

她們是另一個維度的我——盛可以談「我為什麼寫這本書？」
Sheng Keyi: “Why I wrote *The Womb*? I see a great part of me in all these women.”

Translated by Snigdha Konar*

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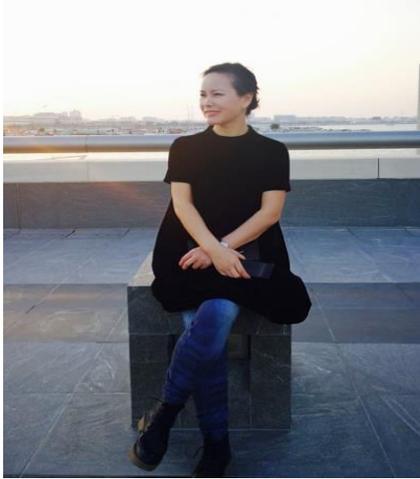
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Source: <https://www.thenewslens.com/article/120219>

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Sheng Keyi, author of *The Womb* 《子宫》
Source: thebeijinger.com

Translator's Note on Sheng Keyi and her novel *The Womb*

Sheng Keyi (1973) is a young contemporary writer in China. She has received the Chinese People's Literature Prize, Yu Dafu Prize for Fiction, the Chinese Literature Media Award and the Top 20 Novelists of the Future Prize. She believes that Chinese rural woman is voiceless and the most vulnerable section of the society. She has written several novels, short stories which depict the miserable condition of women in the Chinese society. Her ninth novel *The Womb*, also translated in English as *The Uterus*, deals with the trauma of forced sterilization that most women in the Chinese society have been subjected to. In short, women have never understood their own body and never had control over it. Li Sijiang, a protagonist in Sheng Keyi's maiden fiction, *Northern Girls* (2004) had undergone an induced abortion followed by forced

sterilization rendering her incapable of child birth in her lifetime. *The Womb* also points out to the different fates of seven such women in the same family, giving it a surreal and happy ending. In the novel, the scientific and rational advice of one of the sisters – a doctor, regarding inducing an abortion of a juvenile girl is rejected because of the history of trauma of sterilization that the other sisters have faced. And in the end, the family members unanimously decide to raise the baby. Chinese government's "One Child Policy" led to women being forcibly sterilized against their will. Below is translation of an excerpt from an article written by Wen Yi, which contains Sheng Keyi's interview? Sheng Keyi sees herself as ordinary as other women. She reveals "bio-politics" in the Chinese society; and that women have become the scapegoat in the process of reproduction. She says, all morality and painful responsibilities are borne by the "carrier of the womb". Although men and women both enjoy sensual pleasures together, men are at large and the women are trapped in the net just because they carry the womb. Sheng Keyi gives a detailed description of how the womb has affected the lives of Chinese women. At present, although the One Child Policy has been withdrawn, but Chinese women continue to have no control over their own bodies. Her choices have already been nurtured as women willingly prefer a single

child. This might lead to aggravating China's aging population crisis.

Introduction

The Western world started following Sheng Keyi, the post 70s' writer after she published *Northern Girls* in 2004. Her writing style is sharp, her language precise and lucid, and the story structure is compact. It can be said her writing is a profile portrayal of the urbanisation and modernization process of rural areas. And the model of this town is her birthplace.



Sheng Keyi
Source: eu-china.literaryfestival.eu

Sheng Keyi was born in a small village in Yiyang, Hunan province in 1973. Just like her character in the novel, she also ran away from her hometown to experience the outside world.

In the Spring Festival of 2018, she returned to her hometown once again. However, unlike in the past when she always travelled hurriedly lest she would be stuck there and never come out. This time, she mustered up the courage to

stay in her hometown and began to write *The Womb*. In just a few months, she completed 150,000 words. It seems to be fast, but in fact the core of the work had sprouted as early as in her childhood days. Women face various psychological and physiological pains during childbearing that no one can replace and this is the shadow of her childhood. "I see myself in these women," she confessed.

Text by Sheng Keyi

Fermentation of childhood memories is a literary process

Most of my works begin in my hometown, and most of the characters in my novels are from my hometown, or are ones who leave the countryside to go to cities to work, presenting a large social landscape. The hometown is a big tree and these characters are branches and tendrils that stretch out to the outside world, touching and feeling the violent social turbulence and the complexities and difficulties of survival.



Battle of the Wombs
Source: liveencounters.net

The story, *The Womb* takes place in my hometown, i.e., the small city of Yiyang in Hunan province. Originally, I had left my hometown with the mentality of completely leaving the listless place and never going back. I rarely returned home when my parents were healthy, perhaps once in a year. But after 20 years when my parents were old, I frequently went home to visit relatives and started speaking the native dialect fluently. I was suddenly influenced by the vivid language and the villagers. It can be said that the changes that have taken place in the village over the years, are earth-shaking. The secret stories and the well-known public events have aroused my passion for creation. I discovered that I am skilled at writing about my hometown more than any other subject, and that I write to my heart's content. I think that the fermentation of childhood memories is a literary process. Going deep into your hometown is like discovering an underground wine cellar. It is worth sitting down for a long time and excavating its taste.

My mom, my mom's black dog Barton and I

On the occasion of Spring Festival 2018, I went home to accompany my mother to celebrate the New Year with the idea of the creative work in my mind. I began writing on January 28. I wrote this by sitting in front of the smiling portrait of my deceased father in his room. It was freezing cold, water and electricity were always cut off, and I had to

light candles at night to write. It must be said that this work has been completed by my mother, Barton – the black dog my mother raised and me. Everyday my mother prepared meals for me, and the black dog Barton urged me to get up at 5:30 sharp in the morning and accompanied me for jogging. We ran past the graves of our loved ones and across large fields. Other dogs rushed out to greet us and barked. After we got acquainted, we became friends. After leaving the country, I am sure they would still be waiting for me to run past the same place.

My day used to begin by running at 5:30 in the morning; and I used to shut down the computer at 9 o'clock in the evening. This type of overloaded and high-intensity work lasted for 50 days, even during the New Year and on the first day of the New Year. It was a period of enrichment for me. But this kind of writing regime is impossible to replicate. All my internal organs were always writhing in pain. And when I look back, I feel terrified. I don't know how I did it at the time.



Small village in rural China
Source: 123rf.com

The uterus is a yoke on the neck of the woman

The death of the 80-year-old neighbour, a widow, was the spark of my ninth novel, *The Womb*. She had seven children and was a widow since her early thirties. I vaguely remember her husband's funeral, his strange illness and rumours. People dug up his grave, and the couple, who had been separated for half a century, finally went to sleep together. The docile and serene widow died, and her whole life quickly turned into a "metal ring" in my mind – the birth control ring inside her womb.

From my childhood, I feared my gender. When I saw chicken being neutered, I noticed it never uttered a sound. Once thrown on the ground after neutering, the chicken would stagger on the ground like a drunkard. I thought that sterilizing women was also so simple. Later I discovered it is not so easy. I have seen women covered in a cotton quilt from head to toe being brought after sterilization in a wheel cart. I have also seen women who did not wish to be sterilized struggle and wail. Words like tubal ligation, wear an intrauterine device, induced abortion – whirl around my head like a black bird, which makes one tremble in fear. Seeing women walking or working in my village, I thought of the scars on their bellies and the metal rings inside their bodies. At that time, I decided I would not marry, would not give birth to a child. I thought, in this way, I would be able to avoid the additional suffering related to child birth.

When I was twenty-four, I had a short experience of working in a Family Planning hospital. The original version of my novel *Northern Girls* before 2015, had a very detailed description regarding the peak period of ligation in the hospital, but subsequent versions of the novel have been abridged.

I have always been very concerned about plight of women. In my view, rural woman is the most vulnerable group. They lack the means and opportunities to acquire knowledge. They have vague idea about their rights and also lack self-awareness. They bear the obligation of labour and childbirth, they lead a monotonous life day after day, and sometimes they have to endure domestic violence and various kind of unfair treatment. Even social customs and language is derogatory to them. It seems that they are a kind of durable consumer goods in the countryside. Decades of social changes have increased the opportunities for women to participate in productive labour, but they have relatively few benefits and other rights brought along by the economic growth.



Know Your Uterus
Source: nytimes.com

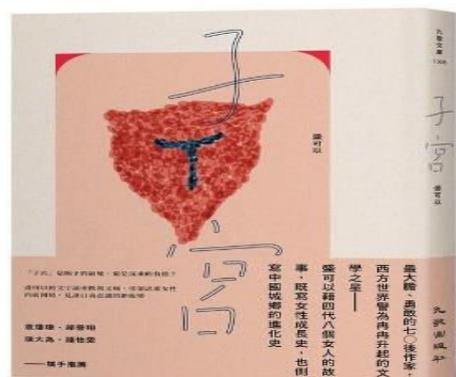
The Womb is a fictional work based on the family of the old widow. The womb breeds life. The only worth of rural women lies in their fertility. The uterus is a heavy burden for them throughout their lives. However, they have not been able to recognize their bodies in their entire lives. Moreover, they have not developed self-awareness and failed to realize their imprisonment. Although urban women are comparatively free from being sterilized, their different situation is equally grim, like the story of Chu's fourth daughter Chu Xue, in *The Womb*. I am afraid that such situation is not uncommon.

Women's burden of childbirth has never received the respect and attention it deserves. The fate of a woman is dragged down by the uterus, the honour and disgrace of childbirth, the sorrow of sexual affairs. The uterus is a place with high incidence of diseases. It is like a time bomb that can kill a woman at any time. The uterus is stuck on the neck of women like a heavy yoke. Women lack the necessary attention and even lack the warmth. Especially in the past few decades, they have not even received verbal comfort for the trauma they have experienced both physically and mentally.

I am not divorced from the characters in my novels

People often ask me whether I project myself in my works or not. My answer is: I have no estrangement with the characters in my works, because I have never had a condescending

perspective or tone. I am no different from them. Everyone is me, the possible, unknown, and another dimension of me. I don't need to "experience" their lives and figure out their language habits, because I have never been far away from that soil. Their voice is my voice. They say all that I want to say. It is just that I was fortunate enough to become a writer. Others heard "me" and saw "me" – I sincerely hope that the dignity and rights of "we" will be renewed.



The cover of *The Womb*

Book Features

- Shortlisted for the Man Asian Literature Award;
- The post 1970s Chinese-language writer who has attracted much attention at home and abroad.
- Sheng Keyi is the recipient of the first Chinese Literature Media Awards Potential Newcomer Award, and the winner of the Yu Dafu Novel Award. Following the success of her outstanding works like "Ode to

Morality” and “Brown Ash”, her latest *The Womb* novel has now been released.

About the Book

Chu’s grandmother Qi Nianci became widow at a young age. Although she was cold and merciless, she was the spiritual pillar of the Chu family. Her small feet carried the weight of the big traditional family. The head of the family Chu Anyun died because of her extramarital affair. The thirty-year-old daughter-in-law, Wu Aixiang, after reproducing like an animal – five daughters and one son – became a widow. The birth control ring inside her body harmed her, but she could not take it out, and finally ended up in the grave with it. Wu Aixiang’s daughters Chu Yun, Chu Yue, Chu Bing, Chu Xue, Chu Yu and her son Chu Laibao and even the fourth generation of Chu family, all grew up in times of turmoil in China. All of them experienced hardship in their own lives, and also faced various problems related to child-bearing. The Chu family females all grew up in the village drawing strength from the neighbours, acquaintances and the fragrant soil. Afterwards some of them left the village to gain insights into different ways of living and cultural landscapes in cities and towns. However, they could not sever their ties with hometown. After all, they were constantly connected to their hometown through the umbilical cord. They would always return to their tender motherland.

When Chu Yu was a child, she saw the neutering of chickens. The chickens let go of all emotions and desires like her widowed mother and grandmother. When she grew up, she saw her sister’s appearance after ligation: Chu Yun’s face was flushed scarlet with fever and the baby was still in her arms suckling milk. Pain and the baby engulfed her body. Chu Yue was brought back home in a wheel cart for recuperation. She was wrapped from head to toe and was lying motionless like a dead person. All this made Chu Yu decide that she would not marry and give birth. Chu Yun wanted to recover her fallopian tubes so that she could give birth with the man she married after divorce. The infertile Chu Xue waged a war with a barren and fertile uterus alone, and the sixteen-year-old Chu Xiu became pregnant without marrying. The whole family dedicated themselves to solve this thorny issue. The novel describes the familial and married life of four-generations of the Chu family. Some people devoted themselves to the family; some tried their best to escape from home; some insisted on not having a baby, and some did their best to conceive a child... The “womb” is intertwined with male and female emotions, physical desires, family status and social roles and this is what determines each person’s different marriage and life.



Sheng Keyi Source: thebeijinger.com

Sheng is good at describing reality with cold and sharp words and thereby truly depicting various systems and current conditions. The novel's narrative is spontaneous, and it meticulously depicts the cohesiveness between the local people and the family. The dialects interspersed in the right time makes one hear the loud voices and quarrel-like Hunan dialect accents. The characters are all alive, as if one is witnessing the women suffering from predicament in the author's works. There is

vigour and vitality in her which makes the readers feel the warmth of home even in the sad and uphill story. This book penetrates deep into the issues of autonomy of women's body from the perspective of the womb, observes the gradual awakening of self-consciousness in women, speaks for women of an entire era, and leads into the rainforest of truth about the lowest rung of the society which is covered under the thick grey mist in seductive and mysterious ways.

Series Editor: Hemant Adlakha

The views expressed here are those of the translator and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies

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