mobilization of a language of transaction—exchanging a leg for a seat—to transform an episode of harassment into an entertaining anecdote, is illustrative of the mechanisms by which violence is naturalized in everyday discourses and practices.

A question remains: does Lili have a choice? In my view, the text does not offer a clear-cut answer, rather it points to ambiguities that encourage a nuanced understanding of gender violence and women’s agency. By drawing attention to the various subject positions that Lili occupies along different axes, including age, gender, sex, and class, the story points to a range of vulnerabilities, as well as privileges, that tie sexual harassment and gendered violence to multiple intersecting oppressive systems. Particularly revealing is how, for instance, the family operates as an oppressive institution that curtails not only Lili’s freedom on gender basis, but also Yixia’s freedom on the basis of kinship obligations, thus destabilizing the male perpetrator-female victim binary. At the same time, by foregrounding the efforts that Lili makes to claim her sexual desires as the subject of the objectifying gaze, as well as her attempts to repurpose reifying, gendered discourses in order to restore her ability to choose, the short story lays bare complex processes of negotiation through which women incessantly and creatively work out spaces for self-assertion and agency from within the system that regulates them.

2.2 “Swimmers”: discourses of evidence, gendered temporalities, and subversive intimacies

The #MeToo movement in China and elsewhere has encouraged survivors to come forward and denounce abuse, but in doing so it has also drawn attention to the obstacles encountered by those who break the silence. Being believed is the first and foremost challenge survivors face. Adding insult to injury, lack of belief humiliates the victims by delegitimizing their stories. To this culture of distrust, deeply steeped in rape myth ideology, belong discourses of “evidence” (Childs and Ellison 2000; Persson and Dhingra 2022, 13–23). Apparently invoking standards of objectivity and rationality, notions of evidence and proof establish epistemological regimes that, as Kathy Mack and Sharyn Roach Anleu put it, “reflect

and construct the social and cultural context in which they function" (Mack and Roach Anleu 2000, 127). The demand for evidence of abuse, inside and outside the courtrooms, instantiates the pervasive nature of a heterosexist patriarchal culture that denies gendered violence and attributes responsibility to the victims. It comes to no surprise then that Luo Qianqian (罗茜茜), the woman who initiated the #MeToo Movement in China in 2018, "gathered a lot of evidence" before going public with accusations of sexual harassment against Professor Chen Xiaowu (陈小武) (Ho and Tsoi 2018).

Discourses of evidence are central to online and offline debates surrounding sexual harassment and gendered violence, as exemplified by the piece "How is Evidence of Sexual Harassment Gathered?" (性骚扰到底怎么取证 *Xing saorao daodi zenme quzheng*) that a Weibo user, under the pseudonym A Xiong Yi (啊熊姨) posted on their page on May 1, 2023 (A Xiong Yi 2023). Highlighting the harm that demands for evidence do to victims of abuse, Zhang Tianyi's "Swimmers" enables a critique of discourses of evidence, while at the same pointing to strategies of resistance that disrupt oppressive heterosexist regimes by reconfiguring the individual's relationship to the past, present, and future. If violence (over)determines woman's existence by hurling her into a passive present that is disconnected from the past and forecloses alternative future possibilities, resistance operates as an "untimely" event that tends to the past "in order to gain a future" (Burke 2019, 137).

The protagonist of the story is Wang Lili (王沥沥), a young professional who has developed a passion for swimming. Swimming is more than a hobby for Lili; it has become an escape from the draining routine of daily life and a relief from the constant vexation of penetrating gazes:

At the end of the workday, an indescribable unease envelops her. It's as if those staring eyes have left her body pitted and scarred, as if her skin has peeled away, revealing exposed wires underneath. Only underwater, when water embraces and protects her, she feels safe; the places on her body that have cracked, the spots where the wind leaks in gradually close up, becoming smooth and even once again. (Zhang 2022, 56)

Lili is introduced after a long prologue that portrays the swimming pool, its internal spatial arrangement, and the experience of going to the pool. As if on a guided tour, readers walk into the building and meet the women at the front desk—Xiao Jin (小金), the younger, who explains to visitors the rules and policy of the swimming pool, and Yuan Dajie (袁大姐 sister Yuan), just over forty years old, who is always eating melon seeds. Locker key in hand, visitors take a turn to the left if they are male, to the right if they are female. We enter the women's changing room. In a documentary-like fashion, the text zooms in details such as the two rows of white washbasins at the entrance, the closets, the benches, and the showers. As visual details give way to other sensory experiences such as the description of

the steamy aroma—"a blend of chlorine, the fragrance of shampoo and shower gel, and the natural scent of people's skin" (Zhang 2022, 51)—that enshrouds the whole space, it becomes clear that what seemed an objective "documentary" is actually the reproduction of a subjective, phenomenological experience. We are following Lili, before we even know her. It is through her eyes that we watch women changing their clothes, peeping at each other's bodies, comparing their own bodies to others'. Still from Lili's perspective, we are induced to discern those women's swimming skills from the characteristics of their swimsuits. And finally, it is through Lili's body-subject that we "feel" the experience of being in water:

It's as if hundreds of anchor chains release from your body all at once. A slight movement of your arms and legs makes you float weightlessly, like a drifting jellyfish.

Water is like a kind of love, the one that makes people relax and feel safe. That moment's feeling is truly wonderful, even better than downing a large gulp of ice-cold beer, better than when your tongue slips into a cute mouth during a kiss. (Zhang 2022, 52)

Lili feels free and safe in water until one day when a man in his forties or fifties touches her. The man is one of the regulars, his main characteristic being a protruding belly that looks like a "rice dumpling" (汤圆 *tangyuan*) that has got stuck half way while being inserted into a hole (Zhang 2022, 57). At first Lili persuades herself that he has touched her unintentionally while swimming past her. But when he touches her a second time, she has no doubt that it is a case of harassment. Thereafter, every time Lili is at the pool, she first checks which lane "Rice Dumpling" is swimming in before choosing a lane. Alertness and self-imposed restraint seem to be Lili's only defense, although for a moment she entertains the possibility of reporting the harassment to the women at the desk:

Should I tell Xiao Jin and Sister Yuan? Tell them there's a guy touching women's buttocks in the water...but what can Xiao Jin do? Forbid him from coming to swim in the future? I can't have Xiao Jin warn every female guest: "There is a guy who likes to harass, be careful, ladies." The crucial thing is that there are no cameras underwater, there is no evidence (无凭无据 *wuping wuju*). (Zhang 2022, 58)

Unable to "prove" the harassment, she chooses to remain silent. The event is brushed aside as though it never happened.

Summer arrives and a new female guest appears at the pool: her shiny white swimsuit and outstanding swimming technique capture Lili's interest. Her name is Ling Kehua (凌可花), Lili reads one day on the book for registration at the front desk, but only later in the fall will Lili have a chance to finally speak to her. It happens in the showers: Kehua has forgotten to bring her shampoo and asks Lili if

she can lend some to her. As they talk, a trickle of blood flows down Lili's leg; her period has caught her unprepared so, after showering, it is Kehua who returns the favor by handing Lili a sanitary pad. Out of this exchange grows a form of intimacy that will prove to be pivotal in contrasting humiliation and offense.

The same man who has touched Lili, one day, harasses Kehua. Screaming at the top of her lungs, Kehua gets out of the pool, everybody's eyes fixed on her. When a lifeguard, Old Zhao (老赵), steps forward to understand what has happened, without hesitation, Kehua points her finger at the man with the big belly and accuses him of touching her buttocks and leg. Rice Dumpling responds to the accusation by claiming that the touching was accidental, that brushing each other's bodies is almost inevitable in a common pool. But as Kehua insists that the touching was done on purpose, annoyed, Rice Dumpling asks about evidence:

"So, do you have any evidence (证据 *zhengju*)?" Turning to Old Zhao:

"Hey, do you have underwater surveillance cameras?"

Old Zhao replied, "Well, no."

Rice Dumpling said: "Then, that's it, it's over! There is no evidence (*wuping wuju*). Sister, if you want to fake an accident (碰瓷 *pengci*), choose a place with cameras next time." (Zhang 2022, 66)

He goes as far as to offend her with a despicable sexist remark:

Sister, if you looked like Fan Bingbing,⁹ maybe people would believe you a bit more. Look at your dark skin, the thick legs—I'm really not interested! Even if you paid me to touch you, I would still find you below my standards. (Zhang 2022, 67)

Although he is reproached by Old Zhao for the sexist comment, the language of evidence has successfully sown the seed of doubt among the people present; Old Zhao himself considers the situation "difficult to deal with." Kehua is in tears when Lili finally finds the courage to shout "I'll testify!" (作证 *zuozheng*) (Zhang 2022, 67). She tells everyone that he has touched her as well, more than once. Lili's "me-too" intervention suddenly makes Kehua's accusations more credible in the mind of the spectators. Xiao Jin, for one, argues that there must be something true if more than one person comes forward with the same accusation. Her reasoning is unfair toward the victims, but it suggests that coming forward as a group can have positive ramifications as much for the victims as for the larger community. In the face of the perpetrator's denial and his refusal to apologize for what he has done—he is certain that in the absence of evidence he will get away with it—another lifeguard steps in. The lifeguard warns him that without an apology the

⁹ Fan Bingbing (范冰冰, 1981–) is a Chinese actress. She rose to fame in 1998 with the role she played in *My Fair Princess*.

case will be reported to the “system” that will put him on a sort of “black list,” with consequences as to his ability to get a credit card, obtain loans, etc. (Zhang 2022, 68). Frightened by the threat, the perpetrator apologizes. The “system” is of course an invention of the lifeguard who wants to put pressure on the perpetrator, but it also stands as a concrete manifestation of solidarity and support toward Lili and Kehua. Indeed, the man has harassed the young women with impunity, but much has been gained at the community level from breaking the silence. In this scene, #MeToo activism is not simply evoked, it is staged and even endorsed as a viable, albeit imperfect, mode of resistance.

The apology, however, does not erase the harm that the victims have suffered. Nor is the solidarity expressed by the community sufficient to heal the wounds caused by the abuse. Because oppressive gendered systems rely upon embodied temporal structures, resistance efforts, Burke emphasizes must “generate disorder in the order of time that produces and maintains the reality of sexual domination” (Burke 2019, 128). Kehua, in particular, is thrown into silence by the abuse. After the event, she appears stuck in her pain and trauma, trapped in a temporal dimension that ties her to the experience of violence while unhinging her from other possible temporalities and aspects of life, including her friend Lili. The young women thus drift apart, but when they meet again in the pool, a month later, the encounter becomes an occasion to rekindle the previously built intimacy and discover its subversive potential. Their intimacy fissures the temporal entrapment by enabling alternative temporal configurations and modes of affection. If heteronormative systems affect how “one experiences her self through the way she can be touched by others” (Burke 2019, 132), intimacy here resists oppression precisely by instituting a new way of touching and being touched, as demonstrated by the scene when Kehua holds Lili’s hand to help her improve her swimming technique:

Both of their hands were cold due to being submerged in the water for a long time, and only the parts pressed tightly together were warm. For a few seconds, Wang Lili felt like her entire being had vanished, with only that point of contact remaining, keeping her alive. She exerted all her strength to experience that hand, to remember the shape of the slender hand bones she could feel through the skin, and the power of restraint and guidance transmitted through the muscles of the fingers and palm. (Zhang 2022, 71)

The touching hands effect a temporal suspension that differs from the temporal suspension caused by the experience of, or by the possibility of experiencing, abuse. This moment can be deemed “untimely” (Burke 2019, 132–137) and queer because it interrupts the temporal habit that produces and maintains heteronormative oppression, activating healing mechanisms that have the potential of restoring agency and freedom. The touch that feels like a return to life for Lili

reconnects Kehua to the past, thereby opening up “the possibility for a relation to the future” (Burke 2019, 139). After swimming, Kehua, who has never completely taken off the swimsuit while under the shower, lets Lili see her full naked body for the first time. A scar runs down Kehua’s stomach below the navel. No word is uttered, but “Wang Lili understands everything. Very clearly, exceptionally clearly” (Zhang 2022, 73). We are not told what caused the scar, but it is easy to intuit that behind it lies a story of pain and trauma—maybe an unwanted pregnancy or an abortion by hysterotomy—that the experience of harassment in the pool brought to life. By showing the scar, Kehua gives visibility to what has been concealed, and by doing so allows herself to inhabit the past in a different way. The past is no longer felt as a congealed dimension that constraints the present and the future but as an open source that can inflect the present and the future in unpredictable, indeterminate ways. In connecting to an open past, the individual challenges the limits of her gendered temporal existence and reclaims her agency. Kehua disappears again after this moment, but the story leaves open the possibility of a future encounter with Lili. The assertion of indeterminacy against the determination of oppressive regimes is reflected in the story’s open ending.

3. The battered woman

Let us return for a moment to the scene in “I Only Want to Sit Down” when Zhan Lili shares with the train attendant two “train stories” that have been passed down in her family. The first one revolves around Lili’s grandmother, who once traveled home with her newborn grandson. On the train home the baby was kidnapped by a female peasant who had been battered by her husband for years for not becoming pregnant. The peasant was traveling to Shanghai, intending to take her life there by jumping into the river, when she saw the cute baby on the train and decided to take him with her. To keep him quiet, she even made him drink alcohol. The story ends with the image of Lili’s forgiving grandmother who offers to pay for the peasant’s return ticket.

Lili’s story introduces to us the figure of the battered woman as a “detail” that is not central to the story plot but is “telling” in that its “presence or absence,” as Jiwei Xiao puts it, “shines a light on what is hidden in the text” (Xiao 2022). The battered female peasant in this vignette unmasks social and ethical complexities that demand a nuanced understanding of gender violence and configurations of victimhood. The female peasant is a victim of unequal gender relations but also of an unjust economic system that has made her vulnerable and, likely, economically dependent upon her husband. She is about to give up on her miserable life when she sees hope in the possibility of having a child, even if not her own. The kidnapping is a desperate gesture, but one that signifies the woman’s effort to

transform herself from a passive recipient of violence into an agent of change. That the gesture comes with ethical implications further troubles not only rigid divisions between victimization and agency but also between victim and perpetrator, highlighting the ambiguities, tensions, and negotiations embedded in those relations.

The battered woman reappears in "The Blood on the Floor" as a revealing detail that situates domestic violence at the intersection of various forms of inequality and injustice. As domestic violence makes manifest differences that are linked to the city's colonial past and to larger patterns of marginalization and socio-economic unevenness, it emerges as a phenomenon that undercuts binary constructions of public and private, victim and perpetrator, as well as passivity and agency. Interestingly, in this story, female victims of domestic violence prove their resilience by repurposing the experience of menstruation and its inherent gendered temporality to form intimacies as potent sites of resistance.

The story is centered on Lili (粒粒), a young professional who returns to her hometown to pay a visit to her mother, Wang Chang'e (王嫦娥), who has remarried and now lives with her second husband Yang Qi (杨器), a former teacher whose standard Mandarin stands out in an unspecified province where everyone is used to speaking the dialect. The story focuses on the night that Lili spends at her mother and Yang Qi's place, and on the accidental staining of the bedding caused by the unexpected arrival of Lili's period. Flashbacks to the past, invariably refracted through Lili's memory, are interpolated within this narrative line.

The first flashback occurs while Lili makes a tour of her mother's new apartment. In the studio, she notices the absence of their old bookcase, now replaced by a new one. Lili remembers that the old bookcase was handmade by her biological father, who "got divorced from her mother four years before" (Zhang 2022, 34). Although this memory conveys a certain attachment to the old bookcase—and by extension to the father who made it—to her mother, who is eager to explain why she has gotten rid of that piece of furniture, Lili would only like to say: "it doesn't matter. Didn't I advise you to get a divorce when I was only eight years old? Didn't I join you in cursing him all along for being a 'scoundrel raised in a pit?'" (Zhang 2022, 34). Lili's unspoken thoughts, and the brutal spatial image (the "pit"), hide a past of suffering that is not immediately disclosed. What is disclosed instead is that the language of the pit is her mother's, who has always associated people's behavior to their geographical provenance. In Chang'e's cultural mapping of the city, the northern area, previously under colonial rule, with its beautiful Western buildings, is where people have style and a taste for the aesthetic. The eastern area is home to the best universities, thus those who grow up there are the most educated and refined. The south is mostly inhabited by people coming from the provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang; not glamorous, but not bad, either. Finally, the

west side is the most degraded area, where brothels, gambling dens, and criminal associations thrived before the founding of the New China. We can already guess where the “pit” is located in this geography, but before we know more about Lili’s father, Lili dwells on how this cultural mapping is reflected in the stories that her mother used to tell her. In passing, Lili recalls one such story. It is about the neighbors’ daughter who within three months after getting married began suffering her husband’s battering. Once, one of her eyes was severely injured. The man had been raised, of course, on the west side of the city, Lili was told by her mother when she inquired about his provenance.

In this reminiscence, the battered woman returns again as a detail that while being secondary to the story line is key to understanding the complexity of gender violence beyond reductions and simplifications. Her story emerges as an uncanny moment that stands out because of, rather than in spite of, the naturalization of the violence implicated in colonial, social, and gender inequalities. The association between violence and the batterer’s origins in Chang’e’s narrative helps to reframe domestic violence as a matter that is not confined to the private space of the home. At the same time, this association establishes simplified causal relations that, by hindering possibilities of intervention and change, naturalize violence. The limits of the correlation between violent behavior and a person’s birthplace is further captured by Lili’s subsequent reflection on her father’s bad temperament:

But as she grew older, she gradually realized that being able to explain her doubts in such a simple way was a kind of naive blessing. Why is he treating me like that? Because he has a bad personality. Why does he have a bad personality? Because he comes from a region with unfavorable customs. Well, then there’s no solution, nothing to blame. If we had a choice, who would choose to be born in a rotten place? (Zhang 2022, 35)

The logics of her mother’s argument is put to the test in order to demonstrate that a critique of violence requires a more profound analysis. This awareness informs Lili’s subsequent recollections.

From the beginning, the image of Lili’s rude father is contrasted with the image of a refined, well-mannered Yang Qi, who was born into an educated family hailing from the east side of the city. Yang Qi’s intellectual upbringing reverberates throughout the house: the elegant European furniture, the books, and the calligraphy hung on the walls epitomize his intellectual cultivation and taste. He is also a caring man and a great cook. The shrimps Lili is served for dinner are made by Yang Qi, who tells Lili “how he chooses them, how he kills them, how he marinates them with sauce” (Zhang 2022, 36). Over dinner, however, Lili’s mother is interested less in the shrimps and more in demonstrating to Yang Qi that her daughter’s education matches his own. When she asks her daughter to read the

calligraphy on the wall, a distressed Lili obeys because “she knows her [mother], she understands her, she forgives her” (Zhang 2022, 37). This moment of tension is the occasion to rethink her mother’s past and her relationship with her former husband.

Lili’s mother fell easily for that man who, on a rainy night, showed up at her place to propose, completely drenched and in tears. He was a welder but the company’s profits were too low. He then tried other jobs, from “breeding tropical fish” to “selling leather jackets, tobacco and alcohol, driving a taxi, and trading stocks” (Zhang 2022, 38), but always incurred enormous financial losses. Disappointed, he would take it out on his wife. At one point he thought that setting up an activity abroad could change his life, but when Chang’e refused to give him money to travel, he began smashing things in the house, yelling at her: “You’re not allowing me to soar! It’s you who ruined my future!” (Zhang 2022, 38). He beat her twice. He beat Lili countless times.

The precarious economic condition of Lili’s father does not justify the mistreatment of the wife and the daughter, but it helps situate violence in a larger context that alerts us to the fact that “matters of redistribution” are as important as “matters of recognition” (Fraser 2009). This context foregrounds battering as a phenomenon that crosses domestic boundaries and is interlaced with multiple forms of discrimination and inequality. In this sense, I would argue, these fictional depictions of violence do not aim at pathologizing the battered woman. Indeed, Chang’e’s anxieties about proving to be a suitable match for her new husband by asking her daughter to read the calligraphy conceal insecurities that find their roots in a past of violence and frustration. Lenore Walker’s study of the battered woman syndrome has shown that women that have been hit suffer from low self-esteem (Walker [1984] 2009, 155). However, Zhang’s fiction is not invested in examining the “syndrome” of the battered woman. It actually departs from problematic views of the “battered woman” as an identity, as “a separate and unique category of womanness,” to use bell hooks’s words (hooks [1997] 2020, 264),¹⁰ to elucidate the intersectional nature of gender violence and women’s coping strategies. Lili turns to these coping strategies in her last set of memories.

In the middle of the night, Lili is awakened by the sudden arrival of the menses. The sight of the blood stains on the bed sheets, blanket and mattress cover brings back to her mind the memory of her menarche. The event had surprised her during a PE class at school, causing the staining of her uniform. Back at home, her mother immediately scrubbed the blood off her pants, prepared a basin of warm water for her to wash, and taught her how to wear a sanitary pad. Throughout, she

¹⁰ Born Gloria Jean Watkins, bell hooks (1952–2021) chose not to capitalize her name for ideological reasons. To respect her position, her name is kept lowercase.

kept a smile on her face. Chang'e's delight became clear a moment later when she told Lili that when it had happened to her, she had been very happy. Lili asked her why and her mother responded:

Because in my aunt's family there was a cousin who was born like a "stone woman" [石女 *shinü*]; she never menstruated and could not have children. The first time I bled, I told myself, with a sigh of relief, this is good, I'm not a stone woman. I can have children in the future. (Zhang 2022, 41)

This passage makes manifest a culture that shames women who do not or cannot fulfill expectations of reproduction. Being able to reproduce is necessary to be validated and recognized as a woman in a heteronormative society. The mother's desire for menstruation then bespeaks a desire for recognition that turns the occurrence of menstruation into a longed-for occasion to become a (fertile) woman. In this longing, a particular relation to time is projected: to become a woman is to be anchored to the present, a present of waiting (Burke 2019, 25–28). Longing for menstruation overlaps, however, with the anxiety of keeping it out of sight. Even as it is necessary for a woman to realize her feminine existence, menstruation is regarded as a "stigmatizing mark" (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 2020, 182) that elicits negative feelings. In the urgent removal of menstrual stains and in the hygiene practices, one can see reflected constructions of menstruation as a blemish that must be concealed (Fahs 2016, 38). In other words, when it comes to menstruating, a woman is damned if she does, damned if she does not.

Remarkably, it is precisely because of its stigmatized construction that menstruation turns into a resource to resist violence. After Lili's first period, menstruation becomes a topic that conspicuously enters her conversations with her mother, and a site of intimacy:

they remembered each other's dates, and provided advice and care; for example, they reminded each other not to wash the face with cold water, to drink a cup of brown sugar water before bedtime, to use a hot water bag for abdominal pain, placing it on the other's lower abdomen. (Zhang 2022, 42)

Every time they talked about the menses, Lili's father would "stare at the television or newspaper, pretending not to hear, without proffering a word. This topic was a symbolic extension of his adult daughter's body, a taboo subject" (Zhang 2022, 42). Once Lili understood that the topic inhibited her father, she began to "use" it. When her parents quarreled, and her father, enraged, "started hitting things, substituting noise for words" (Zhang 2022, 42), Lili would deliberately bring up the topic of menstruation to her mother. Her upset father would push the door open and leave.

Because of the stigmatization of menstruation, the intimacy that Lili and her mother have built around menstruation can be mobilized as a tool to cope with violence. What I call the “menstruation talk” creates a protective barrier that, however, is not unbreakable. When, during the night, Lili wakes her mother up to tell her that she has stained the bedding and does not have pads with her, she expects her mother to hand her a pad, as she used to do. But her mother has already entered menopause and no longer keeps sanitary pads at home. While Lili is waiting in the bathroom, Chang’e sends Yang Qi out to buy pads. When Lili learns that Yang Qi is out to buy the pads for her, she bursts out crying inconsolably. The shock of learning about her mother’s menopause is aggravated by the betrayal of her mother who has broken their intimacy by allowing Yang Qi—a man—to cross a sacrosanct boundary. After Lili goes back to her bed, Chang’e spots a drop of Lili’s blood on the bathroom floor. Instead of removing it, she observes it, as she used to: the vivid color is a sign of health, she thinks. The following morning, however, Yang Qi removes the stain. When Chang’e finds it out, she also begins crying. On this sad image the story ends, reminding us that intimacies are as empowering as they are fragile.

4. Conclusion

Neither women’s writing nor gender is a stable category in China. As He Guimei and Zhang Li (2021) point out, women writers’ efforts in the 1980s to assert gender equality, on the basis of a notion of humanism that was rooted in Enlightenment ideology, gave way in the 1990s to an inward turn that redirected the focus of inquiry toward women’s personal and bodily experiences. Yet the rehabilitation of the private and the body in women’s writing dissociated the exploration of women’s issues from larger social and national questions, ultimately doing little for the feminist cause of liberating women. Take for instance “Ragdoll” (布偶猫 *Bu’oumao*), an essay penned by writer Zhou Xiaofeng (周晓枫, 1969–) and included in her 2017 collection *Like Migratory Birds* (有如候鸟 *Youru houniao*). The essay draws attention to violence in intimate relationships, but by psychologizing women’s experience of violence, emphasizing, for instance, their attachment to their perpetrator, it reduces women to the status of victims and gendered violence to a personal, private matter. Since being a woman is not an isolated identity, but emerges at the intersection of multiple relations, as He and Zhang suggest, questions of gender and violence should be situated within the context of ethnicity, nationality, and social class, in a discursive space where the separation between the public and the private is not tenable (He and Zhang 2021, 385–389).

Some efforts in this direction have been made within the field of contemporary science fiction, as demonstrated by Xi Liu (2022). Literature can offer a productive

terrain to reflect critically on gender relationships and gender violence. In this chapter, the analysis of representations of sexual harassment and gender violence in Zhang Tianyi's short story collection has brought to light Zhang's investment in encouraging a more nuanced understanding of women's issues. As she says in an interview with the Chinese literary magazine *October* (*Shiyue*): "emphasizing a certain kind of gendered issue makes a fictional work weaker" (Zhang 2021, 406). By re-coupling matters of "recognition" and matters of "distribution," as Nancy Fraser would put it (Fraser 2009), Zhang's collection makes an important intervention not only in contemporary Chinese literary practices but also in contemporary feminist discourses. Since the 1995 Beijing UN Conference on Women, the "global feminist concept of gender" has become a privileged analytical category among Chinese feminist activists (Wang and Zhang 2010, 40). Yet, as Zheng Wang and Ying Zhang explain, the tenuous line separating Chinese NGOs and the All China Women's Federation, and the gradual erasure of the language of class from contemporary Chinese political discourse and activism, have turned the pursuit of women's rights into a "safe space" (Wang and Zhang 2010, 68). Such space is "safe" because it "segregates feminists from other parallel struggles that have yet to obtain legitimacy" (Wang and Zhang 2010, 68). At a time when feminism is showing disturbing similarities with neoliberal values of personal empowerment and responsibility (Fraser 2009), Zhang Tianyi's collection urges us to rethink mechanisms of gender violence within a broader interpretive horizon that enables critiques of multiple forms of oppression, thus expanding the scope and potential of feminist analysis and #MeToo activism.

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