

CHUNG Wen-Yin

Be Independent, Be Free, Be Enlightened

Being a woman and a writer, relationships are one of my key concerns.

Everywhere in this small world, women share the same fate. Married or not, mother or not, accomplished in the city or not, every woman is like an island, an outcast in the ocean.

I think women's status in Taiwan is very tricky. We are encouraged to be independent and attend to our own business, but we are also expected to fulfill all kinds of traditional family obligations, including continuing the family line by giving birth to boys. Such a peculiar situation for Taiwanese women probably developed through the course of Taiwan's past social and political chaos. Women were forced to make crucial decisions and earn bread for their families when their men were either dead or imprisoned. When men disappeared from these traditional family roles, women had to take their places.

Today, the level of education for women in Taiwan is very high. Most young women graduate from university, and many women have a master's or doctorate degree. Higher education sometimes causes us to marry late or choose to be single.

Females of this generation have a different point of view from their grandmothers' and mothers' because feminism has greatly influenced Taiwanese society. It has awakened self-awareness. Instead of staying at home, women are choosing to leave their families and study abroad, to travel around the world. They believe that they can lead a wonderful single life.

This is my experience. I always travel alone, and I lead a single life. All of the work I have accomplished has been possible because I enjoy being alone. As a Taiwanese woman, I am very fortunate because I can choose to be single without any social pressure, other than some past complaints from my mom and her worry over my future.

I live in a time of freedom: males and females are equal, and mainstream culture is friendly to women, apart from the fact that men still want to marry young girls. Taiwanese women are very progressive, but men still need to change their thinking. I think that the main purpose of marriage isn't reproduction, that the range of choices should be wider than ever before, and that men must learn to respect women's feelings.

I try to write about women's situations, like in my novels: *Woman Islands*, *Departing Love*, and *Merciful Lover*. These books are all about how women make a living, face love, and suffer due to family and relationships.

But how do I survive as a single woman, especially since I am a full-time writer? I have to write and also take care of my mom, who, like me, lives alone. She is a strong individual with a strong personality, but has been sick in recent years. It's difficult, but I don't want to depend on a man or marriage. I want to be free from that kind of relationship. While I sometimes feel lonely, I have more time to write. As Virginia Woolf—one of my favorite writers—said in *A Room of One's Own*, “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.”

In Taiwan, when I was tortured by writer's block, financial difficulties, emotional turmoil, or the burden of duty to family, I would tell myself: *Literature has been around for thousands of years, and writers in every generation must also have gone through such difficulties. So I am not alone.* Though female writers of my generation are faced with challenges created by prosperity and technology, I always think of any such difficulties as an incentive to become stronger.

I want to tell women that pain can be transformed, sublimated in the transformation, and thus become an impression of life's beauty. Such pain prevented me from idling away my life, urging me always to keep writing. Of course, this does not mean that women writers must choose pain, for who would say no to happiness? What I mean is: pain makes us able to see things from others' perspectives, to see life's multiplicity of layers, to experience the various ways of being in this wide, wide world. In this way, we can add depth to our writing.

I explore the depths of human nature. When I observe others, I reflect on the nature of self and writing. I stand on the margin, looking at people coming and going through the entrances and exits. I watch them as they experience life's beauty and pain, its losses and gains, its riches and wants, its light and dark. Writers are people who dig out the light. Or let me put it in this way: I help my female readers in particular to see whatever light has been denied them.

(Edited by Mary Bradley; translation by Chung Wen-Yin with contribution by Chu Yunxia)