



DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES IN THE DISCOURSE OF EQUALITY IN CROSS CULTURAL ACADEMIC DIALOGUES EUROPE-CHINA

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WITH THE INTENTION OF BECOMING...

a sort of spokesperson for many European gender scholars willing to listen to and learn about Chinese particular contexts with "raw openness" and clear heart

MY GOAL IS...

-to bring into cross-cultural academic dialogues **nodal points and junctions of commonalities** among the works of Chinese academics and European transversalists-Intersectional gender theorists

-to reflect on the fact that the ***understanding of and the fight for*** women's equality and liberation **cannot be cross-culturally imposed**

PHD RESEARCH TOPIC ON INTERSECTIONALITY LED ME TO



XIAOJING LI



SHU-MEI SHI



YENNA WU



ASYMETRICAL COSMOPOLITISM

+

PLEA OF THE RIGHT TO
REGIONALIZED VOICES IN
APPROACHES TO EQUALITY

XIAOJING LI

Founded the discipline of *Women's Studies* in the city of Zhengzhou in the province of Henan in the 1980s.

-*Nuxing Shenmei Yishi Tan Wei* (An Exploration of Women's Aesthetic Consciousness).
Zhengzhou:Henan People's P, 1989.

Nuren Yige Youyong Meili De Chuanshuo (Woman, A Beautiful and Distant Legend). Taipei: Awakening Foundation, 1992.





WHAT EXACTLY HAPPENED DURING THE CONFERENCE THAT INFURIATED LI AND MADE HER CHANGE HER INTELLECTUAL POSITION SO DRASTICALLY?

THREE critical questions posed by a diasporic Chinese woman scholar named P that made her realize the imperialistic nature of 'Western Feminism,':

- 1) What is feminism in your understanding?
- 2) What is 'Western feminism?'
- 3) What are the differences between what you call "particularities of the Chinese Women Movement" and 'Western Feminism?'

As Li states, "What Chinese women call *feminism* is not considered true feminism because Feminism is a universal category, and therefore there is not so-called Chinese particularity outside *feminism* " (Li, Womanism 2; italics in the original).

SHU-MEI SHI : IN "TOWARDS AN ETHICS OF TRANSNATIONAL ENCOUNTERS, OR "WHEN" DOES A "CHINESE" WOMAN BECOME A FEMINIST?"

- Recalls an event hosted by the Chinese Ministry of Culture in the summer of 1988 acting as the translator of U.S women writers Delegate in Beijing
- In the context of **feminism as a fight against state patriarchy and male oppression**
- **Zhang Jie** , a famous Chinese Writer, had replied with disdain that "there was no such a thing as "feminism" (*nüxing zhuyi* or *nüquan zhuyi*) in China and that the writer would not have called herself a "feminist" nor a "feminist writer" ("Towards" 3)
- The **possibility** of a fructiferous **academic exchange** between Western and Chinese writers **collapsed into an abyss of misunderstandings** and theoretical clashes.





“Without acknowledging and studying the **history of socialism in China**, American writers and I turned the possibility of cultural translation and mutual understanding into an encounter of incommensurability” (“Towards” 7)

“not being the consequence of difference made essential or absolute but of ignorance of our specific histories” (“Towards” 7)

YENNA WU: IN "MAKING SENSE IN CHINESE "FEMINISM"/WOMEN'S STUDIES"

- Refers to a 1998 interview in which writers considered feminist in the West, such as **Anyi Wang** and **Qing Dai**, voiced non-feminist claims.
- **Qing Dai** affirmed that "feminism from abroad," meaning feminisms that react to institutionalized sexism, did not resonate with Chinese reality (Wang, "Three interviews" 133-34; cited in Wu, "Making Sense" 29)
- **Anyi Wang** also remembers **being intimidated by the insistence** of American writers on the topic of Chinese Women's subordination, and the degree to what Chinese women felt oppressed by men.
- Female film director **Shuqing Huang**, denied calling herself a feminist on the basis that it was unsuitable for China's contemporary reality (Dai and Yang, "A Conversation" 802-803)





WHAT LI, SHI AND WU HAVE IN COMMON...


- **The failure to account for historical and cultural differences** between Europe and China is to them the **most powerful factor contributing** towards **opacity** and **"instances of incommensurability"** (Shih, "Towards" 7) in cross cultural academic dialogues about equality.
- In order to avoid misunderstandings and misfires: the need to reach **"ethics in translatability"** in cross cultural encounters (Shi "Towards" 9)
- The need to **validate specific ways of understanding female oppression** beyond mainstream Western model of women's liberation



"OPACITY", IN CROSS CULTURAL ACADEMIC COMMUNICATION, MOSTLY CREATED BY TWO MAIN FACTORS....

- by **Western's ignorance** (and diasporic Chinese's ignorance) of the historical situation of the Other;
- by what she terms "**asymmetric cosmopolitanism**" :

"It is not that the Western feminist has a mistaken notion of difference and similarity [...], but rather that the **Western feminist enjoys the power of arbitrarily conferring difference and similarity** on the non- Western woman [...] this I what I call the "operation of asymmetrical cosmopolitanism" across then West- non-West divide; that is, **non-Western intellectuals need to be knowledgeable** about Western cultures and languages to be considered "Cosmopolitan" **while Western intellectuals** can be considered "Cosmopolitan" **without speaking any languages** (Shih, "Towards" 5)



"the Western subject strongest weapon in practicing asymmetrical cosmopolitanism is not that she/he denies the non-West access to cosmopolitanism but that has **the power to assume sheer neglect or ignorance of the non- West**" ("Towards" 5)

That is: **"With the power to arbitrate difference and similarity in such reductive terms,** the Western subject can simply *ignore* that which otherwise needs to be learned with time and effort, namely, the history, experience and representation of the other woman in multiple contexts" (Shih, "Towards" 5; italics in the original)



WHAT IS THE CHINESE WOMEN'S HISTORY, EXPERIENCE AND REPRESENTATION THAT THE EUROPEAN SUBJECT IS IGNORING?

XVII

some women wrote letters thanking Manchu Emperors Shunzhi (r. 1644-1661) and Kangxi (r. 1662-1722) for banning foot-binding

XVIII

- Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen* was published by playwright, feminist and abolitionist Olympe de Gouges (Marie Gouze 1791)
- A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Mary Wollstonecraft 1792)

XIX

- *Seneca Falls Declaration* (1848) U.S
- John Stuart Mill defended women's right to vote in the British Parliament UK
- While the suffragettes mobilized themselves in the UK and the US, defending women's rights to vote, in China, male intellectuals were also advocating for women's rights

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- Women's vote 1918 in the UK
- Women's vote 1920s (19th amendment)
- Chinese intellectuals (most of them male) began to introduce 'Western feminism,' advocating for women's rights in different spheres such marriage, reproductive rights, education, and suffrage
 - ideals such as **equality between the sexes** (nannü pingdeng) and **women's liberation** (funnü jiefang) became buzzwords in the intellectual discourse of the time.
 - Promise of a legal equality** between men and women was articulated as a **key paradigm to the Chinese Project of National and Cultural Revitalization**
- In the 1920s, female workers in Chinese and Japanese factories had joined labor unions to demand better working conditions.
- Sino- Japanese War and the subsequent Chinese civil war in the 1930s and 1940s and World War I and II, **these movements faded away both in Europe and in China.**

MAOIST ERA (1949-1976)

- Chinese Communist Party **focused on class struggle and revolution:**
- It used slogans such as "**Men and Women are the same**" (nannü dou yiyang) and "**Woman can support half of the sky**" (funnü neng ding banbiantian)
- In addition, **New Marriage Law (1950)** and the **Chinese Constitution (1954)** guaranteed equal rights for women in different social spheres
- "**equal job, equal pay**"
- Creation of a intermediary institution **Women's Federation**

COMMUNIST REVOLUTION FAILED TO ERADICATE MANY INEQUALITIES SUFFERED BY CHINESE WOMEN ?

- there was "a gap between the official discourse and less rosy reality (...) between state government policies and party-state practices (...) during **the Maoist Era the ideal of equality before the law was treated with indifference and contempt**" (Wu, "Making Sense" 33).
- the New Marriage Law (1950) and the amendments to the Chinese Constitution **were not uniformly propagated or implemented**
- **double burden of the domestic work** created an overwhelming "**sense of exhaustion**" among Chinese women (Wu, "Making Sense" 34)
- Women were told to **work like men** in production "but **without socioeconomic support** for their work at home in their productive and reproductive roles" (Wu, "Making Sense" 34)
- Ironically, the discourse of equality **proved to be a mixed blessing** to Chinese women

CRUCIAL TO AVOID MISUNDERSTANDINGS....

- the word **Liberation** (jiefang) and **Liberty** (ziyou) (Wu, "Making Sense" 42), which go hand in hand within Western discourses of equality, **cannot be applied to the Chinese Post Maoist context.**
- **"The lack of freedom** is precisely one of the important characteristics of Chinese Women Liberation" (Li "With What" 273):
 - a) lack of domestic support**
 - b) forced suppression of femininity and female characteristics** during China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)
- Equality implied to behave and dress like men** :many girls grew up to be called tom-boys (jia xiaozi -literally fake Boy)

- **genderless sense of collective identity** as the necessary condition to achieve legal equality with men.
- This socio-cultural dimension of Chinese liberation was thus **overlooking the feminine realm for the sake of equality**.
- Consequently, the category of women **"vanished into the ocean of equality"** and **subjective and collective femininity was lost** (Li, "With What" 268-69; cited in Wu "Making Sense" 42)
- Explains **negative reaction against "the personal is the political"** (gerende ji zhengzhide) and how it is a statement **far from beneficial to Chinese women**
- **"Sisterhood is powerful"** (jiemei tuanjie jiushi Liliang) is unpopular among Chinese women on the basis that is **"narrow and weak"**

ETHICS OF TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNICATION ?

➤ **Practical application** is what Xiaojiang Li calls:

a) "transpositionality" (lichang de zihuan)

b) "transvaluations" (jiazhi de zihuan)

To **position oneself in the history of the Other** is to be given the opportunity to see how a given system of value production and knowledge works in a **relational manner**

➤ **Nora Yuval-Davis** credits the term '**transversal politics**' (following the steps of women of color in the US + Adrianna Rich)

"The idea is that each [...] in the dialogue brings with her **rooting** in her own membership and identity but at the same time, tries to **shift** in order to put herself in a situation of exchange with women who have a different membership and identity" (*Gender* 130; emphasis in the original)

As Xiaojiang Li, Yuval-Davis recognizes the willingness to **locate yourself in the specific position of the other**, as the necessary condition to destabilize essentialized and stereotyped understandings of gender.

'INTERSECTIONALITY'

- “Foregrounds a richer and a more complex ontology than approaches that attempt to reduce people to one category at a time [...] In particular, it indicates that **fruitful knowledge production must treat social positions as relational**” (Pattynama and Phoenix, "Editorial" 187; see Sotelo, *Towards Intersectionality*)
- **Methodology compatible with** the deconstruction of fixed categories of identity, the rejection of hegemonic universalism and the investigation of dynamics of power, either material or discursive
- Highlights **gender as a phenomenon that is constructed discursively, linguistically and communicatively** (see Lyke, *Feminist Studies*; Prins, "Narrative Accounts") and is **historically specific**
- In the **rooting** and **shifting** among diverse sociocultural categories of identity, **transpositionality and transvalidation** are intrinsically part of the very fabric of intersectional theories of gender

CLOSER LOOK TO POST-MAO CONDITIONS'

- Equality slogans in China have **been hiding "an implicit male norm** in which women were equal to men insofar as they were like men, dressed and behaved like men, thus **"degendering and neutralizing (*Zhongxing Hua*) women"** (Shih, "Towards" 10) and **depriving them of their difference and femininity.**
- "(Women 'studies) scholars now recognize that the guiding principle 'whatever men do, woman do' while inspirational, in fact it helped to conceal a male standard for women's equality [...] A male standard, however only creates an illusion of equality, since women have no distinct gender identity within the context of so-called liberation [...] The first task of Women's liberation is to allow women themselves to discover who they are [...] and how much they have been influenced by distorted, patriarchal images of their gender"

(Li and Zhang "Creating a Space" 146 cited in Shih, "Towards" 10)

- growing focus on the necessity of **"self-discovery, self-consciousness"** and **women subjectivity** (*zhutixing*) (Shih, "Towards" 11).

NEVERTHELESS....

- Resistance and criticism to state patriarchy is **not driven by "obvious sexism**, as in the West, but because its mode of liberating Chinese women ultimately **prevented that liberation from being complete**" (Shih "Towards" 10)
- if women were "liberated or freed from" gender under Maoism, now they are **longing to be able to reconnect** with the specificities of the female gender, **"women's collective consciousness"** (nǚxing quanti yishi) and **women's consciousness as subjects** (nǚxing zhuti yishi) (Li, Woman 167)
- **Anyi Wang**, currently counteracting hegemonic discourses of sameness and equality (Songs 160-78)
- European gender scholars must acknowledge the fact that contemporary Chinese discourses of equality are **not focused on the acquisition of legal equality** between women and men but on **"the process of awakening female subjectivity and self-worth"** (Li, "Economic Reform" 380-82 cited in Shih "Towards" 14)

CONCLUSIONS

- European gender scholars' vision of ethical cross-cultural encounters **holds many parallelisms** with those of the Chinese academics here analyzed
- "despite many Chinese intellectuals' reluctance to use the **term feminism**, there is no denying that 'feminism' broadly defined- **has again been developed in contemporary China**" (Wu, "Making Sense" 37)
- cross-cultural **misunderstandings** are **not triggered by** essential differences among us, but by the ignorance about each other's historical contexts.
- The need to **shift the position** beyond Western **universalism and allow for diversity and complexity**
- **crucial** that European gender scholars become **aware of these nuances** to promote inclusive and receptive attitudes that will allow Europeans to **grasp Chinese gender reasoning**
- **Looking at these similarities** can provide the foundation to **foster and consolidate** bilateral cooperation between scholars in Europe and China
- **Retaining differences and interacting peacefully** is the first step towards achieving academic crosscultural encounters based on mutual respect and cooperation.

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