

A Conversation with Zhang Huijun: How Poetry and Sisterhood Resemantize and Dismantle Gender Stereotypes

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Zhang Huijun 张慧君 is a Chinese poet born in Xiangyang (Hubei province) in 1989. She obtained a Ph.D. in Medicine from Peking University and has been engaging in poetry writing and literary translation for many years now.

Her poems were published in several poetry magazines and anthologies, like *Selected Poems from China's Women Poets. Volume 2023* (*Zhongguo nüshiren sixuan 2023 nianjuan* 中国女诗人诗 2023 年卷), edited by Beiyue Literature & Art Publishing House. As an award-winning poet, she received the Jiangnan Poetry Prize, the “New Poet” award within the Liu Bannong Poetry Prize, and others; her verses were also selected for the 38th edition of the well-known “Youth Poetry Conference”, annually organized by the influential poetry magazine *Poetry* (*Shikan* 诗刊). In 2022, her translation of Jane Kenyon’s collected poems was published as *The Boat of Quiet Hours: Jane Kenyon Complete Works* (*Ningjing shiguang de xiao chuan: Jian Kenyong shi quanji* 宁静时光的小船: 简·肯庸诗全集) by Jiangsu People’s Publishing House.

Zhang has long been delving into gender-related issues, not only in her writings but also through the promotion of feminist authors from around the world, as her interests in reading and translation suggest. Her poetry collection *Life Is Like a Pearl* (*Ming ru zhenzhu* 命如珍珠) was published by the Wuhan-based Changjiang Literature and Art Publishing House in 2023. Her poetry moves between pure lyricism and a more narrative style, which at times reminds one of pure dramatic techniques, with the use of dialogues and the actual portrayal of different ‘scenes’, as if her ‘characters’ moved on the vast stage of the poetic word. Her pen and personal style depart from her embodied experience as a woman as a fundamental lens through which she observes a

reality that, in turn, is re-mediated and offered to readers. Zhang's lyrical imagery is deeply rooted in the apparently trivial elements of everyday life, devices that let her undergo a constant dialogue with the world itself, urging readers to rethink their position and role vis-à-vis others and the universe we dwell in.

In this conversation¹, we talk about topics like motherhood, creativity, history, and mostly the re-semanticization and dismantling of gender stereotypes through poetry and sisterhood, both intended as effective, liberating, practices. Such broad themes are beautifully and insightfully explored in her poetry collection *A Woman to Her Sisters* (*Yi ge nüren zhi ta de jiemei* 一个女人致她的姐妹) (2025), which the author was kind enough to share with the readers of *DIVE-IN*. Sit down, then (or find the position that suits you most – as Italo Calvino invites readers to do in his undying *If a Winter's Night a Traveler*) and embark with us on this journey of words and images, during which we will cross the boundaries of time and space to connect, or reconnect, to our (forgotten) sisters, and more.

Hi, Zhang Huijun! Thank you very much for agreeing to this interview. I'm sure readers will enjoy this chat as well. When I first met you at a poetry event in Zhengzhou over a year ago, I was thrilled to meet such an outstanding poet. You also gave me a copy of one of your poetry collections, for which I was and still am deeply grateful. I later learned that you didn't graduate in literary studies, but in medicine. As a medical PhD and a (woman) poet, do you often face gender stereotypes?

In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, the American poet Adrienne Rich, whom I translated into Chinese, defined patriarchy as follows:

Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men – by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor, determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female in everywhere subsumed under the male (Rich 1986: 57).²

¹ I am extremely grateful to Dr. Federico Picerni for inviting me to take part in this special issue of *DIVE-IN* and to Lorenza Vianello for her kind help with the final draft.

² The excerpts from the works of Adrienne Rich were provided to me in the English, original, version by Zhang Huijun, whom I want to thank for her work and accuracy.

I think that gender stereotypes originate from the patriarchal system's strict designation, regulation and definition of male and female roles. I wrote several poems for my daughter, which were mostly misunderstood, and reduced to an expression of the so-called traditional 'motherly love', but my verses are not at all a eulogy to such a thing. On the contrary, they are an attempt to express a more subversive and critical female consciousness, to voice the real and complex, personal, joyous and sorrowful experiences of being a woman.

I was born in 1989, when the one-child policy was still in effect; hence, I don't have any brothers, I'm an only daughter. My parents have never supported the old-fashioned 'favoring boys over girls' idea, and I was raised on love. They put all their hopes for a son and a daughter on me: they wished I had a bright professional future like a man, but also that I married and had kids like any other woman. The Chinese labor market needs women's participation too, that's why most families are formed by working couples, but women are expected to undertake both traditional tasks (doing housework and raising children) and work unflaggingly to make money. It doesn't matter what job you are interviewing for: if you are a woman, the sharp question you are always asked is "Can you balance work and family?" Currently, women who can do so better fulfill society's expectations (think how busy they are and how hard it must be!). While women who prioritize their career are given the derogative label of *nüqiang ren*,³ and housewives are belittled because they are seen as women without economic independence, completely relying on men. In my opinion, the phenomenon of working women who appear to balance their job and family is also stereotypical, as it continues to reinforce the idea of 'sacrifice' and 'self-immolation' that patriarchy attaches to women, who are expected to devote themselves selflessly to their family, society, the economy, and the nation.

I experienced firsthand the hardships most women face when I had my daughter. Caught in a whirlwind of emotions and swept up in the intense experience of childbearing – mostly marked by harsh feelings and pain – overwhelmed with confusion and doubts, I wrote a poem. Unlike the stereotypical image of a 'loving maternity', the kind of motherhood I was taking on was full of unwillingness and reluctance. I was upset even and hated myself for having gotten married and had a child in the first place, letting marriage and motherhood hinder my personal realization as a poet and writer. Isn't being single (unmarried, childless) the best living situation for an ambitious artist? Indeed, between mothering and writing, being a

³ Literally 'strong women', the term often translates as 'career-oriented women'.

mother and being a poet, conflicts emerged. What I sacrificed is my reading and writing time, making it difficult to keep doing both. In the poem titled *Tenacious* (Zhang 2025: 21–22), I wrote:

I too experienced pain and hardships, I used to breastfeed while
holding a book in the other arm, my husband's cakehole and his macho
attitude
I've suffered through, between the delight of reading and being with my
child
a balanced agony, I talk about such trivial matters
for sharing with you, in case you love reading, or dreaming,
have writing aspirations, ambitions, don't get stuck in tradition,
for when talent passes away, kindred souls part, and spring wanes.

There was no way I could find a balance, fulfilling the vocation of being a poet, and the role of a mother in the traditional sense at the same time. When writing "don't get stuck in tradition", I was wondering whether a woman poet should ever step into marriage. In the poem *Another Me* (Zhang 2025: 69-70), I adopted a more direct stance against such an institution:

You gave your opinion,
on this withered system.
You, my navigator,
with the intelligence and pride of a single woman.
You could never treat
innocent children as we do: "My
sweet baby, my puppet,
if it wasn't for you
my life wouldn't be the same".
From Jane Austen's kind of old maid
you got the sweet flavor of happiness.

In *New Mothers*, the expectations for my daughter (the next generation) I voice are nothing like those my parents had for me – older generation Chinese people would urge their sons and daughters to marry and have children, not doing so was stigmatized, much like mental illness. I wrote: "Not / all girls marry", since marriage can be "a trap, a cage and a swamp" (Zhang 2025: 64–65). Through my poems, readers can grasp my complex attitude toward motherhood. To read my verses on mother-daughter relationship simply as a celebration of motherly love would be a biased interpretation, a complete misunderstanding of my work.

When translating Rich's poems and reading her biography, I realized that she had gone through everything I was experiencing. Her story proved the truth of mine. She once stepped into a traditional marriage, in which she was a full-time housewife and mom; she gave birth to three children respectively in 1955, 1957 and 1959. She published her second poetry collection, *The Diamond Cutters and Other Poems*, in 1955, and the third one, *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, in 1963. Between the two, she lived eight long years of silence, pregnancy, childbirth, parenting, and housekeeping, which made her feel angry and depressed. She went through exhaustion, deep identity conflict and delusion. Those were eight difficult years, during which she could only use the fragmented, or sometimes luxurious, time earned from hiring a domestic worker to write. I feel a strong connection with Adrienne Rich because, as women and poets, I found our similarities striking; our awareness as women was awakened by issues related to motherhood. The only difference is that she wrote great poems and authored *Of Woman Born*, a book about motherhood as a system, which soon became a feminist classic. I really suggest people read it to better understand motherhood as an experience and an institution. In the foreword of the book, she wrote:

This book is rooted in my own past [...] the geographies of marriage, spiritual divorce, and death, through which I entered the open ground of middle age [...] But for a long time, I avoided this journey back into the years of pregnancy, child-bearing, and the dependent lives of my children, because it meant going back into pain and anger that I would have preferred to think of as long since resolved and put away. I could not begin to think of writing a book on motherhood until began to feel strong enough, and unambivalent enough in my love for my children, so that I could dare to return to a ground which seemed to me the most painful, incomprehensible, and ambiguous I had ever traveled, a ground hedged by taboos, mined with false-namings (Rich 1986: 15).

Motherhood, just like the 'second sex', is acquired, is not innate, it's a patriarchal 'institution', a social convention, embedded in the long-standing division of labor established among humans. That is why stereotypes in this regard are common. But I want to write is the truth, my personal, real, experience as a mother, a woman, a poet: my struggles, bliss and suffering.

You have published a new poetry collection, A Woman to Her Sisters. As soon as I learnt about the title and saw the cover, I wanted to read it. Thanks to this

interview, you were nice enough to let me sneak a peek at it, and I cannot wait to introduce it to the readers. This poetry collection could be understood as a hymn to sisterhood. Do you believe that sisterhood can be a revolutionizing force, one capable of challenging and perhaps even dismantling gender stereotypes?

My first poetry collection, *Life Is Like a Pearl*, was published in January 2023. Back then, I had not even started translating Adrienne Rich's poetry works. This year, I had the luck to be publishing a poetry collection titled *A Woman to Her Sisters* – which is also the title of a poem from the book. I owe the title to Rich's *Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff*. I translated Adrienne Rich's *Diving into the Wreck* (1973) and *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978) between my two poetry collections. Originally, my translations were to be published this year, but due to the influence of the instability in the US-China trade war, the publishing house is momentarily facing difficulties. The circulation of American books in our country is now limited – not only is sisterhood important, but brotherhood is too. This is only a glimpse of the destructive impact conflicts and disputes can have. I am afraid the blood, sweat and tears I put into these books will be wasted. I sincerely hope for a peaceful and mutually beneficial world, and I wish the verses by Rich I translated into Chinese will be published soon.

By reading and translating Rich's poems, my blurry and misty female consciousness became clearer and deeper. The shift from the more individualized experience depicted in *Life Is Like a Pearl*, to *A Woman to Her Sisters* represents – starting from the titles themselves – my total embracing of feminism and sisterhood. I agree with the point of view proposed by Adrienne Rich, according to which a woman's strength comes from the connection, unity, and affection with other women. In *The Dream of a Common Language*, Rich explores the possibility of women's strength and its source. Through a revised perspective, she re-defined the concept of 'strength'. Men's strength lies in control, oppression, violence and destruction, while women's strength lies in unity, healing, preservation, nurturing, loving and promoting life. The interference in the publication of my translations caused by the US-China trade war made me understand even better the value women and principles like sisterhood (and brotherhood) have. I dream of a world made of pacific coexistence, reciprocity, cultural exchanges and dialogue. A world which opposes male destructive power, that condemns war and any other form of violence.

In your new book, readers will encounter several well-known ‘writing sisters’: there’s your “Dear Woolf” – as you call her in your verses – but also Elizabeth Bishop, Anna Akhmatova, Jane Austen, and, in a sense, Adrienne Rich, whom you have translated into Chinese. In one of your poems, you write: “We share a common past / one tradition”. In this regard, I’d like to ask whether you think that, by actualizing Luce Irigaray’s concept of ‘female genealogy’ through poetry and literature, women can effectively re-write their own history (or histories). How important do you think is this today?

When I wrote these lines: “We share a common past / one tradition”, I was reading *The Second Sex* by Simone De Beauvoir. At that time, I hesitated because “one”⁴, sounded like a simplification to me, an approximation: women from different countries, ethnicities, social strata, etc., obviously have different and diversified past and traditions. In the poem, I decided to omit such complexity to purposely portray us women as a community sharing a “long history of being enslaved”. The poet Jane Kenyon, whom I translated too, once affirmed that she would only have one ‘master’, Anna Akhmatova. She thus chose Akhmatova as her ‘master’ and translated her works. The same accounts for me: it is only when reading works by women writers that I feel empathy resonating deep within my heart. This communion of souls is based on the truth of women’s experience and history. When it comes to writing, I intentionally look for and try to trace back my own precursors and models, attempting to include myself in such a ‘female genealogy’. After experiencing the long road of women’s movements and the efforts of generation after generation of women writers, our 21st century is filled with outstanding women authors: we have so many that you cannot count them on the fingers of one hand anymore. From ancient times, the firmament of women’s literature has been dotted with a myriad of bright stars. It is beyond all doubt that women can become great writers, poets, and artists. Women have already proven – through countless literary works and poetry practices – that their writings can retrieve and bring back to the surface the voices of those women who had been silenced. By rewriting their history, women can get rid of gender stereotypes while exploring their own invaluable qualities. In this way, they can also build positive female principles, paving the way for an ideal future society, by overturning and replacing men’s destructive strength with women’s constructive (life-giving)

⁴ Note by the interviewer: referring to tradition.

and creative world-changing force. It is crucial to do so, for women's pens have the power to re-interpret and revolutionize the world, making it a better place.

Speaking of gender stereotypes, although the situation has clearly improved overall, it is still far from ideal, and this seems to be true almost everywhere in the world. In one of your particularly insightful poems, you write about divorce employing a powerful metaphor: "The sealed cage was opened". This line reminded me of the short story Love Must Not Be Forgotten (1979) by Zhang Jie, in which the renowned writer investigates themes such as love and marriage. The story ends with a powerful statement by the young female protagonist: "To live single is not such a fearful disaster. I believe it may be a sign of a step forward in culture, education and the quality of life".⁵ In the poem that carries the same title of the collection – A Woman to Her Sisters – you portray the image of an 'independent' sister, walking by herself; while in From Generation to Generation, you mention a "loveless marriage". In your opinion, are single or divorced women in today's Mainland China still socially stigmatized?

In the past, among previous generations for instance, single and divorced women were stigmatized indeed. I remember I also had a stereotyped idea of divorced women as pitiful and miserable. Compared to the past, society has definitely improved, it is much more inclusive, and women of my age do agentively choose whether to stay single or divorce. This is why I had to rely on imagination and fiction to write a poem such as *A Woman to Her Sisters*. I wrote it to revise gender stereotypes: a divorced woman can embrace "a happiness she has never had before", she is free, blessed.

In your latest book there's a poem titled His Gaze. Where does the inspiration for such a poem come from? It reminded me of the interesting paradox pointed out by Lauren Elkin in her book Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London (Farrar, Straus & Giroux 2017). According to Elkin women who wander through the city are both the most visible and the most invisible. What do you think about this tension between being looked at and ignored or 'invisibilized'?

⁵ The English translation is by Gladys Yang, *Love Must Not Be Forgotten* (Beijing: Panda Books, 1986), 13.

The inspiration for *His Gaze* came from personal experience. Just like Madame Bovary who, because of Rodolphe Boulanger's romantic sweet-talk, believed that she was the most beautiful one, women too may fall for similar subtle traps. That is, women feeling better about themselves due to men's validation, courtship, and admiring gaze. Who wouldn't want to be a poet's muse, the beauty sang of? Where's the harm in this? As soon as the admiring gaze becomes one of invalidation and judgment, the 'praise' based on 'being looked at' from the outside, transforms into 'discredit', and the only thing left in the other person's gaze is 'neglect'. Being looked at and being neglected are two faces of the same coin. It would be better if women built a strong and healthy subjectivity by themselves.

In your collection there's a poem titled A Lyric Poem to My Daughter (Zhang 2025: 118-119), in which you write: "Her father is a handsome brilliant man, her mother / is a beautiful woman". Is this linked to a hard-to-die gender stereotype? Do you think that the promotion of a more traditional kind of motherhood is currently taking place? May a mother speaking to her daughter through the voice of poetry, with her own language, be understood as a way to break related gender stereotypes?

This poem reads:

To me,
 you are a miracle, but what do people say about you by looking at you?
 They assume, «Her father is a handsome brilliant man, her mother
 is a beautiful woman. True love
 must have brought her to this world».
 This applies to happy people, and
 unhappy ones too.

There is a bitter irony hidden in these lines. The subtext is that this little girl's father is not a "brilliant handsome man", and that her mother isn't "beautiful" at all; there was no trace of "true love" there, she was born in a "loveless marriage". But toddlers are as beautiful as pixies, and just by looking at this little girl, without having seen her parents, one may conclude that "her father is a handsome brilliant man, her mother / is a beautiful woman". These are just phantoms, fantasies of happiness shaped by gender stereotypes. A more traditional notion of 'motherhood' is currently being promoted, what I seek to

do with my poetry is precisely dismantling these stereotypes, fiercely voicing the truth about being a woman and a mother.

There are some old, unfortunately popular, refrains like “A woman without talent is a woman of virtue”, or “Poetry is not for women”. One verse from your Madame Bovary Is Me reads: “I owe it to poetry, like the joy / of pointing a star to a child”. May we sustain that poetry does have a social, affective, and emancipatory value?

Absolutely. For me, a poet is someone who challenges all sorts of binding forces and restrictions by practicing an essentially free activity – poetry writing – through which the self is liberated and reborn. Poetry as a practice guides my personal growth: awakening women’s consciousness, breaking the shackles of the mind, renovating ideas... My poetry moves from my concrete experience as a woman, seeks equality between the sexes and criticise inequality and discrimination, also going beyond gender boundaries by reflecting on humans’ strives to overcome passivity, thus carrying an underlying narrative of deep, self-liberation.

In your opinion, have women poets from China finally obtained a “room of one’s own”, or “a writing desk”, to refrain one of your poems?

On a metaphorical level, to have a room of one’s own, or a writing desk at least, means that every woman poet should find and have a lifestyle that suits her. Such a lifestyle should allow us to live off our writing, to sustain the flourishing of our creativity and reach the peak of our art. This depends on our life choices and free actions. Most women poets in China have already obtained this.

Your new poetry collection is addressed to ‘sisters’, but do you hope it reaches male readers too? What would you like them to see in it or learn from it?

I hope that men will read this poetry collection too. It is in this sense that I am a feminist poet: from an outcast, in the darkness of ignorance, aphasic, limited, in great difficulty and weak, I became an awakened, reborn, liberated, empowered, charming person free and able to voice herself. The positive transformation and the hard struggle of those who are disadvantaged and passivized to become active empowered individuals is universal. We share the same destiny of the oppressed ones, regardless of their gender. I wish for a writing that goes beyond gender, even if when I set down on paper I often

resolve to women's experiences, I always keep this in mind as a political issue, something that has to do with freedom, opposing to systems, structures, and so on.

Admission⁶

I can't wake the one sleeping next to me up, to say:
"Look at this moonlight, how beautiful!"
no two kindred poets,
in the room. Outside the window,
almost round, the moon shines bright.
It announces beauty, nobility, calm,
unlike mere grass, unlike yellow glazed roof tiles,
not weak, not vulnerable or erratic like I am.
A bit of darkness was dispelled.

⁶ The poem Chengren 承认 (Admission) comes from Zhang Huijun's new poetry collection, *A Woman to Her Sisters* (2025:80). Like the other poems reported here, it was translated by me. I am grateful to Zhang Huijun for generously letting me share her verses with the readers.