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Becoming Feminist: The Alternative Educational Paths
toward Gender Equality of China's Post-89 Generation

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Education

by

Weiling Deng

2018

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Becoming Feminist: The Alternative Educational Paths
toward Gender Equality of China's Post-89 Generation

by

Weiling Deng

Doctor of Philosophy in Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor Richard Desjardins, Co-Chair

Professor Andrea Sue Goldman, Co-Chair

This dissertation studies the contemporary Chinese feminist movement, as it was unfolding in multiple faceted ways from 2015 to 2018, placing it within both the deeper historical context of gender struggles in China's long twentieth century and within the context of both Chinese and global educational systems. It focuses on Chinese feminists of the post-89 generation, who were largely born between 1985 and 1995, have had no experience of participating in significant social movements and protests that marked China's highly controversial modernization in the last century, and grew up after 1989 in a commodified and depoliticized social-educational environment. The processes in which they become feminists are interpreted in this study as alternative educational paths.

Although the post-89 cohort of feminists claim to continue the unfinished liberation of Chinese women from the twentieth century, particularly by inheriting the historically constructed

term *funü*, meaning women as state subjects, they have detached themselves from what may seem to be their immediate historical precedents. It is because in their usage of *funü* is no longer predominantly illustrative of class struggle, but instead is de-historicized to serve poststructuralist cultural politics. This nuanced change demands that the post-89 generation feminists and their movement be studied not through the ideas that influence them, but through the ways in which they, as politicized students, embody those ideas in everyday life. This framework puts the contemporary Chinese feminist movement in line with the student protests in twentieth-century China.

The purpose of this study is, in part, to address the underlying educational philosophy of some of the major feminist actions in China that has yet to be discussed in a systematic manner. Works on the politics of pedagogy by Jacques Rancière, Augusto Boal, and Gert Biesta shed light on the deeper thinking of social inequality and sex-based injustice that the post-89 generation feminists inject into their consciousness-raising activism. Another important goal, however, is to draw attention to some unexamined assumptions within this movement that may be contradictory to the philosophy of emancipatory education. The new attempts to break through this impasse have unveiled new horizon of feminist education in China.

The dissertation of Weiling Deng is approved.

Douglas M. Kellner

Val D. Rust

Richard Desjardins, Committee Co-Chair

Andrea Sue Goldman, Committee Co-Chair

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2018

DEDICATION PAGE

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmother, a woman Communist of no party affiliation and former professor of Peking University's (PKU) School of Marxism.

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I dedicate this study on the contemporary Chinese feminist movement to my grandmother. Tacitly, she has been influencing me with her independence, perseverance, and an acute criticism of capitalism. Her criticism of capitalism is, and will always be, partial and provincial, due to the heavy Communist ideological imprint she received since her childhood in the 1930s. This criticism needs to be improved and enriched, rather than trashed, like the fate of many of grandmother's old stuff in our house. As she is designing and making little outfits out of our family's old clothes for my stuffed animals (so that I can share the talent with Fred Rogers), I want to share a bit more empirical knowledge of an early life spent with a highly educated woman Communist whose life is not all about class struggle, but also the gentleness she cannot help yielding when knitting and sewing stuffed animals' clothing in her eighties. It is the path to trace back how I found this research project and found it very meaningful and necessary.

Both grandmother's toughness and gentleness I find educational. I spent every single day with her in an old PKU faculty apartment until I went to college at age eighteen. The closest days I had had with her were during the 1990s, when the last generation of PKU professors who painfully survived the turmoil of the anti-rightist campaign (1957-1959), the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962), and the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), were retiring from their teaching positions and spent their last years, in health or illnesses, in PKU's faculty complexes. To a child of no heavy memories and work, the days went slow. Only when I found them passing away one after another, their memories turning into homeless ghosts in the frivolous, anxious, and hectic new world, that I began to realize with great reluctance how fast time flew. The scholarly dedication of the 1960s and 1970s would soon be no more. What replaces it is the zeal of project-driven academic entrepreneurialism, a serious academic and educational problem not limited to

China, but worldwide. It was a helpless moment when I also realized I could do nothing about it. The distance between me and my childhood paradise, Zhongguanyuan (a famous PKU complex built in 1952), irrevocably enlarged as I embarked on an academic journey in the US, a future predetermined by my late grandfather's work in international affairs at PKU, and as neoliberalism quickly cleared out old PKU professors from Zhongguanyuan in order to turn a part of it to a fancy palace for *international* scholars. In 2017, I found myself standing in front of the now empty old backyard where I spent many summers reading literature, lying in the middle of flourishing flowers grandmother planted. The past professors of PKU fed their history into the wildly growing trees that made this complex increasingly obsolete. It became a home in distant memory and remembered distance.

I was urged by my melancholy to do a research on an alternative educational experiment led by critical, strong-willed women in the contemporary time. I substituted grandmother's Communist defiance for the pursuit and practice of critical gender theories. At the point where my search for such criticalness went fruitless in Chinese universities, I accidentally ran into the Chinese feminist community. The radicalness of the young Chinese feminists was eye-opening. It is especially impressive to find them tirelessly trying to keep the history of women Communists alive, which is endangered in the capitalist world of which we are all inevitably a part. This history is undoubtedly a rare source of education to the generations born not only in disjunction with, but also in the legacy of, China's modern revolutions. But I nevertheless find it hard to share the perspective and experience of growing up under the intimate care of a woman Communist with people whose attachment to feminism is primarily ethical and cognitive. My perspective is apparently biased. It is skewed toward a complex feeling of the passage of time, in which the world surrounding the Communist women shifted. Their relative inflexibility with the change of the

world is either criticized for being outdated and snobbish or appreciated as a kind of agency lost in the dazzle of capitalist desires. For the major concern of this project, the notion of agency cannot be applied unheeded, separating the women protagonists from the present time where their past struggles are being discussed as an educational source in effect. The most important empirical lesson I learned from living with grandmother is that she needs to be respected as she is, accepted altogether with her strengths and weaknesses as an ordinary person, and not letting whatever research value the current academic climate determines on her behalf to de-historicize her simply because she represents a unique historical phase of great academic worth. This empirical perspective asked, and will continue to ask, me to take history seriously, always double-checking with myself what I am asking from history, what position I am placing myself to the present location of speech when I speak about a selected set of historical narratives, and if I am so preoccupied with a contemporary purpose that I have mistaken agency for the complexity of a person living through different times. Grandmother is a part of the history that makes me who I am, that I cannot change from whatever hindsight, that has kindled my research interests in Chinese women intellectuals between the 1950s and the 1990s, and that sees history as continuously and relationally lived more than yoking a monument of social change.

I thank Professor Andrea Goldman of the History Department of UCLA for navigating my study since 2015. Her seminar, “Gender and Sexuality in Early Modern and Modern China,” navigated not only my historical research that constituted the foundation of my analysis of the present-day Chinese feminism, but also my endless search for a place between academia and activism, and between China and the West. Her devotion to advising and editing my dissertation is priceless. Professor Richard Desjardins walked me through the last and the most important months of thinking and writing, timing the process of writing and prompting me to step up the

clarity of writing. Professors Douglas Kellner and Val Rust, who have known me since I came to UCLA for graduate study, gracefully and affirmatively encouraged me throughout my struggles with research topic and the changes of research timeline.

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I thank Professor Wang Zheng of Michigan University for her academic and emotional guidance from distance, her assistance to me being awarded with UCLA's Dissertation Year Fellowship, and her invitation to participate in translating into Chinese her recent monograph *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1964*. She also earnestly encouraged me to initiate an oral history project on women professors in the socialist years, upon briefly learning of my grandmother's background.

I am humbled to have been helped by friends who patiently listened to and aided with their respective academic expertise my research progress over the past three years. In this limited space of acknowledgement, I want to thank especially Professor Ivy Liu of Tsinghua University, Professor Li Jinzhao of Beijing Foreign Studies University, Tian Yiyu, You Shunan, Liu Manxin, Wan Qing, and Shi Lin. They gave me special assistance to analyze an unfolding feminist movement. They are my mentors without a formal title.

I am deeply indebted to my parents, who generously funded the majority of my graduate school life with love while having to bear with my radical transformation in academic career and

personal life. And I am privileged to have been supported 24/7 (thanks to our time difference) by cousin-sister Lujia who provides me, the single child at home, with sibling love.

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CHAPTER 1 Introduction

My study of the contemporary Mainland Chinese feminist movement started in 2015. It was the year in which the movement survived its first and most serious crackdown by the Chinese government and was then resurrected in more diverse ways that challenged both the existing approaches to understanding what it really was and where it might be heading to. It first came to my attention after I was curious about the social media messages behind numerous young Chinese women students' engagement in forms of street theater that were deemed "eccentric," or "deviant," in the eyes of the Chinese state and most Chinese people. These women occupied men's bathrooms in public spaces, wore bloody wedding gowns to Beijing's Qianmen Street, a commercial area directly south of Tiananmen Square, performed Chinese adaptations of *The Vagina Monologues*, and walked over a thousand miles from Beijing to Guangzhou to protest the endangerment of women's safety and independent travel. These activists also opened alternative study rooms, or schools, in which to educate fellow feminists and sympathizers. These performative gestures showed them to be activists who participated in a form of social protest that was beyond the immediate comprehension of the average Chinese person. Why, most people wondered, don't these young women (as well as a few male participants) make good use of their higher education to secure a normal, prosperous future? Indeed, for engaging in these "eccentric" performances, some of the activists paid a high price: jailed for thirty-seven days, entangled in conflicts with schools and/or parents, and diagnosed with long-term depression, among other perils.

These feminists, who possess enormous creativity and hold at least a college-level educational background, belong to a broad category known as "the post-89 generation of activists" (Zhao, 2018). Born largely between 1985 and 1995 into urban nuclear families (with a few

exceptions), this generation's collective memory is distanced from the high socialist-era upheavals that occurred from 1949 to 1979, the enlightenment movement that commenced in tandem with China's opening in the 1980s, and, most importantly, the 1989 Tiananmen protests and subsequent massacre. Rather than reinvigorating an enlightenment movement, which would very likely subject them to direct political suppression, activists of the post-89 generation prioritize consciousness-raising in micro-political domains, which nonetheless addresses structural problems (ibid). Transforming the social structure—the ways in which an individual is educated and socialized in accordance with established norms, primarily along the axis of gender—rather than the political structure, is the focus of their activism, learning, and research. Such intellectual investment in social change outside formal schooling, in both practical *and* theoretical dimensions, “can greatly enrich, broaden, and challenge dominant understandings of how and where education, learning, and knowledge production occur and what these look like” (Choudry, 2015, p. 1). Collectively, thinking and acting from the perspective of politicized students, Chinese feminists of the post-89 generation strategize to provide the public (especially fellow students and young professionals) critical conceptual tools to realize and challenge the situation that Chinese women “suffer from systematic social injustice because of their sex”¹ (Richards, 1994, pp. 21-22).

The student identity of the post-89 generation feminists has always been (unfairly) overshadowed by the feminist ideation to which they are committed, taken as a fixed, demographic background in most, if not all, discussion of their actions and characteristics. But it is precisely

¹ It is important to note that the Chinese feminist movement also takes as its interest queer theory and gay rights. Because many who work, or have worked, as full-time feminist activists are themselves lesbians, sexuality is a crucial area in which they integrate sex with politics. As far as I know, a number of lesbian feminists believe that the pluralism of sexuality popularized since the 1990s partly created the subcultural ground on which feminist activism can take shape. Thus, there is no clear-cut boundary between the feminist movement and the gay rights activism in contemporary China. Nevertheless, feminism is still thought and practiced as primarily concerned with the position of women and as “having a monopoly on the representation of women's interests” (Richards, 1994, p. 24).

this “background” that very often reminds the feminists themselves (old and young) and the viewers of their political performances of past Chinese student protests in the twentieth century. In other words, “students” is the intellectual space in which the post-89 generation feminists approach and embody feminism. This generational mark distinguishes the contemporary feminist movement from previous Chinese women’s liberation movements. This argument, which I will discuss at length in Chapter 2, is the foundation of my further theorization of the way the subjects organize their activism and construct their subjectivity within their organizations. By foregrounding the fact that most of them are students—whether currently enrolled in a higher education institution or in between two phases of formal advanced education—and recognizing the centrality of “students” as a special and unstable political, cultural, and economic category (Wasserstrom, 1991; Hunt, 2004; Lanza, 2010), this study illustrates the subtleties of the identity of the subjects.

The purpose of this study is, in part, to address the underlying educational philosophy of some of the major feminist actions in China that has yet to be discussed in a systematic manner. Works on the politics of pedagogy by Jacques Rancière, Augusto Boal, and Gert Biesta shed light on the deeper thinking of social inequality and sex-based injustice that the post-89 generation feminists have injected into their consciousness-raising activism. Another important goal, however, is to draw attention to some unexamined assumptions within the contemporary Chinese feminist movement, such as its relation to the twentieth-century Chinese women’s liberation movement, the criteria by which it selects and tries to integrate Western feminist theories, its propensity for identity politics, its heavy reliance on social media—which blurs the boundary between work (the political) and life (the personal)—and its structureless network, which is claimed to be free of hierarchy and meritocracy. All these taken-for-granted assumptions require

a systematic evaluation of what at first might seem to be fragmented in this movement. As with all other systems, this one has complications, contradictions, and complicities that need to be analyzed in the context of post-socialism and late capitalism.

1.1 Contextualizing the post-89 generation and their education in the 1990s

A decade in which the Chinese society underwent dramatic economic, cultural, and social restructuring, the 1990s is rarely reflected upon in today's Chinese feminist discourse, except perhaps for a single important international event in Beijing: the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. But its historical importance to China and to the world is too significant to overlook. Pertinent to this current study, it made the post-89 generation the first generation of young people who were produced (grown up and educated) in the era of the fully open market economy and also the first generation since the turn of the twentieth century that was ostensibly targeted by state political campaigns. Their formal schooling remained strictly planned and overseen by the Chinese government. However, to eschew institutionalized education at home and search for alternative, even radical, ways to go global is also fraught with complicity with the new, understudied hegemony of late capitalism. The consolidation of globalization as intensive economic, political, social, and cultural processes does *not* blur national and ethnic boundaries (Pieke, 2009; Chow, 2002), but instead reinforces globalism as a privilege, the highest of all geopolitical orders, for nations, institutions, and individuals. This underlying condition makes the vision and practice of emancipation more contested. Hence, it is crucial to go back to the 1990s to contextualize the post-89 generation and their soon-to-be-globalized education.

One major aftermath of Tiananmen Massacre of June 4, 1989 was that state made efforts to sharply depoliticize and increasingly commodify the categories of student and intellectual in

China, with the aim of serving technocracy, entrepreneurialism, and bureaucracy. China scholars have argued that the post-1979 state-promoted market economy's real impact on reconfiguring the Chinese society and economy only came into full swing in the 1990s (Zhang, 2008; McGrath, 2008). The feminist activists of this study grew up in the 1990s, meaning that this post-89 generation accepts marketized education and commercialized mass communication as a given, as they cannot imagine any alternative. Seen in this light, they are inherently international. To be sure, despite the waning of the high socialist era and its accompanying ideology as reflected in textbooks, on billboards, and in the state-run media, it remains profoundly influential to many generations both in politics and in the interstices of everyday life, forming a ubiquitous post-socialist Chinese subconsciousness. This mutually constituting blend of internationalism and Chinese post-socialism has distinctively shaped the post-89 generation feminists; it simultaneously inspires and constrains their consciousness-raising tasks.

The 1990s featured a new relationship between China and world history. On the one hand, history intervened and animated China (Zhang, 2008, p. 4). On the other, history began to be “made in China,” as the Chinese government seized the political-economic opportunity immediately after the close of the Cold War to make the country the world's workshop and factory. This new relationship between an open-border China and the world constituted what Zhang Xudong terms, “the Chinese 1990s,” which lasted twelve years, not ten. Children of the post-89 generation either grew up in or were born into this twelve-year “decade,” which witnessed and was shaped by China's forward momentum gained step by step by a number of key events, including: China's survival of the collapse of the communist front in 1991, the patriotic “fanfare” that resulted from the reclaiming of Hong Kong's sovereignty in 1997 and Macao's in 1999, withstanding the financial crisis that swept the rest of Asia in 1998, and proudly joining the World Trade

Organization in 2001 (Zhang, 2008, p. 1). This twelve-year decade that sent China into the twenty-first century was thus a period of fundamental sociocultural and political-economic changes, which in turn conditioned the development of Chinese education during this same period. This was the time during which the post-89 generation feminists were initially schooled and which they reflected upon and then critiqued when they reached adulthood in the late 2000s.

The Tian'anmen massacre in June 1989 terminated the 1980s "new social movement," that is, the 1980s liberal enlightenment that had illuminated the Chinese nation with a post-socialist intellectual critique of the Mao years. It drastically changed the way students were to be educated and monitored by a state apparatus that tries to maintain the vitality of the "socialist state-form" (Zhang, 2008, p. 5), in which the university shared a similar pattern of disciplining, at least at the ideological level, with the police and jails. These conditions only intensified in the following years, during which "the Chinese government itself [led the] integration of the Chinese economy into the global market and division of labor" (ibid). As a consequence, the notion of "student" was equally reduced to a de-politicized, commodified sociological category, quarantined from its modern, politicized connotation since its inception in the 1910s (Lanza, 2010). Thereafter, in 1992, Deng Xiaoping's Southern Tour marked the country's irrevocable reorientation toward a market economy and mass commodity culture (Barlow, 2004, p. 304). Combined with the political watershed of 1989, Deng's tour ended the prevailing socio-cultural context of the 1980s, and marked the beginning of the market's thorough restructuring of Chinese society (Barlow, 2004, p. 305; McGrath, 2008, p. 3).

The concurrent educational reform was meant to cultivate cohort after cohort of students who would immediately grasp the rising opportunities for creating economic value and willingly take risks to secure new and better lives for themselves and their families (Hansen, 2015, p. 4).

Stimulated by a market economy, the rapidly escalating educational outcomes in both test scores and the quantity of skilled individuals have been neither the result of, nor the condition for, weakened political-ideological control from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Observing the transformation of Chinese education from a view focused on the measures with which the CCP incorporated neoliberalism into its persistent authoritarianism, anthropologist Frank Pieke contends that both post-socialism and “late-socialism” are not sufficiently accurate definitions of China’s ambition. Instead, he terms this “neo-socialism” (Pieke, 2009, p. 9; Hansen, 2015, p. 7). In the current “neo-socialist” Chinese state, the “indigenous” socialism is never a disadvantaged force of state governance under neoliberalism’s erosive threat upon state boundaries. On the contrary, it imbues within Chinese society the selectiveness of neoliberalism that it seeks to empower, in Pieke’s words, “an orderly process of socialist modernization and the engagement of economic globalization and the ‘multi-polarization’ (*duojihua*) of the community of nations (Pieke, 2009, p. 9). When the reformed educational system successfully creates ideologically homogeneous, politically indifferent, and economically ambitious individuals, who passively or actively accept Leninism as the only “home-grown governmental technolog[y]” (ibid), the Chinese state’s power is consolidated and heightened, perhaps in a way that is more efficacious to its people than to the rest of the world. If the 1990s intensified and standardized the modernist ideology of the 1980s (Zhang, 2008, p. 2), the first two decades of the new millennium have undoubtedly intensified this trend.

1.2 A tripartite theoretical framework: feminism, critical pedagogy, and student protest

The contemporary Chinese feminist movement is not simply an ensemble of radical practices isolated from theoretical grounding. It has been deeply engaged in feminist theories (such

as hooks, 1994; Harding, 1987; Crenshaw, 1991), along with theories in poststructuralism, postmodernism, and the arts, which “are now addressing the issue of pedagogy within a politics of cultural difference that offers new hope for a deteriorating field [of education]” (Giroux, 1992, p. 2). It is an integral part of the larger social movement worldwide dedicated to reframing pedagogy as a central site of cultural politics and a performance of political culture. Now recognized globally, this transformation in pedagogy aims unambiguously at broadening the horizon of how people perceive education—leaving behind the notion that education is a practice of skills and knowledge transmission and instead seeing it as “a form of political and cultural production deeply implicated in the construction of knowledge, subjectivities, and social relations” (ibid). Rather than replacing education with a full embrace of the (urban) public space, the actions that the post-89 generation Chinese feminists take construct new language and new everydayness upon interaction with the society and make them available for educational use. Rather than confined to making practical, statistically calculable changes to Chinese women’s lives, the meaning of this feminist movement lies in the “epistemological breaks” that call into question the established patterns of knowing and being recognized as somebody who knows (Laclau, 1990, p. 162; see also Lanza, 2010, p. 104). The epistemological break is realized when the feminist students and teachers appear in, and make a difference to, the society as “cultural workers” who chart the pedagogical dimension of the creation of symbolic—textual, aural, and visual—representations (Giroux, 1992, p. 5). In this way, neither art nor education remain in disciplinary isolation from the rest of social studies and the entire society; and together, they amplify “the political dimension of cultural work” (ibid), broadly defined as the critique, negotiation, and design of the ways in which people understand and (re)produce those representations.

The main argument of this study is that the contemporary Chinese feminist movement is one in which Chinese university students have become politicized, using feminism to criticize the unjust phenomena around them. The vicinity counted as “around” is radically enlarged by the Internet. The movement is formed in the students’ everyday activities of problematizing the “common stage” on which roles are assigned to actors.² The “stage,” in Jacques Rancière’s language, has both real and metaphorical meanings and there is no division between them. This usage of “stage,” centering on the politics of education, best summarizes the way the post-89 generation feminists strategize their actions that are intrinsically pedagogical. It is through the departure from a sociological, fixed category of “student”—one that is completely dependent on the functions of a state-sponsored university—that the feminists who were studied become what they are. Therefore, the contemporary Chinese feminist movement cannot be simply construed as a continuation of the twentieth-century women’s liberation movement. Given this reconsideration of the way in which feminism, critical pedagogy, and student protest are integrated by the post-89 generation in addressing gender inequalities, there are two analytical perspectives to be clarified: *funü* as a flagship symbol of resistance and feminism as a conceptual tool to renew everyday life.

First, *funü*, the nationalist construct of women subjects, is approached more as a symbol of resistance than a future anterior by itself. While this particular term is still in use in official language, its popular meaning has faded. It is no longer customary practice to refer to a woman, or a group of women, as *funü*. The post-89 generation Chinese feminists’ attempt to revive it—such as by adding *funü* as a prefix to their alias on social media on the International Women’s Day

² In theorizing the formation of Chinese nationalism, Rebecca Karl (2002b) quotes Jacques Rancière (1999) “Politics is primarily conflict over the existence of a common stage and over the existence and status of those present on it. It must first be established that the stage exists for the use of an interlocutor who can’t see it and who can’t see if for good reason *because* it doesn’t exist” (emphasis in original).

on March 8—does not make their contemporaries feel any closer to the grand history, and the courage and inconvenience of living in that history, that produced the socialist revolutionary connotation of *funü*.³ Instead of reviving the history, what is being brought into view via the rearticulation of *funü* is a political gesture based on poststructuralism to resist identity discrimination, rather than the historicity of that term itself. The claim that “I am *funü* so-and-so,” therefore, does not mean “my socialist background is in contradiction to (your) capitalist world,” but instead expresses a critical message to the viewer that “I am challenging the way you perceive women as commodities.” Capitalism is challenged on account of its commodification of women.

Second, given the centrality of the de-historicized use of *funü* in present feminist campaigns, this study of the post-89 Chinese feminists does not treat them simply as political actors or intellectuals marked by grand ideas. Instead, it focuses how they become politicized as “students.” This approach shifts the analytical attention to the specific ways in which the post-89 generation feminists embody the great ideas, such as feminism, emancipation, and revolution. They take to this embodiment activities that blur the boundaries between the school and the city, between life and work, and between desire and revolution, to renew the questioning of everydayness. This repertoire of resistance lines up the contemporary Chinese feminist movement with the tradition of student protests starting from the May Fourth Movement in 1919 and its seeming termination in 1989.

³ Here I am thinking of Dorothy Ko’s (2005) explanation of “footbinding is history” in her seminal book *Cinderella’s Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding*. Two views, carrying different emotions, of the ending of the footbinding history can be stressed. When it is read “footbinding is *history*,” it “conveys a sense of relief”—the backward time is finally over, and China is finally a modern country free of embarrassing customs. When read as “footbinding *is* history,” however, there is a strong wish to not simply dismiss and tread on what happened before, but to recognize that there were valuable lives and thoughts in the past worthy of respect and analysis without judgmental presumptions of their “backwardness.”

I owe this crucial viewpoint to Fabio Lanza's (2010) insight into May Fourth's Peking University (Beida), a history of the formation of both Beida's reputation as *the* model university of modern China and "students" as a sign of radical unsettlement. Drawing on E. P. Thomson's study of the English working class, he asserts that "Chinese students were present at their own making" (Lanza, 2010, p. 5; Thomson, 1963) as they displaced politics to everyday life.⁴ Lanza's attention to the absence of a preexisting position, to which structural crises or a famed location of a movement bequeaths meaning, historicizes student activism to the students' everyday lives. Only later did "the category of (Beida) students, the power of place," and the activist gestures become fixed, ideal political and cultural constructs (Lanza, 2010, p. 7). And only even later did people begin taking those assumptions (in the forms of folklore, memoir, and mythology) as history. Stripping off those taken-for-granted assumptions, Lanza elucidates that it was not *what* was being learned—for instance, the big, abstract ideas or ideologies of "enlightenment," "nationalism," "revolution," or "liberalism"—but rather *how* these ideas and ideologies were learned and embodied, that led to the emergence of new political subjectivities (p. 6). Such is the invention of "students," a symbol of transgression and disruption and "an interpretational space" in which the polysemy of "student" and "university" is a continuous political struggle. Borrowing the repertoire of student protest from the May Fourth Movement, the contemporary Chinese feminist movement is not simply paying tribute to the early twentieth-century Chinese revolutionaries (especially women elites). It continues the tradition of modern Chinese student activism with full dedication to the gender axis of structural inequalities, or to use an older term, the "women's problem."

⁴ Influential studies on this topic, on which Fabio Lanza (2010) built his analytical framework of Beida students, include Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991), Kristin Ross's "Streetwise: The French invention of everyday life" (1996) and *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (2002), and Harry Harootunian's *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (2000).

In short, I fully recognize the great influence that the discourses and values of past Chinese women's liberation movements, present feminist campaigns worldwide, and Western feminist theories have on the ideation of the current Chinese feminist movement. But the subject formation of this particular generation of Chinese feminists must be analyzed in the context of China's sociocultural and political-cultural transformation from the 1990s onwards. This tripartite theoretical framework builds upon feminism, critical pedagogy, and student protest, and allows me to ask questions that are likely to be overlooked by other studies of student practitioners of feminism that, in the critical language with which the late Nobel Peace Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo reflected upon the 1989 student protest, are compelled to "[borrow] the name of revolution to speak with the force of justice" (Liu, 1991, p. 309).

1.3 Research questions

This study divides up a systematic examination of the contemporary Chinese feminist movement into five basic elements: the when (historical background and generational rupture in the 1990s), the who (the politicized university students), the how (feminist pedagogy), and the where (the distribution of the sensible concerns of women). Each element is attended to by a set of questions, which will be respectively addressed in the following five chapters.

- 1) What relationship—acknowledged or not—do the post-89 generation feminists have with previous Chinese women's movements (and the discourse about those movements) in the twentieth century? How does the rhetoric of women's liberation and equality, first articulated in the late Qing and Republican eras, and then enshrined in CCP propaganda, shape contemporary Chinese feminist activists' understanding of themselves and their chosen methods of activism? And how do the silences or erasures of previous feminist

activism also shape the current generation? How do these feminists position themselves via transnational feminism?

- 2) What is the experience of becoming feminist like for activists (mostly women) of this generation? What forms of activism have the post-89 generation feminists engaged in? What are the implications of becoming feminist to the individual in regard to her relationships with family, school, and society?
- 3) How have organized feminist activities developed pedagogies that differ from formal schooling?
- 4) How have individual members' positions vis-à-vis the Chinese feminist community been affected by intra-group conflicts and what have they taken away from such experiences as a source of education after becoming feminist?

1.4 Methodology

This study uses ethnographic methods to examine the alternative paths the post-89 generation takes toward gender equality.

1) I review four bodies of literature in regard to Chinese women's liberation movements in the twentieth century. A) Narratives of Chinese women as impotent subjects in need of men's liberation; B) women revolutionaries' own voices and thoughts on their engagement in feminism in the early twentieth century; C) researches on the institutional structures that the party-state set up after 1949 and how the state structure shaped the relationship between the Women's Federation (Fulian), feminism, and CCP ideology, which helps set up for the push back by Chinese women's studies scholars beginning circa 1980; and D) critical studies done in the 1990s and later by

western-trained Chinese feminist scholars against the background of emergent postcolonial critiques and China's rise after the end of the Cold War.

2) I interviewed seventeen post-89 generation feminist activists in Beijing and Guangzhou between October 2016 and October 2018. They are commonly seen as some of the more outstanding members within the Chinese feminist community. They generally had over six months of experience participating in feminist activism within China by the time of interview. This length of engagement ensures that each one of them has been involved in multiple activities, garnered some sense of accomplishment but may also reflect on the contradictions, difficulties, and complexity that accompanied their accomplishments. This sample of seventeen people will be enriched by publicized interviews of people I was not able to reach. But in Chapter 3, I will only focus on five personal narratives.

3) I use a mixture of virtual participation, online documentary study, participant observation, and informal conversation to re-present three sites of collective feminist pedagogical activities in both Guangzhou and Beijing. The first story presents a street theater—a form of dramatic performance conducted in public space to raise consciousness among pedestrians—in 2017. I unpack this in association with more popular socially engaged feminist art, and then give a close reading of the group's limited conversation (demonstration banners) with their viewers, in which I find an incomplete consideration of popular education.

The latter two examples involve systematic and longitudinal practice of emancipatory theaters—radical theatrical performances to break down the boundary between the actor and the spectator. They took place in a longer time span than my fieldwork covers. Thus, in this study, I mainly focus on the sessions that I had participated in and/or in which the involved post-89 generation feminists reflected upon in written or dialogical forms. Then, I apply Jacques

Rancière's philosophy of emancipatory education to analyze the Chinese feminists' engaged teaching/performing practice.

4) Longitudinal participant observation, in both physical and virtual ethnography, allowed me to acknowledge the diversity and difference within what would have otherwise seemed a unitary Chinese feminist community from outside. This diversity is reflected in the personal contemplation of members of the post-89 generation feminist network upon significant involvement in the current feminist movement. I examine two of those reflections to demonstrate the empirical but critical thoughts on what appears to be a unified and compelling paradigm of feminist activism. One is an independent documentary, which started from filming a Guangzhou feminist protest but turned out to be the filmmaker's own examinations of her gains and losses in being tuned to a certain pattern of resistance. The second one is an autobiographical WeChat journal of a young social worker in rural China upon graduating from a top research university in urban Guangzhou. This kind of virtually operated journal on the most popular Chinese social media platform allows individuals to regularly or irregularly publish their personal experiences and insights to an undefined audience who would subscribe to the journal. Her experience and writing are very marginal compared to feminism's appearance seen daily on social media. I analyze this marginal and alternative way of being feminist—rather than being a feminist—with Arif Dirlik's notion of “placed-based imagination” to counter the hegemony of modernity, i.e. the elimination of “place” and subsequently “people” for the sake of social progress, which feminism's pursuit of a kind of globalism is somewhat complicit with.

Below, I will briefly review some important scholarly works on ethnographic research, upon which I will discuss my positionality, the physical sites of ethnography, and my usage of virtual ethnography.

Positionality

In mid-2016, I went into the field as a ready feminist. The readiness came from not only an affirmative recognition of feminism, but also the view that, as Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1996) argues, the function of such ethnographic study included activism. This self-identification distinguished me from many who had attempted to interview the post-89 generation feminist activists, including college students driven by coursework and journalists allured to the novelty and controversies of feminist street performances. As an engaged research in which I participated in the community's activities, this study does not "speak [primarily] to the moment" and is not submitted for the newsworthiness (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 21) of the activism. Thus, I tried to distribute my focus evenly between being a participant and a critical researcher. "Inside outsider" perhaps best describes my positionality. To be inside, I became involved in various kinds of collaboration with the full-time feminist activists in both Beijing and Guangzhou. I viewed the Chinese feminist network as my community, too. Whereas "inside" described my location to the studied subjects, "outsider" defines where I will return to (academia) after collecting the data from the field. This position gave me what Joan Scott (1996) called an "analytical distance" from the people I observed and with whom I worked.

However, the "inside" location and the "outsider's" position does not have a clear boundary. I approached the post-89 generation feminists from a dual perspective: a Chinese graduate student studying education in a US university, and as someone with a childhood heavily influenced by a communist family member, who is a former professor teaching Marxism and Leninism at Peking University. I see the contemporary feminist movement as a reinvention, rather than a replication or continuation, of the works done by communist women. The generational gap

results from China's irreversible entrance into late capitalism. The political economic implications of this gap concern me very much. Therefore, I am both appreciative of what has been achieved by the post-89 generation feminists (and happily see myself as part of it) and critical of this generation's formation (as a practice of self-critique, too).

Physical sites of ethnography

I selected Beijing and Guangzhou as the two main physical sites of my ethnography, one in north China, the other in the deep south. Both are megacities, accommodating millions of local people, migrants, and international visitors and residents. While globalization might have brought both skyscrapers as well as global issues, such as gender inequality and class stratification, these two cities are distinct with their own histories, climates, and languages. Beijing, as the capital of China, enjoys a position of authority within the Chinese nation-state; the dominant language in Beijing is the lingua Sinica, Mandarin. Beijing's ambition of internationalization is probably the most statist of all cities in China, such as when it hosted the FWCW in 1995. Guangzhou, in contrast, is the capital city of the Cantonese-speaking Guangdong Province. With its proximity to China's first Special Economic Zone in Shenzhen, it is perhaps even more closely tied to global currents, although it makes no claims to represent the whole of China, and in this sense, is more local. Admittedly, investigating the extent to which the cultural and historical differences between Beijing and Guangzhou may have an impact on the practice of feminism in China is beyond the scope of this project. Nevertheless, it is necessary to at least point out that there are some significant differences between these two locales of research and that these differences implicitly and profoundly influenced my ethnographic work. Fundamentally, the localization of feminism in China is experienced differently in Beijing and Guangzhou, and apparently in other areas, too.

What matters, then, is that in the course of translating feminism(s) to China, “China” has multiple meanings. A unitary Chinese culture (as opposed to what seems to be an equally racially homogeneous Western culture) should be the last thing that “China” means to academic and activist actors working cross-culturally. Rather, “China” refers to the hegemonic Chinese state against which counterhegemonic Chinese civil rights activism resists. The tension between the diversity and unity of what “China” represents, which I will call for shorthand, Chineseness, has been and will continue to be an integral challenge to Chinese feminism.

After the thirty-seven-day arrest of five Chinese feminists in 2015 in Guangzhou, Guangzhou superseded Beijing to become the “base” of Chinese feminist activists and organizations. I conducted my physical fieldwork between July 2016 and September 2017, while doing ethnographic study of Chinese feminist activities and debates online from October 2015 to August 2018.

Virtual Ethnography

Social media is the main site, or more precisely, main vessel for, the post-89 generation feminists’ activism. Social media cannot be understood only as a technology to continue and accelerate the progress of activism. What truly matters is how this technology is used and understood by people who identify themselves as activists through their engagement with social media technologies. In other words, it is the relations between the activists and telecommunications technology that reveal the nature of the activism in question. According to Keith Grint and Steve Woolgar (1997), these relations include:

our attitudes toward technology, our conceptions of what technology can and cannot do, our expectations and assumptions about the possibilities of

technological change, and the various ways in which technology is represented, in the media and in organizations (p. 6).

Agreeing with Grint and Woolgar, Christine Hine (2000) maintains that which is virtual about “virtual ethnography” is not isolated from what is believed to be the “real” lifeworlds, nor does it take a radically different system of methods to make ethnography work in the worlds connected by the Internet. Rather, it is through the ways in which people use telecommunication technology that ethnographers may seek to understand the impact of technology “as a result of contingent sets of social processes” (p. 7).

Drawing on these understandings, I consider my ethnographic study of Chinese feminists’ activities on the internet as not just a supplement to my on-site ethnography, but as an equally important step both to obtaining a more holistic view of the movement and comprehending the understudied context of the circulation of feminist ideas in contemporary China. The site on which I conducted virtual ethnography is an interactive social media app called WeChat, created by the Tencent Company. As of February 2018, WeChat had over one billion monthly active users, mainly in China but also across the globe, following the world’s most popular social media platforms, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger (Gray, 2018). This record is historical, marking both the Tencent Company’s successful marketing and the indispensability of the smart phone to ordinary people’s lives. WeChat began with simple messenger function for private conversations between individuals and semi-private ones within a chat group. But its sensational success came along with its rapid transformation into an “all-in-one” smart phone app, combining payment methods with all the featured functions of the only four media platforms more popular than it. The app breaks down the conventional perception of the division between the virtual and the real, meanwhile posing new challenges to the boundary between private and public

spheres that its users do not fully comprehend. WeChat's network power is tremendous enough to cause the Chinese government to worry that a politically neutral commercial media platform could have the potential become a convenient place to mobilize or manipulate mass emotion.

For activists and non-activists alike, the first and last thing one does every day is to check WeChat. But activists definitely hope to do more with it. Functions pertinent to activism generally belong in three types: dialogue (to individuals and to groups), moments (to everyone added as a friend to a private account, except when blocked in particular), and privately run e-journals called public accounts. These three communication platforms weave together a politically assimilated web that some people would call a bubble or stratosphere. Information about feminist activism or debate, for instance, travels much faster and invokes higher empathy within this web than outside it. What interests me the most is the ways in which post-89 generation feminists imagine their audience/readers when using these different platforms of communication. There is no better place to observe and study the matter of representation of the Chinese feminist movement than on WeChat. The content of communication is secondary to the matter of representation. But it nevertheless offers valuable written evidence to track the flows of concrete knowledge, especially the flows between the feminist community and its ideological rivals and between Western and Chinese contexts of speech. In short, virtual ethnography generates evidence that face-to-face interview and participant observation cannot, and this type of evidence is crucial to learning about what feminism is when used, where it is situated in relation to other schools of thought and popular knowledge, and whether and how it is presented as a popular educational modality (Manicom and Walters, 2012; Richards, 1994).

Confidentiality

All informants' names are disguised and replaced with aliases. For those who are already known by their aliases in and out of the Chinese feminist network, I use the name by which they are known.

1.5 Chapter Outline

Chapter 2 presents a historical overview of the twentieth-century Chinese women's liberation movement and how women's education arose amidst national crises. The transformation of Chinese women from what elite men saw as victims of imperial China's patriarchal tradition to the Party-state's subjects who could "hold up half the sky," is invaluable but highly controversial. This chapter concentrates on the contested scholarly reinterpretation of this Maoist legacy of gender equality with a consideration of the complex international environment that gave rise to these new interpretations. In doing so, I complicate the activist identity that the post-89 generation feminists have inherited from an earlier generation of overseas Chinese feminist students.

Chapter 3 features five stories of four uncommunitarian students becoming politicized in everyday life and displaced from the "usual" paths toward individual success—secure jobs, decent salary, parent-approved networks, and heteronormative family expectations. Challenging the assumption that feminist positions are readily available for university students to take, it emphasizes the singularity of each process of becoming a feminist. It is in the irreducible and irreplaceable encounters, conversations, and networks that one makes sense of feminism, unlearning to better learn. Therefore, instead of quickly placing the students into an identical political and intellectual position *as feminists*, it is of great necessity to slowly unpack the educational processes (coded feminist) of the experience of becoming.

Chapter 4 analyzes the ways in which theater and politics are integrated in the formation of feminist pedagogy by the post-89 generation feminists. It consists of two related subthemes: politics as theater and theater as politics. Whereas the former reinvents the revolutionary repertoire of Chinese student protests during the May Fourth Movement in 1919, the latter is characterized by the adaptation of two world-class theatrical experiments—respectively Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* and Augusto Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed*—to promote civic education and democratic participation by eliminating the boundary between the actors and the spectators.

Chapter 5 examines two alternative stories of being feminist in which feminism is interpreted and practiced differently but not to a lesser extent. The first one is an independent documentary produced by a former feminist activist of the post-89 generation. While starting from the passion to document a small-scaled feminist protest in Guangzhou against the sexualization of women and the commercialization of the International Women’s Day. But it turned out to be a product of the filmmaker’s reflection on the way in which she had been involved in feminist activism in China. The second one, coming from a close reading of an autobiographical WeChat journal, is a young social worker’s integration to rural China where ethnic minorities inhabit. She brought into view the superiority of urban over rural women, metropolitan and globalist theories over local, indigenous lives, and Han majority over Chinese ethnic minority. All three critiques challenge “Chinese” feminism to reconsider what it has been complicit with and overlooked.

1.6 Significance

This dissertation uses an interdisciplinary framework, including feminism, critical pedagogy, and modern student protest, to systematically examine the educational pathways opened up in the contemporary Chinese feminist movement. By foregrounding the post-89 generation

feminists' student identity, it sheds new light on the connection between this generation's engagement in gender equality and the Chinese women's liberation movement in the twentieth century. It also brings to attention the process of becoming feminists as an irreducible learning experience lacking in China's formal education, but argues that this experience embraces more diverse knowledge of life in China than a more-or-less fixed feminist's identity may contain. Hence, on the one hand, this study unpacks and deciphers the underlying emancipatory educational goals the post-89 generation feminists try to fulfill in both individual and collective ways. On the other, it reveals internal contradictions and limitations in the organization of the Chinese feminist network to attend to voices and thoughts even less recognized in today's feminist and women's studies scholarship.

CHAPTER 2 A Historical Overview

“Women hold up half the sky” has been one of the best-known of Mao’s revolutionary quips. It posits his assertion of the equality between women and men. It is one of the foundational claims of the CCP’s ascendance to power through the twin pillars of communist “liberation”: socioeconomic justice for “peasants” and gender equity. In China’s twentieth century, Chinese feminism was an integral part of nationalism and socialism. And yet, with the CCP’s assumption of power in 1949, the state’s claim to be *the* champion of women’s rights (and its corresponding sublimation of gender equity to nationalist and socialist goals), has put later feminists observant of the gap between rhetoric and reality, and choosing to recoup feminism for non-statist aims, in a quandary. This historical context is crucial for understanding the fundamental difference between the women’s liberation movement before and after China’s entrance into capitalism. By highlighting this distinction, I dislocate the contemporary Chinese feminist movement from what seems to be its historical precedents in the last century.

Below, I briefly narrate how the image of Chinese women changed over the first half of the twentieth century, basically from victims to women who held up half the sky. Then, I discuss what institutional structures were set up by the party-state post 1949 and how that shaped the relationship between Fulian, feminism, and CCP ideology, which helps set up for the push back by Chinese women’s studies scholars beginning circa 1980. Next, I elaborate the way in which western-trained Chinese feminist scholars are bringing new and challenging interpretations of that past into the discourse of contemporary Chinese feminists, as well as the pushback against the colonization of theory by feminist scholarship emanating from the US/West. And finally, I review a major disagreement between feminist Chinese scholars/students (mainly falling along domestic-

trained versus U.S./Western-trained fault lines) to elucidate the complicated identity that the post-89 generation has inherited from earlier Chinese feminists.

2.1 Chinese women's education of body and mind

Women as victims

Slightly over a half-century passed between the height of anti-footbinding agitation in 1895-1898 and the last reported case of girls' footbinding in 1957 (Ko, 2005, pp. 4, 17). In the meantime, China underwent governance (in part or full) by at least three different political regimes. The Manchu-Qing dynasty fell in the nationalist revolution of 1911. The Nationalist Party (Guomintang, or GMD) ruled (at least nominally) during the Republican era until 1949, punctuated significantly by the New Culture Movement (1915-1925) and the May Fourth Movement of 1919, which helped to disseminate the Chinese enlightenment New Culture ideas. The last decade of GMD rule was an era of instability, dominated by first the Second Sino-Japanese war (1937-1945) and then the domestic Chinese Civil War (1945-1949). During this period, the Chinese Communist Party, having dramatically strengthened itself in rural China during Second Sino-Japanese war, defeated the GMD to establish the People's Republic of China (PRC). The statement that "women hold up half the sky" (*funü nengding banbiantian*), attributed to Mao and issued around the time of the cessation of new records of girls' footbinding, became one of the most popular revolutionary slogans from the mid-1950s onward. Though without sufficient record showing that this empowering statement was from Mao himself, it came into being after he learned about the first equal pay act becoming effective in a village in Guizhou Province in Southwest China (Hongchao, 2014). It represented the Maoist state's official policy that women were men's equals in constructing a socialist country (Zhong, 2009). The officially depicted representations of women—

transformed over a few decades from that of pathetic beings responsible for the weakness of the Chinese nation to that of proud agricultural and industrial laborers of the newly established communist China. This transformation reveals the centrality of the symbolic meaning of “women” in the formation of Chinese modernity in the first half of the twentieth century (Chow, 1991).

To be sure, both male and female bodies were under scrutiny in the intellectual and political attempts to conceptualize the modern as opposed to the traditional. For instance, the importance of exercise, as an individual’s physical and mental entrance to a modern world, was placed on both male and female university students in the early twentieth century (Lanza, 2010; Hong, 1997). Susan Brownell points out that, “physical education came into existence with the rise of European nation-states in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in order to meet the needs of a more diffuse, legalistic kind of state power—a power that was to be exercised uniformly and efficiently” (Brownell, 1995, p. 156). Fabio Lanza applies Brownell’s observation to the “untrained” male students of Peking University (Beida) to show how they created a “symbolic instability” to question the specificities of both modernity and tradition through manipulating their everyday outfit, the gown simplified from the Qing scholar-officials’ long robe.

However, the great political milestones from the late Qing through 1911, 1919, and 1949 turned women into victims that needed liberation from men. There were a few women exemplars thrown into the mix, but many of them had become martyrs, such as Qiu Jin (give dates), a cross-dressing anarchist who was executed for a failed assassination attempt against the Governor of Anhui. Some of the key tropes of women as oppressed victims include: footbinding (Ko, 2005), suicide (Sommer, 2015), and prostitution (Hershatter, 1997).

The renowned late-Qing reformist Liang Qichao, among his contemporaries, famously castigated “all two hundred million” Chinese women for being “consumers [*fenli*, partakers of

profit]; not a single one has produced anything of profit... No wonder men keep them as dogs, horses, and slaves” (Liang, in Ko, 2005b, p. 21).⁵ Joan Judge interprets Liang’s statement as follows:

Establishing what would become a common trope in later essays on women’s education... in the early twentieth century, Liang claimed that women had to be transformed from parasites to producers, from helpless creatures who lived off the labor of their fathers or their husbands to economically independent individuals (Judge, 2002, p. 170).

Situating himself as a representative of China’s most erudite classes, and as a progressive father and husband, Liang raised the woman question and connected it with the plight of national independence.

In 1903, a Chinese liberal educator and political activist, Jin Tianhe (or Jin Yi), rang the bell to call upon his fellow *men* to restore Han masculinity by emulating white men in the Western world (Liu, Karl, and Ko, 2013). This bell was not an actual instrument for ringing, although the title attempted to simulate an alarmist effect within society, but rather a manifesto entitled *Nüjiezhang* (The Women’s Bell), in which he outlined making women instrumental in the restoration of Han masculinity from its deep ethnic-political identity crisis. *The Women’s Bell*, in its passionate rhetoric, was written to enlighten Chinese women, and was meant to tell a different story of Chinese women’s liberation than the common narrative categorically encapsulated in the rhetoric of the Women’s Federation under Communist leadership (Liu, in Wang, Ko, and Liu, 2005, p. 23). Widely admired as it was by Jin’s contemporaries and later readers, *The Women’s Bell* had been (mis)perceived as the founding work of Chinese feminism because it overtly

⁵ This passage was first published in 1896 in Liang’s essay, “General Discussion of Reform” (*bianfa tongyi*), under the section, “On Women’s Study?” (*lun nüxue*).

advocated women's education. But this manifesto did not change the rhetorical connection between women and backwardness, or weakness. It was granted a high position in the terrain of Chinese women's education despite, or implicitly because of, its self-serving purpose. The sensation of *The Women's Bell* earned Jin Tianhe a title he deserved unmistakably—"the Rousseau of the world of Chinese feminism" (p. 27).⁶

Male Chinese elites located their preoccupations of constructing "a nationalist agency that subverts colonial discourses by displacing and appropriating oppression/resistance dichotomies in racial and gender theories" (Zhu, 2014, p. 148) in women. Historians have found that while grand theories concerning racial, national, class, and gender differentiations pervaded published writings in the early 1900s, they mainly served to "construct traditional Chinese women into a category of 'slave' which men [were] repelled to become" (Ko, in Wang, Ko, and Liu, 2005, p. 9). In this logic, the feminine was not simply a sexual opposition of the masculine, but rather a discursive space associated with heterogeneous slavery in racial, national, and class dimensions. It accommodated a "slavery trope" in the late Qing, which was further "transformed into the May Fourth 'women-as-victim' narrative" (Karl, 2002a, p. 215). During the men-led New Culture Movement, which strived to overthrow Confucianism and which peaked in 1919, a new and hopeful category of women, the "new women," was created in popular culture with complex and emotional imaginations of Chinese men's future as a ground upon which a competitive and strong modern Chinese nation could be built.

⁶ Jin first got this title from a woman intellectual, Lin Zongsu, author of the foreword for *The Women's Bell*.

Women as political actors

Men may have had multiple motivations for supporting women's education, but that did not mean they were disingenuous about wanting to improve the conditions of women. They were not only advocating feminism instrumentally, even if they could not live up to their own ideals in practice (Wang, 1999). Two things need to be made clear from the above critiques of early twentieth-century Chinese male intellectuals' advocacy for women's education as a strategy to save the Chinese nation from colonialism. First, a male subjectivity was being consolidated in preparation for the creation of a modern nation-state. Second, the consolidation of this male subjectivity was not a conspiracy. That is, the revolutionary men did not mean to subordinate the women they tried to help to the greater sufferings of patriarchal domination. That said, women were not completely passive and manipulated in their education advocated by the revolutionary men. Nor should this particular men-led popularization of education for women be seen as chiefly responsible for the miscarriage of a full-blown feminist movement in twentieth-century China.

Lydia Liu's (1997) analysis of the development of individualism during the New Culture Movement offers a constructive framework in which to historicize the growth of a Chinese feminism in the same historical period and the process through which it became institutionalized post-1949 when the Communist Party became the Party-state. Since the 1980s, a good number of contemporary philosophers of the Chinese enlightenment have tended to accuse nationalism for the short life of individualism in China. Liu challenges their taking of individualism as a fixed master code that ignores its historicity in the particular history of East-West collision. To historicize individualism, one needs to investigate it, she says:

as part of a dynamic historical process capable of generating its own meanings and terms of interpretation. In so doing, they end up reading history according

to a set of master codes, while eliding the subtleties, complexities, and contingencies of given meanings and situations that emerged from the twists and turns of events (Liu, 1997, p. 92).

In the same vein, feminism's appearance in China in the early twentieth century requires that its own "meanings and terms of interpretation" be fully acknowledged. To this end, Wang Zheng (1999) contributed her pioneering work on *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment* via collecting and scrutinizing the oral and textual histories of urban women elites. By creating a platform to allow "outdated" vocabulary of nationalist feminists' belief flow effortlessly, such as "independent personhood" (*duli rengen*), "promoting feminism" (*shenzhang nüquan*), and "the rights of human beings" (*rende quanli*) Wang Zheng's study re-constructs the complex cross-currents in the May Fourth era that embedded urban Chinese women's subject formation prior to partisan dominance (Wang, 1999, p. 30). The value of that outdated vocabulary is immense. It is from there that Chinese feminism sprung to life on its own, inspired by some key arguments in Western feminism but deeply grounded in China's crises. It was not contradictory to nationalism, but rather was invigorated and constituted by it. This vocabulary, as it was recalled in the early 1990s by the women born in the first two decades of the twentieth century, survived with some significant inflections during the high socialist era but not into the market economy.

The significance of understanding Chinese feminism as women's commitment to nationalism in the Republican era and to socialism in Mao's China lies in the validity of a Chinese feminism independent of, and also inspirational to, Western feminism. It is not to deprive Chinese feminism of its transnational feature by being blind to the travel of feminist thoughts into China. Its difference from Western feminism, however, was a historical one and that history—including existing and imminent colonial occupation, the Cold War, and the Communist bloc—was

fundamentally different from the neoliberal international environment in which the post-89 generation is embedded and by which it is shaped. Hence, although the current Chinese feminist movement tasks itself to continue the incomplete or interrupted women's liberation from the twentieth century, it is not preoccupied with nationalism and/or socialism. The tribute to the women protagonists in the first seventy years of the twentieth century, such as Qiu Jin, Tang Qunying, those included in Wang Zheng's historical study, and Fulian officials, no longer makes the post-89 generation feminists yet another incarnation of the Chinese feminism that their extolled forerunners promoted. Rather, even as they are familiar with the icons those earlier times through formal schooling and local lore, as later chapters will show, the contemporary Chinese feminist movement populated by politicized post-89 generation youths is more akin to student activism, with a dedicated interest in poststructuralist gender discourse, in the late capitalist world.

2.2 State feminism and feminine-ism in the 1980s

As Wang Zheng's protagonists narrate, such nonpartisan, spontaneous feminist activism came to a halt in the Mao era, but not the women's conviction of themselves as being men's equals in socialist China. The process by which the Communist Party turned into a party-state complicated the relationship between feminism and nationalism, as both became appropriated by the state structure, which to a great extent was navigated by an informal, absolutely male-dominated, super powerful elite network. The institutionalization of state feminism was marked by the establishment of the All-China Women's Federation (Fulian) in the 1950s and its many local branches. It was then that *funü* became identified as what Tani Barlow (1994) has called "woman as state subject."

Wang Zheng (2017) defines Fulian feminism as "state feminism." The central feature of "state feminism" was its anti-feudalist propaganda, which closely shadowed the CCP's leadership.

However, according to Wang Zheng, state feminists such as Deng Yingchao inserted “intense gender struggles” into the connotation of “feudalism,” which included “what we mean today by a combination of ‘sexism,’ ‘patriarchy,’ ‘masculinism,’ and ‘misogyny’” (pp. 101-102). In this way, Fulian was able to borrow the CCP’s authority to promote women’s work that primarily addressed women’s “entrance into the public domain” (p. 103). From the examples of Fulian officials who simultaneously battled against “feudalism” and upheld “Communist morality” (p. 110), Wang Zheng finds state feminism to be an alternative way of addressing class issues and a counter-hegemonic discourse and practice within the male-dominated party-state.

However, Fulian’s subordination to larger goals and discourses of the party-state became a target of criticism among women’s studies scholars in China starting from the 1980s—the post-high socialist era. These scholars, and a great number of women writers and film directors alike, attempted to carve out a space of resistance to the party-state through the study of women and their history (Liu, in Wang, Ko, and Liu, 2005, p. 22). The act of depoliticizing women in effect embraces certain understandings of women that embrace their so-called inherent sexual characteristics. To counter the statist value undergirding Fulian’s work, many prominent women intellectuals in various professions adopted feminine-ism, or *nüxing zhuyi*, to replace *nüquan zhuyi*. In the meantime, thanks to China’s opening up, Western scholars of China gained access to both lived Chinese experiences and archives. Studying the newly accessed information made some of them shift their appreciation of the Maoist “women hold up half the sky” to a critical reassessment of Chinese women’s liberation under socialism. Prominent works include Phyllis Andors’ *The Unfinished Liberation of Chinese Women, 1949–1980* (1983) and Margery Wolf’s *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China* (1985). Their views of Chinese women’s incomplete or interrupted liberation were later reviewed in the 1990s and 2000s by a cohort of

feminist China scholars trained in the West, whose scholarship will be introduced in the next section.

To highlight this response to state feminism, here I focus on Chinese women's studies scholar Li Xiaojiang, whose firm rejection of being called a feminist (*nüquan zhuyizhe*) stimulated roughly three decades of debate from Chinese scholars and intellectuals who call themselves feminists. Li Xiaojiang, "who in the 1980s had single-handedly created the discipline of 'women's studies in the hinterland of China'" (Shih, 2002, p. 90), was among the leading intellectual figures in the 1980s and 90s who critically reflected on state feminism. Yet, she does not think the state can be absent from justifying and defending women's subjectivity. Li argues that her thoughts on women's essential difference from men, a strategic tool she uses to detach male subjectivity from women's self-discovery, is constantly misread by feminists, including Wang Zheng, whose uncritical adoption of the sex/gender division from Western feminism, Li believes, has uprooted them from the reality of a post-socialist China. Explaining that her women's study was derived from an indigenous understanding of development in a country just freed from high socialism, Li says she has been misread by Chinese feminists who repeatedly categorize her feminine-ism as a way to essentialize and sexualize women, depriving women of their autonomy to stray from assigned feminine gender roles.

In what she terms "socialist enlightenment," Li Xiaojiang speaks of the women's enlightenment realized through the women's liberation movement institutionalized in Mao's China. Chinese women's liberation was fulfilled on the basis of public ownership and of a full social security infrastructure, which allowed them to leave the household and enter the nation's labor force. That was an achievement even developed countries in the same historical period were unable to realize. But at the same time, high socialism was destructive as it was built on the policing

of everyday life. Li contends that “socialist enlightenment emphasized not rationality, but practice; not science, but fact; not democracy, but individual freedom” (Li, 2000, p. 251). Nonetheless, capitalism’s rapid development in China is predicated on the consumption of women’s sex, subjecting Li’s idea of “essential womanhood” to malign exploitation.

Li Xiaojiang and her feminine-ism are almost entirely excluded from the vision of the contemporary Chinese feminist movement that is now constituted mainly by the post-89 cohort. For some of the post-89 generation feminists, feminine-ism means to escape from shouldering the revolutionary duty of earning women their rights, from seeing everyday life as a political arena, and from claiming a pioneering position in an inevitable social progress. The competition to save feminism from being depoliticized and sexualized by the escapist translation of *nüxing zhuyi* substitutes the complications of a socialist state for a nostalgia for state feminism. In this nostalgia, *funü* is no longer predominantly illustrative of class struggle, but instead is de-historicized to serve poststructuralist cultural politics.

2.3 The “revisionist” view of agency

A significant development in Chinese women’s studies emerged in the 1990s. Under the scholarly call to “engender” China (Gilmartin et al., 1994), feminist scholars of China tried to problematize the party-state narrative of the progress that Chinese women had made in the second half of the twentieth century by seeking the agency of women in unexpected places, such as bound-foot women and prostitutes in the early twentieth century, and by understanding the power built upon the erasure of this agency. The building of this power paralleled the construction of modern institutions. Out of this process emerged a modern nation-state. The making of a Chinese

modernity was an extremely complex and continuously developing product intimately intertwined with China's modern clash with the West.

Thus, to look back onto the erased voices of Chinese women from the vantage point of the 1990s, the feminist China scholars were *undoing* two things simultaneously: “the nationalists’ modernist assumptions about freedom and agency” derived from “the degrading view of women with bound feet” (Ko, 2005, p. 10) on the one hand; and on the other, the sex/gender distinction, derived from “Western social-scientific dualistic thinking” that gave rise to representative feminist theorists like Judith Butler. Such theories, they claimed, were inapplicable to China where the sex/gender distinction did not (and perhaps still does not quite) separate (Brownell, 1995, p. 216). Seen from these two tasks, the project of “engendering China” challenges precisely the taken-for-granted passion with which generations of politicians and academics, male and female, in and out of China, have sought for women who “choose to ‘act out’ their sex in ways that allow them to take advantage of the opportunities offered them within a given set of power relations” (p. 215), and disqualified silence and complicity for *modern* struggles. In other words, “engendering China” is not about finding women in power cracks of the state, the revolutions, or the household. Rather, it is using gender to foreground the formation of China. It is about questioning from the perspective of history, first, how women were shaped into subjects of a new party-state and, in this so-called “emancipation” process, submitted to the domination of modernism as sexed subjects; and second, what is attached to that passion for acted out agency and whether that attachment paradoxically reinforces a part of the power of modernity that feminism wants to overthrow.

Since the contemporary Chinese feminist discourses only fleetingly recognizes this trend of feminist scholarship on China, and oftentimes prioritizes gender over China, it is useful to review some of the key contributions to “engendering China” to resuscitate its methodological

breakthrough from Chinese women's studies conducted outside China in the 1980s. I do so by putting selected works on footbinding (by Dorothy Ko) and prostitution (by Gail Hershatter) in conversation with contemporary Chinese feminists to bring into attention the problematic of emancipation as an educational goal.

Footbinding and anti-footbinding: an enduring debate over women's freedom

Probably the most entrenched symbol of Chinese women's oppression that represents patriarchy's cruelty is still footbinding, even so many years after its demise. The vitality of the controversy that talking about footbinding can trigger is quite forceful. Equally forceful is women's rights advocates' willingness to squelch the remaining controversy about footbinding—its damage to women's independence has long been concluded. For this reason, Dorothy Ko (2005) sardonically described her judgment-free investigation of the cultures of footbinding in imperial China a “revisionist” study.

In his article “What if women voluntarily bound their feet?” Yang Zao (2015), a former student of the internationally renowned feminist philosopher and film critic Dai Jinhua, inquired into the lack of challenge to the underlying patriarchy of the anti-footbinding campaigns in the late Qing and the early Republican era. To borrow the words of Janet Radcliffe Richards, author of *The Sceptical Feminist: A Philosophical Enquiry* (1994), Yang's inquiry “looks like the work of a brisk and confident outsider striding into the fray to take the existing protagonists by the scruff of the neck, and this is bound to be irritating (to say the least) to people who have been battling away for some time” (p. 15). Yang contended that the May Fourth Movement was an ideological construction that made the terms of “the modern” and “the traditional” derive their meanings from

one another and then solidified them into concrete referentiality.⁷ Whoever takes this modernist ideology as a given truth and history's evolution as a progressive and linear path will find it difficult to reconsider the meaning of footbinding to Chinese women in the past. Therefore, not only feminists, but virtually all educated men and women who no longer question May Fourth's exemplary position in modern Chinese history will have a kind of "political imperative" (Ko, 2005, p. 5) to deny all the values of footbinding (Yang, 2015).

A paradox that Yang Zao points out is that while feminists have no trouble supporting women's manipulation of their bodies in contemporary times—tattooing, ear piercing, nose piercing, and plastic surgery—and calling it a practice of freedom, they ardently reject women's agency (or at best recognize their inability to resist androcentric aesthetics) in footbinding. Supporters of the former could argue that those changes to the body are not meant to please men or for marital purposes, while footbinding was. Therefore, in their view, Yang irritatingly confuses women's freedom with their choices under social pressure. To see his self-entitled authority to define women's freedom, one only needs to take a glance at his article title (Liu, 2016). Yang's infamy in the Chinese feminist network and his "liberal" position, which Chinese feminists have countered, has prevailed for longer than the span of my fieldwork. Only after I read Ko's *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* was I able to perceive the chasm between what Yang tried to argue and what his feminist critics had sought to understand. Both sides provided good insights, but they talked past each other because of different perspectives to look at and into history.

⁷ I follow Arif Dirlik's critique of the conceived dichotomy between the global and the local. He writes in "Place-based Imagination: Globalism and the Politics of Place" that "[f]or all their supposed concrete referentiality, the global and the local are terms that derive their meanings from one another, rather than from reference to any specifically describable spatiality" (Dirlik, 1999, p. 152).

To critics who see him as blatantly defending the male-dominated liberalism and the “feudal” and “Confucian” thought that would push women back home, his viewpoint regarding women’s freedom smacks of misogyny. But the central point of his argument, which is easily missed if one gets too irritated by the title to read further, is why contemporary society is so unwilling to contest the cruel authority of patriarchy that, since the May Fourth, reproduced itself by differentiating women with released feet from those with bound feet, and that asked women to once again internalize this patriarchal logic of self-differentiation, not unlike as it did when perpetrating appreciation of the “three-inch lotus feet.” He cites an equally controversial article by Yang Xingmei from 1999, which questions the intrinsic oversight of the anti-footbinding campaigners since the Qing government’s collapse. Yang contended that the campaigners’ devotion to women’s foot-releasing was grounded in building new criteria to judge womanhood and connect it to “the subjectivity of the state” (Liu, in Wang, Ko, and Liu, 2005, p. 22), rather than the emancipation of the person.

Similarly, Dorothy Ko’s study problematizes the link between releasing feet as a symbol of liberation (to attest to a revolutionary ideal) and the foot-bound women being emancipated *as* a person (that she was no more or no less a person than before). Ko’s “revisionist” attempt results in a courageous and fruitful methodological breakthrough. It raises questions not about the historical value of liberating Chinese women from footbinding, which opened the first chapter of Chinese women’s popular education in the modern time and recognized women’s education as a matter of public significance. What she questions rather is why “we” find it necessary to resort to “so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves” to look back at the history of sexual repression and try to unveil this guilt “in its most naked reality” (Foucault, 1978, pp. 8-9). The “we” refers to those who take Ko’s

“revisionist” point of view literally and who, in Foucault’s (and now also Ko’s) mind, interpreted by Rey Chow, see the criticism of premodern sexual repression as “a kind of religious belief [but] in an otherwise secular context” (Chow, 2002, p. 5). The consequence in the secular context, Chow continues, is not so much suppression as a proliferation of discourses, which demonstrates a “belief in the possibility of liberation and betterment” (ibid). As soon as the productivity of the discourse of liberation and betterment generates a seeming infinity of hope for social change, the questions of who is actually authoring liberation on behalf of whom, and if the liberation will make a difference for better or for worse, frequently go unasked. A deeper educational and philosophical question that Yang Zao, Yang Xingmei, and Dorothy Ko broach is why, in the passion for emancipation, the complexity of knowing, choosing, and remembering has to be reduced to binary-structured questions such as supporting/opposing footbinding. Where are the women’s own memories and understandings of their situations to be placed within the grand agenda of emancipation?

Reform the prostitutes: agency tuned into party-state narrative

A corollary to the debate about revisionist scholarship on foot-binding can be found in recent reassessments of the history of prostitution in modern China. Symbolized as a threat to public health and family, and therefore to national strength, prostitutes in republican China were subject to moral degradation, unemployment, and reformation. In order to “irreversibly consign semicolonialism to the past” (Hershatter, 1997, pp. 7-8), prostitution had to be eradicated to prevent bad women from endangering men’s health and jeopardizing a monogamous family structure. Encapsulated in multiple subordinations in moral, economic, social, and legal terms, prostitutes strategized for survival by flexibly adapting their femininity to communicating with

different, sometimes contradictory, institutional powers. These acts of resistance—shows of innocence and vulnerability—were examples of the prostitutes’ “working the system” rather than a purposeful display of agency (p. 27). Consequently, these resistant acts almost unanimously legitimated the emergent social norms and reinforced the state’s authority (ibid).

Hershatter’s work shows that more thoroughly revolutionary than criminalizing prostitution was the reformation of the subalterns’ language carried out by the Communists. She finds that, through speaking the CCP-sponsored vocabulary of resistance, prostitutes, peasants, and workers submitted themselves to the category of “the people,” which the CCP appropriated to transfer the agency of the subalterns to its own political power (p. 22). The creation of this vocabulary, such as “old feudal,” enabled the illiterate and disenfranchised Chinese people “to name an oppression that previously could not have been articulated” (ibid) without questioning the new identity thrust upon them. Subsequently, the language became an outlet of a kind of rage that could only be released when its target was named, generalized, categorized, and stereotyped. By collectively stereotyping the privileged, the disadvantaged are able to destabilize their relationship with the attacked hierarchy and formulate “palpable political forces” at the grassroots level (p. 23). What used to be an elite action to criticize patriarchy and feudalism was widely shared among illiterate people in no more than three decades, forging a politics of identity based on class. However, rather than helping the subalterns make their voices heard, Hershatter argues, this localized Marxist language “complicates enormously the search for subversive voices” (ibid) because the sophistication of their silence was reduced and that of their rage abstracted to give way to the political ascendance of the anti-oppression rhetoric. Detached from the materiality of everyday life, the way such language was greeted by prostitutes it meant to emancipate tells quite

a sarcastic story: “Not a single one of them thought that the Communist Party had come to save her” (ibid).

This sarcasm risks casting the CCP as a completely homogeneous political body and overlooking women cadres’ work from the grassroots to the state level. Though attached and subordinated to the CCP, the Women’s Federation made tremendous contributions to actualize Chinese women’s and girls’ rights in education and employment that had gone far beyond a women’s liberation based on the male subjectivity represented by Jin Tianhe (Wang, in Wang, Ko, and Liu, 2005; Wang, 2017). However, what is too important to dismiss about the prostitutes’ reaction is that it warns of the ideological recuperations within the twentieth-century liberation discourse that prioritized the efficiency of popularizing political ideology while being inattentive to nuances of the everyday life. By means of “homogenizing, unilinear, flattening” language, power was efficiently centralized and eventually recapitulated with destructive violence the hegemonic ideology the liberation movement had meant to overthrow (Hershatter, 1997, p. 23). Although, chronologically speaking, the Cultural Revolution is a past event, the individual subject’s total submission to the ideology of identity is considered a constant threat to liberation by many Chinese people who survived the oppressiveness of the Cultural Revolution’s identity politics.

The particularity of China’s recent past engenders a mixture of emotions about gender equality and the kind of progressive modernism metaphorically expressed in the state’s promotion of the image of “Iron Women.” Starting from the 1980s, there has been both nostalgia for the past socialist state system and rejection of it. The replacement of socialism by capitalism effects an overall deprivation of the subordinated subjects’ speech, a right once possessed by those who held fast to, and were simultaneously regulated by, the CCP’s identity politics. Thus, masculinity during

high socialism refers to not only the gendered expression of the body or worshipping the healthy male body as a physical and mental standard, but also to the violence of the policing state inflicted upon its subjects. Responding to the implications of masculinity in Mao's China, the rejection of masculine women is at least twofold. One is the attempt to dissociate the individual subject from Ideology (the general idea of the dominants and domination), seeking women's subjectivity without politicizing identity. The other develops the recovered femininity into sexual essentialism in which woman is a sexed and secondary being that falls prey to capitalism. The myriad paradoxes surrounding femininity are evidence of this accretion of women's history in China. In short, the purpose of introducing a cumulative reading of twentieth-century Chinese women's history is to make evident that the idea of liberation needs to be freed from a given value of historical progress, resistance, and agency; only then can a new feminist movement avoid "[reproducing] without interrogation the terms of the ideological discourse within which feminism has operated" (Scott, 1996, p. 2).

2.4 No innocent political identity in the neoliberal age

In this last section, I focus on the formation of the positionality of contemporary Chinese feminists in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. This positionality was drawn from the experience of the first cohort of Chinese women students trained in US graduate schools with a specialization in women's or gender studies. In between the East and the West, the Women's Federation and grassroots activism, Mao's "women hold up half the sky" and second wave feminism's attack on sexual injustices, it reflects the complicated political and historical context of the 1990s during which feminism, as a guide to socially engaged studies of gender, was being reintroduced to China. As will soon be shown, it was distinct from, while shaped by these students' interaction with, the

positions of three groups of feminist scholars or students: (1) American feminists in the same graduate programs, (2) feminist scholars in China, some of whom I have introduced above, and (3) native Chinese academics whose teaching and research began in the late 1970s. Each of these three groups embodied a cultural terrain that was undergoing dramatic change in the last two decades of the twentieth century amidst the economic and geopolitical restructuring of that critical time. This positionality invokes the politics of location that many postcolonial scholars and their critics are keen to analyze. It gets more contested when inherited by the post-89 generation feminists whose cultivation of political view both represents and challenges China's economic rise.

In *Crossing Border: Transcultural Feminist Practices*, Wang Zheng (2004) recounts the early stage of her graduate school life in the mid to late 1980s. Her condescension to American women's social status was shattered as she was exposed to the Chinese sexism American feminists criticized and as her perception of Chinese women's high social position—thanks to Maoist feminism—was challenged passionately by a fellow feminist friend. I take Wang Zheng's experience as an example not only because she is a flagship scholar in the contemporary Chinese feminist movement who ardently transmits the legacy of her co-founded Chinese Society of Women's Studies (CSWS) to the post-89 generation feminists, but also because the intellectual influences she received and produces are telling about what the contemporary Chinese feminist movement is, as well as what it is not and what it should include.

These dramatic moments of Wang Zheng's encounter with American feminism have a few interlocking effects that are worth expanding upon. First, the boundaries of what she thought the women question had been were broken. Broader and more poignant inquiries were needed. These inquiries can be summarized under the central term "gender," which separates the social

constructedness of identity from its biological traits and which emphatically critiques the unequal power relations between sexes. These analytical perspectives would be useful in addressing the gender injustices in the capitalist economy emerging within China. To Wang Zheng and other like-minded Chinese graduate students, the production and productivity of “theoretical resources” marked the fundamental strength of institutionalized Western feminism that the world of Chinese women’s studies lacked (Wang, in Wang, Ko, and Liu, 2005, p. 25). By productivity I mean the possibility and sustainability of producing critical knowledge and alternative history based on social reality. This became a source of major disagreement between Chinese feminist scholars trained in the US and some established Chinese academics, particularly Li Xiaojiang.

Li Xiaojiang and members of the CSWS were positioned differently in relation to China’s transformation from a revolutionary, Stalinist state to a rapidly rising state capitalist political economy. The conflict between them called attention to the historically conceived binary between “Western theory” and “Chinese reality” (Liu, 1997, p. 87). This binary was, and still is, symbolically represented in the tension between *nüxing zhuyi* (“feminine-ism or ism of femininity and womanhood) and *nüquan zhuyi* (ism of women’s rights and power). Their disagreement was put on display at an important Harvard conference in 1992 (Li, 2000; Shih, 2002), which was developed into the well-known edited collection, *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State* two years later. At the conference venue, Li Xiaojiang recapitulated the irreducible differences between the twentieth-century history of China and that of the US—that China’s modernization was the product of its semi-colonial subalternity to the industrialized West. It was also implied in her argument that the theory/reality divide contained Orientalist insinuations of the sophisticated colonizer overseeing the naïve but mysterious native. In contrast, the CSWS members who were pursuing their graduate degrees in US universities tended to see these

differences as only minimally relevant to feminism and Li's critique as a sign of isolationism and nativism. The only intelligible relevance was that the presence of Chinese scholars like Li at a US feminist conference would not have been possible without western feminism's embrace of multiculturalism (Li, 2000, p. 3). That those in the vanguard of feminism's representation of uncompromisable universal values and multiculturalism were overseas *nüquan zhuyi* Chinese students (and not just Western feminists) is evidence that the political tension of translating "feminism" into Chinese took on a life in the Chinese context larger than feminism itself (Li, 2000). Interestingly, though Li publicly rejects *nüquan zhuyi* for its ideological authority, she finds no other way than the untranslated English word "feminist" to synthetically describe her academic engagement with what Tani Barlow calls a "market feminism" (Barlow, 2004, p. 253), which inevitably draws philosophical inspiration from "Western liberal feminism" (Shih, 2002, p. 101). The nearest, and perhaps only, Chinese equivalent of her "feminist" scholarship is *nüxing zhuyi* in which she emphasizes an anti-political predisposition. As later chapters will show, this political tension lasts to the present and continues to provoke difficult, but meaningful, conversations within the community of Chinese feminists broadly defined.

The second effect of a feminist awakening gained from dramatic transnational encounter departs from the issue of Western feminism's theoretical productivity. In *Crossing Border* and elsewhere, Wang Zheng highlights a strong cross-cultural comparative drive underlying her research interest in and sympathy with feminist movement histories in the US and in China. This comparative drive was continually renewed in her traveling across—literally transgressing—the dividing "ocean" between China and the US. The "ocean" here is a referent to both the Pacific Ocean that geographically separates the two countries (but that can be crossed by airplane) and the cultural gap that is repeatedly constructed and deconstructed in the traveler's subjectivity via her

travels. Her growth as a feminist scholar—and that of others like her—benefited from the hybridized frameworks of learning and unlearning.

But what cultural identity does such frequent travel between the East and the West, or in other cases, a more fixed immigration to the West, construct when the native (“Chinese”) contexts of gender, ethnicity, and class identities are displaced? Shu-Mei Shih has attended to this question from the perspective of the affect invoked in the transnational encounter of feminism. She focuses on the possibilities, at least in theory, of creating an embodied Chinese subjectivity “neither simply assimilationist nor conflictual” (Shih, 2002, p. 92) in a “West” that extends far beyond its geographical determinations (John, 1989, p. 52). Approaching this question from a different perspective, I am more concerned in the present study if this cultural identity is inevitably transmitted in the process of translating feminism into Chinese and turning Chinese nationals into feminists. What kinds of new power or representations external to feminist engagements do the processes of “translation” and “becoming” generate? How, then, do Chinese feminists reflect on the privileges of this cultural identity to refine their engagement in feminist activism in diverse locations and forms? These questions tend to free the discussion of identity from the oppression/resistance dichotomy and encourage more self-reflexivity than the passion for a clear political fidelity to feminism might circumscribe.

The third effect has to do with American feminists’ explosive challenge to Chinese women’s perception of liberation, which was experienced by Wang Zheng and many other educated Chinese women as they encountered Western feminists. As Lisa Rofel confesses regarding her encounter with Chinese women articulating their liberation, she positions this kind of active confrontation, which risks violating a researcher’s ethics, “within a history of Euro-American feminism and its representations of Chinese women as [their] political others” (Rofel,

1994, p. 230). By the time these initial confrontations took place in China and the US, the world of Euro-American feminists was both celebrating “the widening of the political” with the rapidly popularized discourse of resistance (Abu-Lughod, 1990, p. 41) and wrestling with its frustration with the American left (Rofel, 1994). This mixed proposition was diffused in US academia, which hosted the CSWS and later generations of Chinese feminists. Transnational encounters as such undoubtedly generated moments of enlightenment for Chinese women, students in particular, helping them see the sexual injustices to which they had previously be blinded.

But the enlightenment that Wang Zheng describes has been a controversial provocation, too. On the one hand, the controversy is similar to that in which Western missionaries’ condescending and moralistic criticism of footbinding became internalized by Chinese elites. The unawareness of China’s problem was seen by Chinese elites as a cultural and racial embarrassment (Ko, 2005b). The result of the ethnicization of China was an oppositional binary between “traditional/Chinese” and “modern/universal.” The social unrest thus stirred helped foster a series of self-critical liberation movements, which were necessary and crucial but inherently dehumanizing. The same problem continues to plague the present Chinese feminist movement, although it has not drawn adequate attention: how should the “backward,” “traditional” “Chinese” women and men be positioned within the current liberation agenda of the transnational feminist alliance? On the other hand, the crises within the American left in general and American feminism in particular are left uninterrogated. Believing that there is no innocent political identity in the neoliberal world, critics of feminism (and feminists with privilege) after the second wave have called into question exactly how feminists have interrogated power and expounded the dangers of eternally seeing feminism in the margin of society representing only conscience (Freeman, 1973; Halley, 2006; Fraser, 2013; 2017a; 2017b; Orloff and Shiff, 2016). Of all the dangers,

neoliberalism's subversion of democratic foundation (Fraser, 2013; Brown, 2015) and the political-economic transactions behind ethnicized, human rights-centered criticisms (Chow, 2002) are the most acute. Ideas demonstrated in these works try to keep the core tenets of feminism while challenging the self-sufficient organizing of feminist discourses and activities. As they start to be accepted by those who are at the margins or just outside of the core organization of the post-89 generation Chinese feminists (not distinguishing *nūquan zhuyi* and *nūxing zhuyi*), new tensions between feminist practitioners have emerged. It is in these emergent, under-theorized tensions that new spaces are opened up for interrogating existing paradigms of "becoming a feminist" and exploring possibilities of "a feminist becoming."

What this section has tried to demonstrate has been the critical changes within and beyond Chinese feminism in the 1990s. These transformations have shaped the contemporary historical foundation upon which a Chinese feminism enmeshed in global late capitalism can be critically (and differently) examined. Other scholars have analyzed the paradigmatic shifts in making feminism a guide to a new social movement during this period from the perspectives of sociology (Wesoky, 2002), literature, (Zhong, 2006), and a genealogy of the Chinese feminist movement (Song, 2011). But these explanations, insightful as they are, do not acknowledge how the altering world order has been internalized by the emergent Chinese feminist scholars and influenced their claims to represent what would become a twenty first-century Chinese feminist movement upon their own understanding of the usefulness of the Western term "gender."

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed Chinese women's liberation movements in Republican and Socialist China and elaborated upon their complex, often non-continuous, transition to the

emergence of the Chinese feminist movement in the 1990s. Following Barlow's idea, I have demonstrated the cumulative nature of Chinese women's history in the twentieth century. This history is cumulative, as all histories are, because it cannot be narrated as a seamless factual transition from the past to the present and then to the future, a transition disregarding the way people know and remember things. Rather, it has been shown through the cited historians and literary critics—Dorothy Ko, Gail Hershatter, and Lydia Liu, in particular—that the “linear, progressive” narrative serves to institutionalize power, thereby overriding irreducible, potentially decentralizing micro-histories. Between the “gigantic” national narrative and a “quixotic search for agency and resistance” is the space for an alternative history that is “simultaneously apprehended and reinvented” (Hershatter, 1997, p. 10) by researchers who have a different, emancipatory future in mind.

Hershatter has a succinct summary of the recurrence of the gender as a topic for concern in twentieth century China that I find useful:

In Chinese history over the past century and a half, gender has often been a salient axis of difference or point of identification, and sometimes both. It was an axis of difference, for instance, in late Qing and May Fourth writings on the benighted status of women and the need to remedy it. It was a point of identification among women's suffrage groups in the Republican period. When the new PRC state formed branches of the Women's Federation in the 1950s, it became a different point of identification—what Tani Barlow (1994) has called “Woman as state subject.” Therefore one important question when gender emerges in discourse is to ask: How and why is it erupting? Who gives it

expression? Who recognizes or takes it up, with what degree of passion, and to what ends (Hershatter, 2007, p. 115)?

These questions that Hershatter asks need to be asked again in the second decade of the twenty-first century. In addressing these questions in this chapter, I try to propose a new frame with which to conceptualize the post-89 generation whose passion for feminism is not quite a continuum of the women's liberation movement engendered by nationalism and socialism over the past century. Rather, the current one takes on a life of its own. It requires new a perspective of analysis that contextualizes it in what makes the post-89 generation.

CHAPTER 3 The Uncommunitarian Students

In the previous chapter, I outlined the relationship of the contemporary Chinese feminist movement with the Chinese women's liberation movements of the twentieth century. Building upon this, the current chapter re-embeds the movement into the genealogy of Chinese student protests since the May Fourth Movement (1919) by showing how the process of *becoming a feminist* shares key characteristics with that of the politicization of student activists. It argues that student identity is not a natural sociological category that demographically features the post-89 generation Chinese feminists, but rather, it is precisely by problematizing and exceeding the "student" category that a small but growing number of post-89 generation students who are attracted by gender discourses became politicized. The politicization of these individuals, in turn, marks "feminism" as a political symbol. That is, new feminist positions are being invented when, in Kristin Ross's words, "students cease to be students" (Ross, 2002), challenging the hierarchy of teaching and learning, creating new everyday life, and problematizing the institution rather than the individual. By unpacking their student identity and incorporating into it the political implications of "students" in modern Chinese history (Lanza, 2010), I seek to make the individual feminist stories of the post-89 generation speak to broader crises of individualization within Chinese society and how these crises are experienced in everyday life, as tensions grow between school and students and between parents and their grown children.

Moving away from the assumption of any settled "feminist" identity, a well-defined "community," and a prescribed "movement" agenda, I reopen an interpretational space within the plural experiences of becoming feminist. Against a background understanding of the contemporary Chinese university and its favoring of what Nikolas Rose (2007) calls the "enterprising self," this

chapter relates five stories of four Chinese women undergraduates becoming feminists: how they fell out of (hetero)normative campus life, learned of their bodies and sexuality, found “homes” in alternative learning spaces off campus, struggled with families’ expectations while discovering new womanhood and sisterhood, and envision and enact their civic engagement. I dwell on these behind-the-scene experiences because they consist of contingencies of thinking, doing, remembering, and strategizing that are irreducible to a singular, disembodied, universal political identity that a social movement requires and that even feminists themselves sometimes take as given as a destination.

It is important to point out that I do not study how feminism is “downloaded” to a given locale to spark new cognition—though this activity does take place on a daily basis thanks to the internet—but rather challenge the assumption that feminism is “associated with one hegemonic, political project” (Hoffman, 2010, p. 16). This latter position can be related to culturally or geographically localized feminism(s), nation-based variations of feminist development formulae, the manifestation of partial feminist elements by (non-Westernized) individuals, or a once-and-for-all awakening to feminism. My challenge shares the same logic with Lisa Hoffman’s questioning of the incompatibility hypothesis, or strange hybridity, of neoliberalism and China’s authoritarian polity, which defines “neoliberalism as a particular bundle of elements or as a particular set of interests related to capitalism and class power” (ibid). The purpose is to observe and understand what is at stake in the emergence of new subjectivities without overdetermining the political agency of the individual. Therefore, I return to the student feminists’ everyday lives to conduct a “slow-motion” analysis, within the transitioning period that they define as becoming feminists, of the ways in which the individuals make sense of their surroundings and networks that elude preemptive theoretical articulation. Following Fabio Lanza (2010), who applies to May

Fourth's Beida the studies of urban space by Kristin Ross (2002) and Henri Lefebvre (1984), I recognize politics in the students' attempt to transgress and unsettle "the boundaries of identification" and their "ability to produce a space in which a new everyday can be experienced, new relationships formed, and alternative lives can be lived" (Lanza, 2010, pp. 7, 11).

This chapter takes the lived space, or place, seriously to retain enough room for the plurality of feminist subjectivities that are grounded in and derived from concrete, unduplicated, and lived networks. It sets the foundation to criticize a progressive, elite cosmopolitanism discernible in feminist theorizing, or globalism in Arif Dirlik's writing, conceptualized as "a kind of spaceless *and* timeless operation, which rather than render it vacuous as a concept, ironically bolsters its pretensions to a new kind of universalism, rendering it into a point of departure for all other spatializations" (Dirlik, 1999, p. 153; emphasis in original). The attention to space sets the stage for later chapters to problematize the new local-global dynamic produced by the complex positionalities of the post-89 generation feminists whose activist identities are now an integration of student, pedagogue, and transnationally traveling theorist. Ultimately, this attention leads to my critique of "the spatialization of places" (p. 154), or the de-historicization of place, in comparative and international education represented by the universal delivery of a uniform feminist agenda.

3.1 The contemporary Chinese university and self-enterprising students

Since China left behind high socialism and entered a different stage of modernity four decades ago, scholars worldwide in the China field have been preoccupied with finding ever more comprehensive ways, under the dual themes of individualism and individualization, to measure and explain the country's rocketing economic growth, its formidable collective educational accomplishments, and the increasingly brutal burdens imposed upon Chinese individuals as the

government sheds its responsibilities in education, housing, and medical care (Yan, 2010; 2012). They have become less and less satisfied with only examining the changing Chinese society on the “surface,” an aerial view of “government policies, social institutions, and market activities,” instead diving “deep” to the ground where flesh-and-bone individuals live and die, feel and neglect, desire and loath, struggle and give up (Kleinman et al., 2011, p. 3). In their academic exhibition of a “Deep China,” Arthur Kleinman, Yan Yunxiang, and other colleagues draw attention to what they call “the divided self,” a term they adopt to sympathetically describe the moral person living amid the “total breakdown of social relations” in post-Mao China.

Yan Yunxiang (2010; 2012) has charted a “Chinese path to individualization.” Agreeing with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) that individualization is an objective, institutional shift of social structure, he acknowledges that individualization sadly engenders new forms of inequality, such as the rapidly increased wealth gap, and it subjects individuals to more uncertainties than they could have ever had when embedded in family, kinship, and local community. But Yan deviates from, and thus rejects the universality of, the Western Europe-based individualization thesis derived from a foundation of cultural democracy, political liberalism, and the welfare state. Considering the immediate history of China’s high socialism, he stresses that the low economic basis in the late 1970s and the emancipation politics in the 1980s determined the initial role of neoliberalism to be reflexive and progressive. He adds elsewhere that although the individualization of the dossier system (i.e. the issuance of a traceable residential ID card) may trigger worries of encroachment on individual freedom in a democratic country, it emancipates the Chinese individual from both the socialist collective and the household (Yan, 2009) and consequently animates the education field nationwide with the demand for human capital. Yan’s emphasis on this historical reality can hardly be overstated. Only in this light, rather than in a

decontextualized, universalistic critique of individualization, can the promotion of individual's overall quality, or *suzhi*, be seen as a key biopolitical project of development that, regardless of cost, aims to transform Chinese people's general subjectivity from subalterns of capitalist expansion to patriotic intellectual competitors. In Hansen's words, China's educational ambition is not to develop a population that primarily fits "for the labor market of the manufacturing industry," but to have it "secure China a future place in the league of innovative countries" (Hansen, 2015, p. 5).

But the moral approach, however deep it penetrates Chinese people's private life, has its limitation. It eschews the critical question of exactly how the Chinese government has managed to stand firm against, and even gain momentum from, what seemed to be serious threats to its legitimacy of governance: the rise of the *migrating* individual. Migration happens to individuals of all classes, as mobility through education and employment becomes a mandate of surviving market-driven competition. Moreover, the ways in which migration happens, particularly in terms of domestic vis-à-vis transnational travel, are means to the formation of new assets or class belonging. No matter whether it is conducted involuntarily or proactively, to migrate demands rationality. That individual's rationality is the interest of all—individual, family, society, and the state—indicates an institutional change in the mode of production and the meaning of productivity that the moral approach alone cannot explain. Focusing on the moral landscape risks confining the act and politics of governing to the state and subsequently essentializing the differences in the modality of governing by national tradition of political participation. The result is an understatement of migration and its implications about the value of choice, autonomy, and rationality. In other words, what is at stake is not the extent to which the post-Mao Chinese state retreats from personal choice, autonomy, and rationality; but rather, how the party-state reinvents

its concept and methods of government by “regrouping” its population (Sigley, 2006, p. 489; Hoffman, 2010, p. 13).

One could argue, as Yan Yunxiang (2012) does, that because the majority of Chinese people are still striving for a material ends, which fails on the economic basis the biographical approach of self-realization and almost entirely precludes participation in identity-based politics (such as gender equality), the neoliberal “enterprising” self is already an institutional phenomenon within China. However, nationally based case studies of the Chinese individual inflexibly mark as demographic exception those who have been able to work the neoliberal system, and therefore lack the conceptual tools to comprehend three related institutional changes regarding neoliberalism.

First, there is a stable, though porous, hierarchical relation between the “enterprising” elites and the “striving” majority within the contemporary Chinese population. The more the top is desired and populated, the more solid the hierarchy will become. This proves that the Chinese state’s governmental interventions around the turn of the twenty-first century “are not ‘reducible’ to one particular political project,” but rather remain effective by including and excluding “segments of the population from ‘neoliberal considerations’” (Hoffman, 2010, p. 16; Ong, 2006). Second, individuals who grow up in the cultural environment produced under the global market live a generational rupture from all previous generations (McGrath, 2008, p. 2) and are expected to collectively enlarge the “enterprising” talent pool—to “[approach] everything as a market and [know] only market conduct” (Brown, 2015, p. 39). The sense that every youth, regardless of socioeconomic background, should become a risk-taking entrepreneur, or run his/her life like an enterprise to pursue success, is most explicitly and boldly expressed in the state’s radical policy of

“popular entrepreneurship and mass innovation” (*dazhong chuangye, wanzhong chuangxin*).⁸ Third, out of these post-socialist generations, a small but expanding population has become cosmopolitan migrants influenced by, and actively embodying, the value of Euro-American liberal arts education and/or critical theories on gender and class (less so on race and ethnicity). They are becoming very much like their counterparts in the First World. Their autonomy of choosing what to believe in ideologically and politically is greater than their peers, again, regardless of socioeconomic status. In her study of the rise of the young Chinese professionals, Lisa Hoffman (2010) forcefully warns of the danger of “naturalizing the act of choosing” and that “[t]hese autonomous subjects are governed through their choices” (pp. 13-14).

Hoffman’s warning needs to be connected to the supranational level of institutional change. Neoliberalism exceeds the commonplace understanding of what it is and how it works, which is mainly about “radicalized competition for profit” and elevated bar for “efficient individuals” (Yan, 2009, p. 276). But the bigger threat is its “‘economization’ of political life and other heretofore noneconomic spheres and activities” (Brown, 2015, p. 17), including prominently the progressivist arena of women’s empowerment. What is at stake about how higher education in China plays a role in, and is transformed from within by, macro-level individualization is not only the suppression of criticism, but also how best to govern in order to form and sustain what Hoffman calls “patriotic professionalism, [which] is not an exception to a general neoliberal rule but is in fact a generative form of neoliberalism” (Hoffman, 2010, p. 96).

⁸ Yang Kaixin, Jiedu Li Keqiang “dazhong chuangye, wanzhong chuangxin”: shao bu liao yige “zhong” zi [Interpreting Li Keqiang’s “popular entrepreneurship and mass innovation”: on the indispensability of the character “mass”], 2015. See link: http://www.xinhuanet.com/zgjx/2015-08/12/c_134506432.htm.

Top Chinese universities, and more recently, elite high schools, are eager to turn themselves into hubs of internationally recognizable entrepreneurial innovation. Maylink, for instance, is a private training agency incubated in the Tsinghua Science Park that targets affluent female students at top-tier Chinese universities, assists them to make rational and responsible choices of graduate schools in Western countries, and offers customized service in compiling competitive, one-of-a-kind portfolios. The founder of the company, a former student of Tsinghua and Oxford and now an emerging businesswoman, claimed herself, as well as her business, as an apolitical practitioner of feminine-ism (*nüxing zhuyi*). Of all the books she read about women's empowerment and agency, there was one introducing emphatically the notion of "the personal is political," which she quickly chose to ignore. She disapproved of what she believed to be a man-hating, conflict-based politics of women's rights, i.e. feminism (*nüquan zhuyi*). Fashioned into an organization of women's empowerment, Maylink stretches widely to both university-based Lean-In associations within China and business networks worldwide. It connects young, urban, professional Chinese women with each other to formulate a sisterhood that will be adored by and benefited from androcentric and Orientalist power holders.

The state governs the autonomous subjects in an emergent space that dwells on the geographical and administrative verge of the state-funded university but operates with an ideological (not political) and financial flexibility that the university does not have. In this space, socialist logic has been replaced by the rule of the capitalist market, and collectivist ethics partly give way to self-interested, self-reliant, and self-staging activities that place the individual competitively in the discourses of the global market. The boundary between self-centered and public interests is blurred when it comes to terms with the benefits of a sociologically categorized group of people, such as women or migrant children. However, the bond between strangers in this

space is based on the common knowledge and goal of biographical prominence, or the enhancement of portfolio value (Feher, 2009, p. 30; Brown, 2015, p. 33), which is increasingly gauged by the manifestation of a sentiment for equality, justice, citizenship, and communal ethics. To borrow Wendy Brown's term, this bond "hollows out much of the substance" of public good and education for the people.

I hope to use this example highlighting the centrality of portfolio value in contemporary Chinese higher education (which critics of neoliberalism would problematize) as a background against which to stage the protagonists of this chapter. The following stories of becoming feminists and gaining political implications for that identity reveal a gradual process of growth in which an ordinary college student deviates from the modernist model of *homo oeconomicus*, falls out of the normative expectation to develop an enterprising self (at least during the time of becoming a feminist), crosses the categorical border between normal and abnormal production of knowledge, and re-embeds into communities that an authoritarian modernization project wants to eliminate by making them invisible. As new bonds (sisterhood) and knowledge (womanhood) are formed in indecorous places within a city, such as the hospital and the prison, those places become the space that breaks the state's monologue of its modernist political and economic ambition and hence is "truly the stake of political struggles" (Lanza, 2010, p. 7). However, I do not want to give the false impression that the hospital or the prison in itself functions as a political space, or that everything is political, or that as long as an ordinary student gets exiled physically or virtually (such as when his/her blog is erased) he/she becomes an extraordinary feminist fighter. Rather, the young feminists' student identity is key to displacing politics into those unlikely places, as learning therein is no longer monopolized by the state. In turn, those places become meaningful,

countercultural spaces of alternative relationships, spaces that have not been overdetermined by self-governing modern life.

3.2 From high school to college: confusing “women”

“I think I’m a little odd.” Xiao Meili commented on herself and chuckled, beginning her interview with me in 2016. Born in 1989, she is best known for co-creating the “bloody wedding dress” meme in 2012 and completing a 1,200-mile walk from Beijing to Guangzhou in 2014, among other street art experiments to raise awareness to domestic and public sexual abuse. Both events took place around her graduation from the Communication University of China in Beijing. In a time where “difference exerts an uncanny fascination for all of us” (Moore, 1994, p. 1), it is not so extraordinary to think of oneself as “odd.” However, it is the ways in which this personal oddness is perceived as a connection between the individual, her community, and the society that matter. It takes more efforts than an idiosyncratic binary between “me” and “others,” as well as a propensity for conquest and superiority, to make difference a departing point of reflection upon structural exclusion and inclusion and a foundation of collaboratively initiated social change. For most young Chinese women, leaving behind the big-as-parachute school uniform and entering college signifies the first crucial life transition upon which they are to independently deal with the confusion of what it means to be a woman and how. This is yet another sort of standardized “test,” intersecting with the national college entrance exam, that filters its participants into the mainstream and the marginal. Whereas the mainstream try to fit themselves into what they perceive to be a ready frame of being “women,” which ends up with a form of categorical sameness (for instance, *homo oeconomicus*), the marginal “fail” the test and instead take part in the pursuit of “unbridled freedom” and “symbolic instability” (which resemble students in May Fourth’s Beida before its

mythology was finally formed) and that question and confuse “women” as a sociological category. Meili is the latter kind.

Meili’s college years began with her seeing the “toxic matter” in her becoming effective. She remembered following the aesthetics of affluent roommates, for instance wearing colored contacts, dying her hair yellow, and thickening her eye lashes, with the normative goal of attracting boys. Still, Meili described how she always felt uneasy with about this process, and ambivalent about heterosexual romance in general, until eventually she identified herself as lesbian.

“Intuitively, I can’t perform to be a weak girl, though I look skinny, to satisfy heteronormative, masculinist aesthetics. I used to be in a relationship with a boy in high school. One day, I had an 800-meter run and he was waiting for me at the finishing line. He expected me to look exhausted, needy, and helpless, which, to his mind, would give him the opportunity to play his part in a heterosexual relationship. But to his frustration, I was totally fine. I ran passed him like a strong animal!”

Meili felt conflicted. On the one hand, what now seemed to her to be false consciousness came from media and printed products that still made her fantasize about the kind of love portrayed in fairy tales about princes and princesses. But on the other hand, she failed to fully commit to the game of being an adorable and pleasing princess. As she dressed up more “womanly” in college, her new image coincided more with the signs of femininity, the signs that boys had become accustomed to reading as fitting their choice of female partner.

“To them, I became nothing more than an assemble of symbols. When they started dating me and realized that there was a gap between their imagination of me and the real me, they felt like customers buying a wrong product.”

Young urban women in China today find that they are left to themselves, often individually or in a small group of confidantes, to amend the gap between what is taught in textbooks or on TV and what a lived experience really is after school is finished, between the lingering Maoist belief that men and women are already equal and everyday conversations that explicitly or implicitly subject women to men's domination, and between the public and the private spheres that subsume every activity under two oppositional categories. No matter how popularly known that it has been bureaucratized and corrupted, the university is still perceived to be *the* habitat of students who long for a more liberal learning opportunity after surviving the highly opportunistic national college entrance exam (*gaokao*). Moreover, the transition from the authoritarian governance in high school to the comparatively more liberal, decentralized governance in college is also symbolized by the removing of the school uniform, a change that immediately highlights womanhood more than manhood due to the fact that Chinese school uniforms tend to be baggy athletic clothing that hide the effects of puberty whose changes are generally more noticeable with girls than boys. At once more autonomous and more subjected to sexist judgment, Chinese women students in college translate into agency sexual otherness, which is a new identity largely alienated to the much less visually differentiated bodies of middle schoolers.

“It is not that girls didn't know they were girls and boys didn't know they were boys, and not that we had no idea about the difference between the two sexes,” said Charlene in her interview with me. Charlene studied anthropology in a British university after completing high school in China and returned to China to volunteer for gender equality and rights-based campaigns. “Rather,” she added, “in high school we didn't relate sexual difference to ourselves the same way as we do now as adults.” Compared to college years, the pre-*gaokao* student life is governed in more socialist style, but with much stronger emphasis on individualized responsibility than in the

time of high-socialism to earn a better future for oneself through hard work (Hansen, 2015). Sexual difference is dealt with generally in separation from the individualization of academic ambition, as is reflected by the peripheral position in curriculum that physiological health and physical education classes have. While those classes, as well as biology, do teach about sex and reproduction, girls and boys are not asked to claim responsibility for the bodies and organs pictured in the textbook. Additionally, intimate relationships are seen to be entirely irrelevant with, and sometimes contradictory to, the academic individual, which subsumes all individual agency before college; and thus, it is deprived of all educational meaning.

But as soon as this artificial study environment is removed, body and knowledge are joined in college to form a new learning subjectivity but, again, without proper and sufficient guidance, and are quickly exposed to judgments and biases. The way in which this new learning subjectivity interacts with others, equivalent or superior, is full of uncertainties of what to suppress and what to liberate.

“There was an intelligent young man that I dated briefly upon persuading myself to like him. As we headed to a hotel, my mind was flooded with the images of women giving their virginity to their male lovers in costume dramas. I stored too much “chastity complex” in my head. I often imagined I would bleed, like all the chaste women did on a little piece of cloth in movies, and then I would frame the cloth and hang it on my wall as an artwork. This man was completely mind-blown when I told him that my hymen was intact, because all that he interpreted from my relaxing response to his invitation was that I was sexually experienced. His astonishment appeared to consist of a variety of feelings.

My second partner was a college mate of mine whom I had known for some time before we began hanging out often. He was of the type of people confused by my demonstration of my real self. Only when I started wearing colored contacts did he rediscovered me [to be someone approachable]. He found it incredible that I, a woman younger than him, knew more than he did [in terms of sex]. However, he was also different from the gentle, creative, artistic image that he constructed for himself on social media, the only image of him I had known. He took me to his dorm. His room smelled and was filled with dirty clothes. He read no books besides graduate school test preps. His personality couldn't have been more boring. Eventually he ended our relationship saying test preparation pulled his attention away from me.”

Meili found herself surrounded by profit-driven artists and commercial designers preying on women college students. This realization pulled her away from attempting to follow standardized beauty and instead drew her toward a career in creative artifact design that speaks to her criticism of the gaps women like her possibly fall into. The moment she understood her forced passivity in the past relationships opened the door for her to feminist thoughts that she heard about but had yet to make sense of.

3.3 “Becoming” is to be on the road

The early 2010s, around the time Meili graduated from college, witnessed Chinese feminist activism blossoming on social media. A group of experienced Chinese feminist practitioners and researchers independent of the Women's Federation, who created in 1996 one of the most influential feminist media stations in China, Gender Watch Network (*funü chuanmei jiance*

wangluo), registered their account on Sina Microblog (*Weibo*) in 2010 and renamed it Feminist Voices the next spring (Zou, 2018). This move toward the public space created through social media was interpreted within the “(Chinese) feminist community” as “feminism’s coming out in China” (Zhao, 2016), borrowing the rhetoric from gay people. It symbolized a significantly more reflective gesture to undocumented everyday sufferings taking place in domains of life that are conventionally deemed unworthy of public opinion. The determined grasp of activist autonomy in what Zhang and Ong (2008) called a “privatizing China” was both the result of, and an inevitable cause to draw closer to activism, the socialist governance “from afar.”

Soon after the digitalization of Chinese feminist activism, Meili decided to put herself on the road, telling Chinese internet users that she would walk all the way from Beijing to Guangzhou to protest sexual abuse, domestic violence, and the hostile environment to women engaging in independent travel. Of the many netizens expressing interest in and voicing support to her journey, a young woman under the alias “Donkey,” who turned out also to be an art student, volunteered to join Meili. The big-eyed “Donkey” from Northeast China was really like a donkey—Meili thought sympathetically—being quiet, stubborn, tolerant, and able to endure hardship (Xiao, 2018a). “Donkey,” later renamed as Ma Hu, was the only walking companion who joined in the middle and stayed until the end—a hundred and four days in total. Meili wrote in her memoir:

“We were treated to two gorgeous meals and offered two nights of accommodation by those notoriously known as ‘the worst people of all of China,’ the Zhumadian residents. We walked through empty towns, passed by mountains of landfill, and picked our path amidst lots of coffins on the night road, all the way from the grey, smoky North to the green, exuberant South” (Xiao, 2018b).

On the walk, Ma Hu had yet to connect her lifeworld with feminist criticism. But gradually, she began to free her body from tight, breast-shaping clothing, embracing and embodying the idea of emancipation. Ma Hu's detachment from the braced body, which is subordinated to "the hygienic order of the panopticon" (Ross, 1996, p. 69), produces a *laissez-faire* gesture of complex meanings. It simultaneously actualizes an escape from the requirements of being a self-enterprising, self-governing market subject and opens a space of a new everydayness, calling into question the value of control and rationality that underpins bureaucracy and the techniques of governmentality of *homo oeconomicus*. It was upon her embodiment of "symbolic instability" that she was able to be attracted by the forthcoming encounter with bohemian young feminists in different cities on the road from Beijing to Guangzhou.

Ma Hu told Meili from hindsight that the long walk "was not simply a piece of behavioral art, but also a resistance, an aggregation, and in the meantime a chance to help others" (Ma Hu, in Xiao, 2018b). Ma Hu's words testify that the process of becoming a feminist is to be on the road both literally and metaphorically. For these two walking companions, the bodily movement through a multiplicity of locations is akin to Michel de Certeau's "celebratory rhetoric of walking, [in which] physical movement itself [was] translated into rhetorical tropes—all this as against the various stationary, monumentalized or reified congelations of power: the panopticon, the master planners" (Ross, 1996, p. 69; Certeau, 1984). Meili and Ma Hu assumed the role of de Certeau's ordinary pedestrian, whereas the empty towns, enormous landfills, and the idle coffins became the "twists and turns along highways and byways—deviations that allow [the pedestrian] to escape the gaze of the law" (Ross, 1996, p. 69). However, the emancipatory walk within and between the cities in the 1,200-mile journey was not a flight from social struggles or an individual consolation that led to politically meaningless resistance. Scholars focusing on urban space, for instance Kristin

Ross and Fabio Lanza, have critiqued the disentanglement from state politics that de Certeau's lone urban pedestrian exemplifies and argue that he stages "only half of the scenario," in favor of Henri Lefebvre's "materialist and historically embedded analysis of urban space" (Ross, 1996, p. 73; Lanza, 2010, p. 67).

Lefebvre's focus on the street, the very location embedding the dialectic between the abstract economic and political order of capitalism and the irreducible lived practice, draws the ethnographer's attention to the political symbols inserted in functionally unstable areas within the city. Interpreting Lefebvre, Ross notes:

those lived uneven developments that alone, for Lefebvre, have consequences—consequences like May '68, which erupted, as he likes to remind us, in a suburban, functionalized university cité, constructed in the middle of immigrant shantytowns (Ross, 1996, p. 73).

Having successfully completed the walk in Guangzhou, Meili and Ma Hu returned to Beijing. In search for both cheaper housing and a liberal environment for artwork, they moved to an urban village in northeast Beijing, Caochangdi. It is where the fifth ring road intersects the expressway to the Beijing Capital International Airport. It is similar to the more famous 798 Arts Zone nearby. Meili wrote:

"Half of the village was arts space, where empty, magnificent red-block art factories stood. The red blocks were purposefully left sticking out of the building's frame, making the villagers believe that the buildings were unfinished because constructors ran out of money for cement. The other half of the village was packed with migrant workers' self-built houses. Those houses stood too close to each other to allow for pathways to go through them. The view looked

like a microcosm of Hong Kong at first glance. Unfortunately, the residents could not be made smaller proportionally. Phone reception in the village was very poor. Every time I needed to make a phone call, I had to climb up to the rooftop. Poop was everywhere in the lanes. Who knows whether dogs did it or humans did. Outside the village, a long narrow pedestrian bridge connected it to the spaceship-like [white] architecture cluster of Wangjing SOHO. This is Beijing. Drastically different lives share the same piece of land” (Xiao, 2018b).

For Ma Hu, the meaning of becoming a feminist was conceived of within the functional instability of Caochangdi, or in Kristin Ross’s words, “a crisis in functionalism” in which “political experiments of *declassification*” may take shape (Ross, 2002, p. 25, emphasis in original). The characteristics of this urban village are equivalent to the shantytowns in 1960s Paris, compacting “uneven developments” and contradictory properties of the capitalist modern society into a location distant from, but also observant of, the political and economic centers of the city. In the absence of the givenness of the place—contrary to the Tsinghua Science Park that incubated Maylink—Caochangdi opened up possibilities for Ma Hu to redefine and reclassify herself in relation to what she thought was emancipation. In this case, the way to approach and identify with feminism would always be undetermined and negotiable. It would need to be continually readjusted to the engagement through which Ma Hu felt herself to be most primitively grounded in and indivisible from local life (Xiao, 2018c), where “local” is both fundamentally modified by and constantly resistant to “[a] modernity driven by capitalism” (Dirlik, 1999, p. 184).

3.4 The functionally unstable space

Politics is not a function of place, social categories, or abstract concepts, but it lies rather in the ability to produce a space in which a new everyday can be experienced, new relationships formed, and alternative lives can be lived. Space is not simply the stage of events but truly the stake of political struggles. Only by claiming a space of its own, only by producing a new everyday, can a group express and realize its politics (Lanza, 2010, p. 7).

Helen was a second-year college student in Beijing when Meili was invited by Ms. J, Helen's sociology professor, to share the story of her long walk. Her spirit so brightened by the valorous act against sexual abuse to women and girls, Helen followed Meili after class all the way out of the teaching building. Meili immediately noticed in the middle of the big class Helen's face, which was "glowing with excitement." Just a few years apart from each other, it took them only a few minutes to build trust and friendship that turned out to be longlasting. While Meili already had a couple of years of expertise in feminist activism and was in the center of a gradually enlarging Chinese feminist network, Helen felt feminism was entirely new to her. Feeling that the rest of her student life, and even her future career, had been reoriented, Helen called the moment of enlightenment "bodhi" (*kaiguang*), a Buddhist term meaning "awakening."

Thanks to her grandfather who spent his life making wooden Buddhist figurines, Helen had been showered by Buddhist philosophy. She came from a remote, impoverished village in the mountains in Southwest China. Every five or six years, the village would see one child, sometimes two, go off to college. In 2011, it was Helen. The people backing her dedication to education were her mother (Mrs. Chu) and grandmother (*waipo*), two strong-willed women who ran the big family. Like most poor families in which the men migrated to big cities and supported the family with

remittances, Helen's father had moved to Shenzhen, a rapidly growing, immigrant-populated metropolis that links Hong Kong to China's mainland. Both Helen's mother and waipo had unhappy marriages and had to earn respect on their own. Waipo trained herself to make clay-coated eggs and sold them to villagers for a few cents each. Waipo's independence influenced Helen, encouraging her to be less disciplined than the average girls.

Taking the entire village's pride with her, Helen went to a medical school in Chongqing. Immediately, she found her undisciplined self constrained in a secluded university village and surrounded by uncreative, disciplined "good girls" (*guaiguai nü*). Three weeks of boredom drew her to a new life plan. She quit school, returned to exam preparation class, and took the annually held *gaokao* again, and began her journey to Beijing in a top-ranked university.

"As soon as I arrived in school, my classmates started calling me sister two—'two,' you know, means adorably dull and simple-minded—and I took my nickname as a passport to even being a little more outlandish and untamed. I loved cleaning our dorms and getting my hands dirty for whoever needed my help. I like Ms. J and her class, Sociology and Life. If she brought refreshments to class, I would rush to get them before anyone did. When I said, 'professor, I like you!' And she would reply, 'I like you, too!' In this way, we became close."

Thanks to Ms. J's connection, Helen was introduced to a feminist community where she soon felt at home. Meili forwarded her a call-for-application letter from an under-the-radar feminist summer workshop, named School of Feminism (SF). It was a branch organization of a Seoul-based transnational feminist teaching institute that had partners in China, Mexico, and South Africa. These sister institutes were operated under a common operational method that integrates the global with the local, as was expressed literally in the blend word "glocal." Each sister institute was a

“glocal point,” localizing the global commitment to Marxism, ecology, and feminism, and readjusting its teaching focus to local/national needs and restraints. For instance, unlike South Korea where the power of workers unions was recognized by law and in reality, the SF in Beijing had little to zero chance to align with the Chinese workers union; instead, it mainly consisted of middle-class college students, but remained open to company employees and working-class students.

“I was fascinated by the SF’s call for application and went happily to check on the classroom before the summer school started. It shared the office of a feminist educational NGO called ‘One-Yuan Commune’ (*Yiyuan Gongshe*). You donate at least one yuan (approximately \$0.15 USD) to partake in its activity, which is open to the public. I went to a few lectures where I met with my first lesbian friends. Although in Ms. J’s public speech class I had studied the legalization of gay marriage and expressed my support to it, the way in which those friends so candidly introduced their relationship was still quite stunning to me. Interestingly, I had had sexual relationship with another girl back in high school. But never had I thought of identifying our relationship as homosexuality or thought it necessary to give it a name.”

Now Helen’s same-sex relationship had a name and she was no longer “sister two” in her new network. Not everything taught in the lectures One-Yuan Commune held made sense to her. Yet, she was willing to take care of everybody as she did to her classmates in the university and enjoyed their company. She “came out” to her roommates and, to her disappointment, they turned their backs on her, isolating her and prohibiting her from getting any closer to them. Consequently, the SF became her only home in Beijing, sheltering her from discrimination and hostility. What the

SF provided to Helen and other members was a collective that could not be defined in the Stalinist way, one that oppresses individual desire and autonomy. The ideal feminist collective is rather “an open space of ambivalence and contestation where there is room for tentative bonds and shared frustrations to cross entrenched boundaries and mark out new ones” (Biehl and Locke, 2010, p. 327).

Helen’s defiance eventually drew attention from her family as she shaved her head bald in the summer she went to the SF. The pressure from family escalated after her mother’s visit to Beijing. Helen took her to the SF in hope of introducing feminism to her, only to find Mrs. Chu embarrassed and enraged by what was being taught there—sex and sexuality. “A man is a man; a woman is a woman”—this was the fundamental law of society’s reproduction, Mrs. Chu believed. The “simple-minded” Helen thought, perhaps another try would pacify Mrs. Chu’s anxiety. But things went against her wish once again as she took her mother to a forum theater at the Beijing LGBT Center, which put on a play titled “Anti-parents” (*Fumu Jie Huohai*, literally translated as “parents are all blights”).

Coming from an interpretive translation of a quote from British novelist Nick Hornby’s *A Long Way Down*, the Chinese phrase had quickly gone viral since it allowed for a peaceful protest of young Chinese dependents that was long overdue. Before adopted as a play title by the LGBT Center, it was already a popular countercultural label widely used online by Chinese youths born after 1980 to release in a dramatic, devastated manner their conflicted gratitude to their parents. Most of them being single children, the post-80s and post-90s generations grew up under tremendous pressure to become competitive, aggressive, and entrepreneurial in the race toward success. Over a hundred thousand of them formed a virtual community and named it “Anti-parents” to make visible their unhappy childhoods and young adulthoods, which had been marred

with physical and verbal domestic violence, parents' indifference, discrimination, and compulsive control, among other traumatic familial controversies. Hurtful as it is, the title was said to have harbored countless traumatized youths and stood as a youth culture landmark to speak against parental tyranny and the sociocultural institution behind it. But the nearly decade-old gigantic virtual community was eventually made invisible from the Chinese internet, only months after Chinese TV shows began propagating parent-arranged marriage and the CCP's Youth League announced "parents are never blights" in 2017.

As the mother-daughter relationship underwent fraught moments, little did Helen know that she had bipolar disorder. She recollected the night when her volcanic emotion erupted from her with discernible regret. The outbreak of her illness was a mixture of fear, despair, desire, and love. It went against her tradition of being a considerate and understanding daughter who learned about and had always appreciated mother's heavy burden of doing multiple jobs outside and at home while dealing with the problematic relationship with Helen's father.

"I sacrificed and suppressed myself for mother's sake. Never had I objected to her ideas. But I underestimated her objection to my idea. Nevertheless, after I calmed down, I understood that it was precisely because I loved her so much that I went crazy. Had it been another person, I wouldn't even have cared. Mother also reflected on her part of the fight. She had been raped and survived it. But there was no scientific method in a place like ours to help rape survivors get rid of the trauma, except marrying her to a divorced man—my father. Their marriage was only an expedient balance of life two discriminated against people both sought. Mother must have known too well the cruelty of the judgments

from society and our family's embarrassing economic situation to let me partake in feminist activism.”

As soon as Helen's father learned about her sexuality, he suspended his financial support to her, stranding her in the middle of college education.

3.5 In the hospital: the displacement of “students”

Just before school started in September 2014 and her financial dilemma went deeper, Helen was hired to work as an intern for Kim Lee, an American woman who turned herself into a fighter against domestic violence after the day she decided to make public her own suffering from her Chinese ex-husband.⁹ Having discovered her liberation and “bodhi” in the off-campus feminist workshops, Helen felt at ease working with Kim and spending time with her children. But the situation began deteriorating as 2015 kicked off. With the internship discontinued because of Kim's return to America, home and school felt more depressive. On March 7, the detainment of five feminist activists gave Helen a devastating blow and triggered another outbreak of bipolar disorder. She was sent to a hospital by her school, with the permission from her distraught parents,

⁹ The accused man, Li Yang, was China's most famous English teacher who founded the “Crazy English.” Riding the nationalist wave stirred up by Beijing's preparation for the 2008 Olympics, Li Yang invented a yelling pedagogy, which invited hundreds of thousands of Chinese adults and adolescents to collectively shout out English words and phrases. Behind this ritual of learning was the ambition to masculinize and highlight the Chinese man on the global stage, prompted by the English teaching guru's motto “I enjoy losing face.” As Lee publicized what was behind the scene, she used that motto against him: “I love losing my face = I love hitting my wife's face” (Lim, 2013), when captioning a photo of her bruised forehead. After a dreadful struggle toward divorce, Lee was dedicated to continuing her career in anti-domestic abuse campaign.

on the first day of April. “It was April Fool’s Day. Isn’t that ironic?” said Helen. She spent all of April in the hospital, being treated as a mentally sick person. Each time when Helen tried to resist being caged in the hospital, the nurses injected electricity in her vessel to induce her into unconsciousness.

At this crucial juncture of narration, it is important that the subaltern speak herself, making her own decision to interpret that experience. It is equally important that her hospitalization not be read as a break from feminism as an integral part of her subjectivity. Otherwise, feminism would be confined to a political arena that is not separable from the policing of the state and to the capitalist order that conditions the production and dissemination of feminist theories. I encouraged Helen to be more subjective in her narration: “I am keen to know about how, at that time and at present, *you* perceive your position in that situation, in the hospital, being isolated by ‘normal’ people?” My question made my point of view very clear: she should not be treated as a mentally ill person but as a medicalized person “who was claiming experience on her own terms” (Biehl and Locke, 2010, p. 318). Helen replied calmly, “Nobody understood me. But I understood myself. I still do. I remained conscious and alert and was observing everything around me. I kept a diary when in the hospital.” Encouraged by my question, she looked more relaxed to open up her memory.

“I got along pretty well with other patients. There was one woman who always grinned at me. I took another woman’s frosty pants (long underwear) with me by mistake when I checked out of the hospital. A third one gave me tips of survival in the hospital, of how to be obedient. Still another one, wearing dark circles around her eyes, looked like a death god. There was also an old lady. I called her granny. She had an immortal air about her. The other day, there was

some poop on the floor and everybody wondered who did it. I went straight to it, wrapped it up in a piece of paper, and dumped it in the toilet. Granny said, ‘What a child! How thoughtful! How well-learned!’ That had to do with where I grew up. My family raised ducks and chickens. I used to play amongst their waste and wasn’t bothered by it at all. I had been in touch with people living in the very bottom of the social hierarchy. I had even stayed with a homeless woman. She lived in a dark tiny room and fed herself with stuff she gleaned from garbage. One day, she returned with some lotus roots, made a soup out of them and shared with me.”

Hospitalization excused Helen from her duty of being a student and a daughter, and from rationality and its political-economic orders altogether. Her narrative is clearly relatable to an emergent genre of early-1980s Chinese women’s fictional writing on women’s illness and hospitalization (Zhu, 1994). Putting women on a sickbed signals a rejection to the totalizing description of women’s agency, or to use Zhu Hong’s words, their “unlimited capacity to take on suffering” (p. 323) in Mao’s China. But when lying in the hospital, the “woman’s body [is] not in relation to male desire, not as a tool for worthy ends, but from a woman’s own point of view, in relation to herself and her own situation” (p. 324). On the one hand, hospital is “metaphor for victimization” as it “[invokes] the problems of the society and women’s place in it” (p. 329). On the other, however, it is also an alternative space for liberation because it “[provides] healing through women’s mutual opening-up” (p. 334). When women drop out of the assembly line of technological, academic, industrial, and social production, chances are they get together in the first place and then begin reviewing and sharing their life experiences that are impossible to be heard and made sense of in the world colonized by entrepreneurialism and professionalism. It is from

this very marginalized and secluded zone within the city that a thinking mind is able to observe the morbidity of the mechanism of development and overstatement of rationality.

However, the subaltern in the present case, “speaking” with a pathologized and denied voice, is also different from both the women patients in the 1980s fictions and from their authors. It is simply because Helen is revealing a different set of social problems that did not exist three to four decades ago. The connection between Helen’s displacement from school (where a student is supposed to be) and her developing feminist subjectivity must be understood in terms of both the “limits and crossroads [of life]—where new intersections of technology, interpersonal relations, desire, and imagination can sometimes, against all odds, propel unexpected futures” (Biehl and Locke, 2010, p. 318). To give the missing person or people their due value and avoid reinforcing their subordination to the modernist “rational-technical interventions,” João Biehl and Peter Locke argue, stressing Gilles Deleuze’s idea of becoming, it is crucial to reverse the emphasis on “damage over possibility [and] determination over flight” (p. 319).

Helen’s displacement reveals how university and mental health hospital are linked in contemporary Chinese society. Although seeming to function very differently—one institution being desired, the other repelled—these two institutions constitute and share the same “dominant mode of subjectification at the service of science and capitalism” (p. 318). Contextualized in a space that silences voices with medical treatment and nullifies the meaning of speaking, which is in fact more symbolic of the lived world than the politicized discourses are, her story asks that the ethnographer attend to more than the “enunciative function” of the subject (Biehl and Locke, 2010, p. 323). While Helen’s hospitalization was one of the many traumatic effects of the “Feminist Five” incident, it tells the truth that, to borrow Biehl and Locke’s words, “subjectivity does not merely speak as resistance, nor is it simply spoken (or silenced) by power” (ibid). It dislocates

politics to the everyday without being subject to the claim that “everything is political,” which permeates any power/resistance binary-structured narrative (Ross, 1996, p. 71; Lanza, 2010, p. 67). The complexity of troubled speech and silence in student politics deserves an equal position with outspoken protest in ethnographic and theoretical work of becoming.

3.6 Politicization

“Bie zhi wo! Wo mei bing!” (“Don’t fix me! I’ve got no illness!”) Chinese LGBT rights advocates printed these words on their T-shirts in support of Qiu Bai’s long battle (circa 2015) against the “toxic textbooks,” ones that humiliatingly describe homosexuality as a “sex-based psychological disorder,” along with pedophilia, paraphilia, transvestite, exhibitionism, and voyeurism. Qiu Bai was a student of Sun Yat-sen University (SYSU), a nationally top-ranking, aiming-to-be-world-class research university located in Guangzhou. In a collective survey of textbooks in psychology, medicine, and college students’ mental health that Qiu Bai undertook, she found recommendations of conversion therapy to homosexual individuals that included electronic shock and vomiting treatment (Qiu Bai, 2017). Shock, fear, and a growing sense of civic duty foreign to her education pushed her onto a path toward “activist frontline” against the “toxic textbooks” that were thoroughly misleading about homosexuality. It has been a difficult and depressive journey from Guangzhou that culminated in her suing the Ministry of Education (MoE) to the Beijing Municipal High People’s Court in 2017 (ibid). In spite of a not surprising loss of the lawsuit, it broke the silence on the oppression of gay students in China.

Qiu Bai’s detoxifying textbook campaign showcases the institutional change of individualization in an authoritarian state, and in particular, how educational institutions—the university, the university-based publishing house, the governmental organization supervising

textbook publication, and the MoE—implement this change. In the first place, in order to minimize any likely political consequences, from either the university or the police, Qiu Bai initiated the campaign under her own name to keep the collective work behind the campaign under the radar. This strategic choice, on the one hand, apparently concentrated the pressure and risk of action-taking onto one person; and on the other, can be purposefully misinterpreted as a personal complaint and subsequently stripped of its collective value by the defending parties and the partially informed outsiders. Both aspects had real consequences as the campaign evolved against all odds.

The first obstacle came from the student supervisors (*xuesheng fudaoyuan*) in Qiu Bai's department. They made multiple attempts to keep Qiu Bai's protest within their own working capacity to prevent it from disturbing more superior administrators in the university. The student supervisor in college is a legacy of the high-socialist era dating to 1952 (Chen, 2017). Located at the lowest end of the socialist bureaucratic system and in charge of closely watching students' everyday activity, this non-faculty position seems to have a bureaucratic and disciplining power over students that is disproportionately larger than it should be. Yet, its administrative role is also much overlooked by the faculty. A student-turned supervisor describes his position as follows:

“The students see us as the very beginning and the end of the process of problem-solving; the teaching faculty take us as colleagues, the ‘who-knows-what-they-are-doing-all-day’ kind of being; the professors pat our heads (meaning greeting kindly but lightheartedly from a superior position) and ignore us” (Chenxiaoxin 233, 2014).

The supervisors are selected from each university's own undergraduate pool of student leaders and put into this administrative position as a part of the five-year package of their graduate study.

Opposite to those who would walk onto the street to protest bureaucracy and challenge the government's unconstitutional acts, these student leaders are themselves an integral part of the bureaucratic system of the university (and the state, too) and rely on this system for both a living and faith. They work to organize and set political limits on students' academic, professional, social, and ideology-learning activities and make sure that the students do not go beyond their "proper" places and class. Therefore, it may be said that in Qiu Bai's case, as well as in other instances involving student activism, the student supervisor is also responsible for solving the "student" problem, instead of solving the student's problem. Between 2004 and 2014, the number of tertiary-level student supervisors nationwide increased from over 40,000 to 127,000 (MoE, 2014). Their sheer increase in number reflects the CCP's stronger determination to inject its impact on and control over the rapidly diversifying undergraduate student population, meanwhile mobilizing popular culture in its governance of university students. In short, the steady and rapid expansion of student supervisors gives an unambiguous sign of the resuscitation of the "Red experts" in the Maoist age, linking the present Chinese leadership and mode of talent cultivation back to the history of high-socialism.

The tension between Qiu Bai and her supervisors revolved around the century-old question of "what a 'student' and a 'university' could be" (Lanza, 2010, p. 10). This questioning from student activists during the May Fourth Movement marks the advent of modernity in the history of Chinese higher education. Lanza adds that "if classifications... are always a site of struggle, students made this struggle spatially evident" (p. 12). As soon as Qiu Bai took the issue from her campus to the court, first in Guangzhou and later in Beijing, the spatial movement of the student protester who left her assigned space of acting signified a breach in the classification of "student." Qiu Bai documented a short conversation between her and one of the furious supervisors.

Supervisor: “You can’t get interviewed by foreign presses.”

Qiu Bai: “But teacher, everybody has the right to access to the media. And we are a department of communications studies.”

Supervisor: “You’d better study hard and get your own future secured.”

Qiu Bai: “Teacher, it’s precisely because I studied hard that I could find mistakes in so many textbooks.”

Less eloquent and knowledgeable than the student, the supervisors decided to overturn their disadvantage by willfully violating Qiu Bai’s wish and informing her parents, at their ignorance and fear of a homosexual daughter, about her sexuality and the “harm” she did to her school. They did so to transfer the institution’s trouble to a family trouble, adding a moral burden to Qiu’s deviance from the normative “student” classification.

A working-class family like Qiu Bai’s is already pushed to the margin of the society where few pathways besides a good, government-authorized education could lift it from economic precarity. Bound more tightly than better-off families to the normative route toward well-being, it internalizes even greater the risks within an individualized society. In other words, the prospect of a contemporary family is simultaneously reliant on the rise of the individual and at the expense of this institutional change; and this paradox is particularly grave to working-class households. Thus, when the university took advantage of its authority to individualize the pressure it came under from Bai, Qiu Bai’s parents could barely continue a normal life. Her father told her that mother narrowly escaped a deadly car accident driving their old pick-up to deliver goods because mother was preoccupied with the “new” fact she had learned of her daughter—and Qiu Bai would have been scapegoated had any tragedy really happened. Rather than an underestimation of her parents’ reaction, it was precisely out of care, gratitude, and an earnest hope to requite their love that Qiu

Bai refrained from coming out to them. But more than hiding in the closet and an acute sense of guilt, she needs candid conversations and honesty to keep her home a home (Qiu Bai, 2015).¹⁰

As the textbook case moved up the bureaucratic ladder, the collective value it embraced became increasingly visible, posing greater, though still symbolic, challenge to the targeted state organs. At the People's Court, both the judge and the MoE decided that what might be beneficial or harmful to a segment of the people was irrelevant to what might be beneficial or harmful to an individual (self-)identified as a member of that segment. Knowing that it would be groundless and illegitimate to criminalize a student who had only and would only use lawful means to ask for her due rights, the representatives of the legal and administrative systems had no other choice than avoiding and denying the fact that it was a community, a part of the people, that was accusing them. The last trial in Beijing simply declined public hearing, blocking a good number of gay and lesbian supporters outside the Court. Isolating Qiu Bai from the widest possible public her campaign appealed to and putting aside over eighty reports of textbook mistakes from students mobilized by this campaign, the Court announced that Qiu Bai was not the primary victim of the mistakes the identified textbooks made, if there had been any.

The textbook was more than an object of contestation, but rather a terrain of politics. What Qiu Bai tried to do, along with the assistance from her lawyer and other supporters, was not simply a matter of correcting the wrong information printed on the textbook paper, but a perseverant action that aimed at “troubling the link between knowledge and ethics” (Zhang and Ong, 2008, p. 15).

¹⁰ The original publication was in Qiu Bai's own WeChat journal, *Qiu Bai de Ziyou Ye* (Qiu Bai's Field of Freedom), which became inaccessible after she appealed to the courts in Beijing. The link provided in the references is one of the remaining accesses to her article.

The role of “students” exceeded and contested its fixed position (dictated by the teacher, the textbook, and the institution endorsing them authority) and location (the classroom where the dictation of received knowledge takes place), and hence was reconnected to the “sign of radical unsettlement” invented on May Fourth, 1919 (Lanza, 2010, p. 14). Central to the modern role of “students,” Lanza argues, are an “always renewed political subjectivity of self-definition” and the commitment to potential equality as an identifier of political subjects (ibid). These two characteristics of “students” were unambiguously demonstrated in Qiu Bai’s statement that “what is problematic is the ‘closet,’ not me” (Qiu Bai, 2017). The “closet” is a common metaphor gay people apply to describe the self-imposed enclosure of their sexual identity to preclude harm from hostile social environment. Finding its historical precedent in the May Fourth Movement, the political subjectivity of “students” that Qiu Bai resorted to challenges the functioning of contemporary Chinese universities against what the Republican-era Beida model had promised in education, culture, and politics. Therefore, to avoid reducing Qiu Bai’s engagement in feminist and gay rights movements to an abstract change in ideas, the following examination of her case shows how her academic practices (i.e. surveying the “toxic textbooks”) “embodied, expressed, and negotiated the disciplinary shifts, the epistemic changes, and the political framework for learning and teaching” (p. 74).

Conclusion

The five stories documented in this chapter showed unpredictable and unfinished paths of becoming feminists, a trajectory of growth free of patterns but inducing substantial, meaningful change to the individual’s perspective of her relationship with the society. Xiao Meili relied on her own relationship adventures to explore her sexuality and only upon reconsidering her passive

position to men's desire did she begin to take feminist criticism seriously. In protest to reported sexual abuse cases and consistent threat to women's safety in traveling, she put herself on the road, walking 1,200 miles from Beijing to Guangzhou. Her adventurous steps attracted Ma Hu to join the long walk and experiment with bodily and mental liberation and later inspired Helen to discover the School of Feminism in Beijing outside the government-authorized educational system. Traumatized by the "Feminist Five" incident in March 2015, Helen spent a month in a psychiatric hospital because of bipolar disorder. But instead of seeking for a shelter in victimization narrative, she reoriented her perspective to look at alternative womanhood and sisterhood unlikely to be made sense of in any circumstance subject to science and capitalism. The modernist logic that determines these intersubjective bonds to be nonsense governs individuals as psychobiological units "doomed to consume diagnostics and treatments... as [they] seek fast success in economies without empathy" (Biehl and Locke, 2010, p. 318). In this light, school and psychiatric hospital are only two sides of the same coin. To reveal and challenge this usually disguised internal connection between these two institutions was the goal of Qiu Bai's campaign and lawsuit against "toxic textbooks" that rooted into students' minds a twisted and medicalized understanding of homosexuality.

By no means do these stories provide an exclusive, or even adequately representative, account of how students of the post-89 generation became feminists. Nonetheless, with interpretive analysis, each case is a very telling micro-practice of transgressing and unsettling the sociological category of "students" and of questioning what a university could be, revealing structural problems in Chinese higher education. It is then important not to read these experiences in isolation from each other. Yet, it is equally important not to treat them as statistical contribution to the Chinese feminist community and reduce the singularity of each

experience to one variation on the pathways to one same political or ideological position. The unduplicated micro-historical condition in which one becomes a feminist perseveres as a space for reflection on, and at times detachment from, her position in relation to feminism and to her feminist network. It predetermines that there will be more than one end, i.e., a feminism tacitly defined in a unitary manner, to which the engagement in feminist theories and practice leads.

CHAPTER 4 Feminist Pedagogies of Unlearning: Emancipatory Theater and Politics

This chapter focuses on the activism of the post-89 generation Chinese feminists in light of the inherent connection between student protest and dramatic performance. This connection places the contemporary Chinese feminist movement within the genealogy of student protests that can be traced back to the May Fourth Movement. Reinventing, rather than replicating, the May Fourth Movement's activist repertoire, the young feminists use street theater and emancipatory dramatic performance to develop conversation with their "audience"—random pedestrians, college students, school teachers, and others—and invite the latter to be engaged in what is being demonstrated on the "stage." In so doing, separation between the actor and the audience, and between the theater and the reality, is erased. These activities crystalize the fact that representation is not only a theatrical property, but more importantly, has real consequences in people's lives.

Upon the theoretical foundation of student protest association with the politics of theater, this chapter is divided into two large, interrelated subthemes: protest as theater and theater as protest. The first subtheme contains one case study and the second two. I obtained the empirical data from archival and documentary analysis and participant observation. One group of students took to the street in Guangzhou to demonstrate their embrace of the term *funü*. As Chapter 2 introduced, *funü* used as a central symbol of emancipation arose in the twentieth-century Chinese women's liberation movements; but now it is deemed unfashionable in the market economy because of its "birthmark" from socialist propaganda. These two protests aimed to establish temporary communicative relationship and create improvised interaction with their audience:

random college students and pedestrians (and later, the potential audience on social media, though this is not the direct focus of the analysis here).

Following this, I move on to study the particular theatrical tactics, and the philosophy of emancipatory education embedded in the use of the theater, adopted by two sets of dramatic performances devoted to broad understandings of gender equality: the Chinese adaptations of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* performed on and around university campuses; and the Guangzhou-based Shanquan Drama Society (*Shanquan Jushu*) directed by Sun Yat-sen University (SYSU) alumni. The latter may be seen as a derivative of the former's earliest experimental performances in Chinese universities (circa 2002), which were particularly indebted to the scholarly and activist engagement of Professor Ai Xiaoming of SYSU. Representative of the political culture of the contemporary Chinese feminist movement, these three theaters collectively vindicate women's empirical knowledge and contest what is the right way of knowing in China today.

4.1 Student protest and theater

In his study of twentieth-century Chinese student protests in Shanghai, Jeffrey Wasserstrom provides insight into the integration of theatrical tactics—improvised skits, group singing, and pageants—with the actualization of student protest (Wasserstrom, 1991, p. 4). He shares with Fabio Lanza the view that student politics should be put into the milieu of everyday life to be more holistically understood, rather than aligned simply with the gigantic ideas and political projects that come in the first place in social historical studies of intellectuals (p. 9). But Wasserstrom goes further in interpreting the political militancy of mobilized students. He points out the coherence between the repertoire of communication in student demonstration and

politically salient theatrical performance (p. 2). Student protesters both tell, by frequently adopting theater-related metaphors, and show, by doing dramatic performances, the symbolic nature of their activism, which, Wasserstrom argues, should draw attention to what a collective is experiencing in their mobilization. Rather than a sum of individual actors professing their predispositions, collective action demands an encompassing interpretive framework that investigates what Lynn Hunt calls the “political culture”—that is, the ensemble of “the values, expectations, and implicit rules that expressed and shaped collective intentions and actions” (Hunt, 2004, p. 10).

Knowing that the term “political culture” has been used in varying ways, Wasserstrom makes a crucial clarification of what he believes to be the most convincing “political culture” approach to study the student struggles in Republican Shanghai. Instead of following sinologists, such as Lucian Pye and Richard Solomon, who took a socio-psychological path to linking political behaviors with entrenched, nationally based cultural features, Wasserstrom builds his “political culture” framework upon leading scholars of the French Revolution, particularly Lynn Hunt and Keith Baker (p. 10).¹¹ This interpretive framework highlights “the fluid nature and creative possibilities of revolutionary political culture” and its potential to transform “existing power relations and forms of discourse” (p. 11). The advantage of this acknowledgement is that it can best locate student activism on the “fuzzy” border of elite and popular culture, which endows on student activists some unique qualities that other ground-up protesters, such as peasants, do not possess. Consequently, it sheds new light on what revolution could mean. Exceptional articulateness and usage of nonviolent theatrical gestures in their protests make students stand out on the stage of social movements around the world, formulating a universal continuity of the way in which empathy toward emancipation and equality is communicated and acted out.

¹¹ Pye, *Spirit of Chinese Politics*; Solomon, *Mao’s Revolution*. Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*; Baker, *French Revolution*.

Wasserstrom's insight provides substantial conceptual assistance to my theorization of how the contemporary Chinese feminist movement is devoted to *engendering* the Chinese Enlightenment, where the word "Enlightenment" itself is very telling of the impact that the post-Renaissance European political-cultural revolutions has had on the "(re)invention of students" in China beginning from the May Fourth Movement.

Inverting the repertoire of street as political theater, the post-89 generation feminists also actively participate in the creation of emancipatory theater under the mentorship of Chinese feminist teachers from older generations. The theater of emancipation, in this case no longer a metaphor, is contrary to the construction of specifically chosen representation within an unlimited context, to the effort of earning spectators. Instead, it brings into a limited, fixed, and predefined space the dynamic of real-life experiences that insinuates larger social problems and subsequently converts the spectators into actors. Using language, body movement, and symbols, it asks that the audience stand in the shoes of the characters, which may or may not be separate from the actors. By dramatically acting out how social roles are imposed on different people, how privilege is unevenly distributed, and how individuals from historically disadvantaged communities suffer and resist injustice, the actors try to entice the audience into exploring the "deeper and hidden meanings" of reality (Tolomelli, 2016, p. 47) and rethinking about how people, in particular the oppressed, are actually represented in the world and what actual political, economic, emotional, and mental consequences those (mis)representations have. The audience is to be lifted up from their seats, from their reclining position, to join the actors on the stage and become protagonists of the narrative (Boal, 2008, p. xxiv). This collapse between actors and onlookers, which theoretically leads to the transformation of the latter, is what Jacques Rancière (2009) terms the emancipation of the spectator. The word "emancipation," Rancière argues, means "the blurring of the boundary

between those who act and those who look; between individuals and members of a collective body” (p. 19).

Contemporary feminist argument finds resonance with the principle of the emancipatory theater because both believe that not taking action is also an action, and not alluding to the political is also a political stance. This statement attacks straightforwardly the ways in which the personal and the political are usually perceived in China. It also casts a big challenge to the dialectics between the individual and the collective, which has been in a deep epistemological crisis since the end of the Mao era. Inevitably getting entangled with the problematic perception of individual rights vis-à-vis collective good in post-Mao China, the post-89 generation feminists’ theatrical experiment is essentially a form of popular education in which they and their audience may work together to reconstruct the sophisticated relationship between the individual and the collective and embody it in a new network.

4.2 Protest as theater

In this section, I will introduce one collective feminist activity that produced a street theater incident. Against the background of the rapidly commercialized celebration of International Women’s Day (March 8), it aimed to revive the obsolescent revolutionary connotation of *funü*, the Republican-era construction of women subjects. The present defense of *funü*, however, both lacks the nationalist implications of pre-1949 discourse and uses it rhetorically to gain legitimacy from the state in the largely anti-*funü* capitalist culture. This particular activity took place in Guangzhou and immediately before March 8, on the second anniversary of the “Feminist Five” incident. In spite of unpredictable risks, the post-89 generation feminists reminded people of the forgotten importance of working women and of the history of China’s modernization to which women had

contributed no less than men. With small banners and group singing, they turned the street and statues into political theater. Their “symbol-laden performances” aimed to move specific audiences (Esherick and Wasserstrom, 1994, p. 36). The mobilization, as a disruption of social order, poses threat to the Chinese authorities. But in a country that has a history of punishing and criminalizing subjects for their words and images, the symbolic challenge that features student activism was seen as a willful threat to the legitimacy of the state authority. Scholars of twentieth-century Chinese student protests, from May Fourth 1919 to June Fourth 1989, have adopted Charles Tilly’s notion of “repertoire” to make visible the familiar “script” of collective actions students follow. As will be shown, this line of thought continues to be productive in interpreting the activism of feminist students in the 2010s.

Re-acting the century-old Chinese feminist revolution



Figure 1. March 6, 2017, Chinese feminists gathered in front of Qiu Jin's statue on Sun Yat-sen University campus.¹²

On March 6, 2017, a group of ten post-89 generation Chinese women feminists, dressed or cross-dressed in Republican era student costumes, re-enacted the “route” taken by Chinese feminists who first celebrated the International Women’s Day on March 8, 1924. The “route” refers to the actual streets to which Ms. He Xiangning (Ho Hsiang-ning), the then Minister for Women’s Affairs in Sun Yat-sen’s Nationalist government, took her fellow women for the celebration: Yide Road, Qiyi (Uprising) Road, the People’s Park, Jixiang Road, and the old site of Guangdong Province government (of the Republican era)—and added to the original route was the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall and finally the statue of Qiu Jin, a feminist martyr, on the campus of Sun Yat-sen University (the orange lines in Figure 2). But it also indicates the political path He and her women colleagues took to institutionalizing the equality between women and men and making it a common sense for the broadest population in China.

¹² Source: Qiao Long, “Ten young women in Guangzhou interrogated for re-enacting the hundred-year feminist path on the Women’s Day.”



Figure 2. Walking routes of the March 8 commemoration.¹³

The ten feminists took the street as their space of performance, and the random pedestrians as their audience, to protest the eroticization and commercialization of women in China’s capitalist economy by re-presenting the earliest celebration of the Women’s Day in the 1920s. The walk-out converged two century-old, overlapping historical landmarks that were indispensable to Chinese modernity: The May Fourth Movement that asserted “students” as a symbol of unsettlement (Lanza, 2010) and the inclusion of the equality of men and women to the founding principles of the CCP. Despite the passage of time and China’s breathtaking transformations, Chinese feminists

¹³ Source: Feminist Voices, “今年如何過「三八」？這群女青年重走了百年女權路” [How to celebrate March 8 this year? This group of youth feminists re-enacted the feminist route from a century ago], March 8, 2017.

argue, women's subordination in nearly all walks of life persists and the revolutionary feminist declarations that Chinese women should be independent, progressive, and respected from a hundred years ago still ring true in the present. The choice of May Fourth's student skirts and long robes is an embodied tribute to the manifesto made by elite Chinese women revolutionaries a hundred years ago that women should be equal citizens with men. As the symbol of "students" is reinforced here and ties the contemporary feminist movement more closely to the history of student activism, it is necessary to remember Fabio Lanza's (2010) argument that student protests since 1919 are reinventions, instead of replicas, of the historical precedent of the May Fourth Movement. Therefore, my analysis of this Women's Day walk-out considers three interrelated aspects: the fundamental features of student activism, its political symbolism, and the content demonstrated.

The fundamental features of student activism, as Jeffrey Wasserstrom (1991) contends, are twofold: that students blur the division between culture and politics and that they perceive themselves to be elites who are responsible for speaking of equality and justice on others' behalf. To both avoid drawing the attention of China's massive internet police¹⁴ and to conveniently thematize their activity, the feminist demonstrators entitled it "*chuanyue*" (meaning "time-travel") on WhatsApp Messenger, a Facebook-owned freeware messaging service. In the cultural field, "*chuanyue*," or time-travel, is a genre of literature, film, or TV serials. Its production in the Chinese

¹⁴ Internet police, according to Wikipedia, "is a generic term for police and government agencies, departments and other organizations in charge of policing Internet in a number of countries. The major purposes of Internet police, depending on the state, are fighting cybercrime, as well as censorship and propaganda." It is unclear how many internet police China has at present. But given that residents in China, both Chinese nationals and foreigners, are increasingly aware of and disturbed by their presence, the estimated two million internet police force could be true. Within this gigantic crew, many are not formally hired by the government, but rather are part-time workers or opportunistic bonus takers. The dire situation of the freedom of speech inevitably resembles the decade-long Cultural Revolution that ended only forty years ago. The Chinese government successfully created the panoptic effect among Chinese internet users, leading to the latter's self-censorship. The "Feminist Five" in 2015 was a result of internet censorship, since the feminists were arrested at their respective residential places, prior to carrying out a collective advocacy for women's rights. Their detainment marked the Chinese feminist movement's entering into the spectacle of China's dissident politics.

film industry and popularity among Chinese audiences represent not a serious or responsible attitude to history, but rather the rise of consumerist entertainment that does not contradict the Chinese government's authority of narrating Chinese history to its people. In the present case, however, "*chuanyue*" was taken as a popular means to a serious, political end. It differed both from consumerist media products for the entertain the market and from historians' reassessments of the social revolutions of early twentieth-century China. This in-between positioning, with a celebratory expression of a dedicated political intention, is an unmistakable sign of student activism (Wasserstrom, 1991; Esherick and Wasserstrom, 1994), in spite that some of the demonstrators were not enrolled students. The group members decided that their plan would be to criticize the public for their low awareness of the injustice done to women and to insinuate that the CCP has turned it back on its founding history in which the earliest Communists of both genders pioneered the celebration of the Women's Day and asserted working women's contribution to the establishment of the Party and of a future Chinese state.

The "elite" position is more complicated in the case of feminist activism. Generally, the position that university students take is inevitably an elite one, even if they exhibit unevenly distributed financial stability among them. But feminism, most broadly defined, is known for its dedication to the people and its criticism of elite power. How, then, does a tribute to the criticisms made by elite, most highly educated women in the Republican era serve a political project that tries to demolish elitism? What is the elitism that is being demolished and what new form of elite culture is being produced? These questions will be addressed in the next chapter.

Political Symbolism of the Costumed Walk-Out?

The Republican-era student costumes can be viewed both as an inherited symbol of unsettling that the authorities would see as a violation of the social order and disguised political criticism underneath the harmless image of students. In fact, the Republican student image has widely been depoliticized as students of the post-89 generation often dress up for individualized graduation photos. In this “retro” fashion, the category of “students” is commercialized and sexualized. Graduates hire professional photography studio and photoshop the images to look more “like that old time.” Precisely because the graduation photo shooting is no more than a stylish replication, it inevitably leaves a strong temporal mark on the image reproduction, that is, a distinct, sex-based, normalized polarity between femininity and masculinity shown from subconsciousness to appearance. However, the concepts of femininity and masculinity, of sex and sexuality, were undergoing substantial changes during the time that is being recalled. The instability of these concepts at the turn of the twentieth century was indeed the space in which a modern China and a Chinese modernity were being imagined, tested, and acted out. The uncertainty of China’s future and its relationship with the past, under the dire conditions of colonialist threat, was symbolized in the everyday apparel Chinese men and women wore (Lanza, 2010). Therefore, what students chose to wear in this particular time period, which lacked an absolute central authority nationwide, was a means of demonstrating their political stances. In contrast, the contemporary students who put on the May Fourth student costume for graduation photographs divest this apparel of its historically specific meanings and subsequently distance themselves from the history of the “invention of students in Beijing” (ibid).

The latter approach was adopted by the “time-travel” feminists. They held up little pink flags and banners to show solidarity with the pink pussy hat known from the Women’s March on

Washington earlier in 2017, walked a planned route instead of roaming around, took collective photos on the street instead of individual portraits with the aim of maximizing voyeurs, and, to further overturn voyeurism, gazed back at their viewers (in person and via the camera). Their reversing the objectification of women's bodies subjected the viewers to the message they tried to express, which can be associated with Barbara Kruger's politically engaged creation of *Untitled (Your body is a battleground)* in 1989 (Figure 3). In portraying a female model's face, Kruger split the symmetrical face with a vertical line. From left to right, the image reversed from positive to negative exposure. While the left half shows "normal" femininity available for being objectified and gazed at, the right half stares back at the spectator, forcing him to withdraw his gaze.



Figure 3. Barbara Kruger: Your Body is a Battleground.¹⁵

The Chinese audience—the passersby, the local security, and the authorities overseeing from distance through the eyes of the former two—did not have to know the techniques of feminist

¹⁵ Source from the internet: https://www.thebroad.org/sites/default/files/art/kruger_your_body.jpg.

art to appreciate the feminist demonstrators as rebellious. The activists' political message was delivered through its symbolism. The activists' purpose of invoking the memory of intellectuals in Republican China soon attracted the attention of the local security apparatus. When the security guards categorized the activists' outfits as "odd costumes," it was not because the apparel came from a different time period, but because the way the apparel was shown symbolized a dissenting opinion to the current regime. Therefore, the excuse of a graduation photo shoot that the young feminists presented did not prevent them from being followed by the security guards patrolling the streets. However, it did act as a kind of "buffer" that slowed down the impending interrogation. The group managed to enter the Guangzhou People's Park, where the first rally for the International Women's Day took place in 1924. However, they almost did not make it into the park where they read out loud He's famous article, "A Warning to My Compatriot Sisters" (*Jinggao wo tongbao zimei*), which permitted women dressed in *qipao*, "a female body-hugging dress with distinctive Chinese features" popularized by upper-class Shanghainese women (Wikipedia, "Cheongsam," n.d.), but not the student costumes (Qiao, 2017).

The antagonization of female "students" for the Women's Day celebration indicates a significant, but very problematic, value behind the idea of what "women" should be. Chinese women have every right to be consumers, to strive to keep themselves young and attractive, to get married or remain single, and to work hard to become entrepreneurs or professionals, so long as they do not break through their assigned position as the scapegoat of China's lack of strength compared to the Western powers. Hence, the contemporary Chinese feminist movement sees as its priority the task to challenge the normalized scapegoating of women. From a hindsight made possible by scholars of Chinese women's studies since the 1980s, the post-89 generation feminists are able to re-read with a critical eye the reformist and revolutionary texts produced by elite male

Chinese intellectuals a century ago. Many of the texts grounded China's national humiliation and crises in the physical, intellectual, and mental features of late-Qing Chinese women, and ended up constructing a popular, modernist rhetoric that tightly locked the image of "women" to China's weaknesses and corruption.

This rhetoric, coded by contemporary feminists as "misogynous," has been used persistently by male Chinese intellectuals in post-Mao era. What Liang Qichao claimed in the late 1890s—that the two-hundred million Chinese women were all parasites that weakened China's strength—reappeared in 2018 from the mouth of China's most successful English-training entrepreneur and founder of the Xin Dongfang (New Oriental School), Yu Minhong (Lin, 2018). The proud Beida alumnus and ambitious businessman told the public that Chinese women's corrupted nature was the cause of ills of China. Having been slammed for his offensive remarks, Yu apologized while actually attempting to correct his critics' misinterpretation of his good will to enlighten Chinese women and to make China greater.

The biases of elitist Chinese men from over a century ago continue to dominate the Chinese public sphere. Juxtaposed with the Women's Day-turned commercial carnival that seems to promise Chinese women an excessive amount of rights and freedom, the biased discourses assume a ubiquitous didactic role that overrules the way Chinese women are valued and squeezes them into a singular and spectacular category. On the one hand, there is the fantasy of the unbridled power of consumption, and in a consumerist society governed by an authoritarian state, purchasing power is widely mistaken as freedom of speech. On the other, there is the unescapable scapegoating of social ills and national impotency on Chinese women, as well as endless cases of sexual and domestic abuse. Enraged by this situation, the feminist walkers proclaimed that as far back as a hundred years ago, the women revolutionaries were already awake, but all of "you"

remained asleep, indirectly invoking Lu Xun, a leading figure of modern Chinese literature. The word “you” consolidated the theatrical conversation the Chinese feminists wanted to have with their unidentified audience, presumably whoever was unempathetic to the feminist slogans displayed in the walk-out and the statements made by Chinese feminist pioneers around the 1920s. An exclusively plural pronoun, “you” accusatively commanded that the audience in this street theater become conscious of their perpetration of, or complicity with, women’s subordination to patriarchy.

However, this passion for categorizing everyone else as the accused “you” is associated with its “unspoken and under-theorized pair” (Moore, 1994, p. 1), the “we” who will carry on the feminist politics from a century ago. In all three imagined parties, namely “they” (the Chinese women revolutionaries of the early 1900s), “we” (primarily the post-89 generation feminists), and “you” (the rest of “our” contemporaries), in-group difference is overshadowed by between-group difference. While it can be argued that a practically feasible action has only a limited capacity for sophisticated and scholarly ideas, the relationships between the three parties imply further problems of representation. “Time-travel” collapses the distance between the present feminist activists and the earliest ones but deems the learning of China’s feminist history empiricist. Empiricism, in turn, replaces the learning of women *in* history with the learning of historical highlights by women recognizable in revolutions. It does not necessarily subvert the existing, male-dominated way of learning, and consequently shrinks the interest in exploring who the Chinese women really are, apart from their universal and timeless particularity as “subalterns” to male domination. The paradox between *what should be known* and *how to know* raises more questions about the positionality of students as well as the historical context that shapes their

specific ways of representing feminism. This is a thread that will be further dealt with in next chapter.

4.3 Theater as protest

“Spectator” is a bad word! — — Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, 2008, p. 134.

We therefore need a different theatre, a theatre without spectators: not a theatre played out in front of empty seats, but a theatre where the passive optical relationship implied by the very term is subjected to a different relationship – that implied by another word, one which refers to what is produced on the stage: *drama*. Drama means action. — — Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 2009, p. 3.

The above statements are powerful recommendations from globally renowned performance and pedagogical philosophers that theater, in both its real (the place where shows are performed) and metaphorical (the society at large) terms, be revolutionized in order to prompt responsible participation amongst the audience. The “revolution” is to eliminate neither the theater or the spectator; after all, as the student protests show, “without spectators there is no performance” (Breemen, 2017). Rather, what is being eradicated is the binary between the actor and the spectator, in order to enhance democratic participation from both sides.

This section switches the narrative of protest as theater and introduces two long-term experiments of using theater as protest, namely *The Vagina Monologues* (VM) by Eve Ensler and *Theatre of the Oppressed* (TO) by Augusto Boal. The two models of emancipatory theater share the concern for people who are oppressed and the hope to bring emancipation and the practice of

democratic politics to the here and now. The reason that they have been able to travel very far from their origins is that they are open and listen to real life experiences, which are expected to add new content, antagonism, and forms of struggle to the original format. Moreover, only with local activists and communities' efforts to incorporate historically specific scenes and subjects can these art projects come to fruition. This vision of what constitutes VM and TO gives credit to the value of their "unfinished" status and recognizes their invitation for grassroots participation. Ebru Gökdağ's (2014) analysis of TO's popularity, and the public intellectual responsibility it takes, is very helpful. She writes:

It is a new dramaturgical language and like many living languages, Theatre of the Oppressed changes as it encounters new situations that demand it evolve to meet the specific challenges those situations present. It is in an endless search for dialogue that will enable people to have their say (p. 29).

The same framework of dramatic performance is also applicable to the VM. These theatrical experiments aim at breaking down the division between actors and spectators, which is "required for making sense of the changing nature of participation" (Breemen, 2017). Yet, they also differ significantly in their methods of audience participation. The VM utilizes symbolism—the social, cultural, and political implications derived from the vagina—to push forward thoughts on the power of knowledge, whereas the TO requests audience's intervention in the script being performed on the stage to make symbolic, but responsible, social change.

The Vagina Monologues

There is no way to overlook the importance of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* as a font for new language that many young, college-educated Chinese women find useful to

reconceptualize their positions in intimate relationship, reproductive labor, and in a society sharply divided by gender. From its first appearance on a Chinese university campus in 2003, thanks to SYSU professor Ai Xiaoming's cross-cultural scholarly engagement, to the present, the VM's influence upon college students, avant-garde artists, and women workers, among others, has only increased. The unabashed enunciation of *yindao* (vagina) challenged what could be said and performed in a theater, a public space always fraught with discursive controversies, and pushed forward new imagination of how theater could function as a political space. It is impossible to cover the width and depth of the VM's influence between 2003 and now. For a competitively holistic picture of the history of Chinese pedagogues, students, and artists' performance of the VM, Rong Weiyi's (2013) reflection on the show's ten-year run in China is a good start. My focus here, as was noted in the first chapter, is how the VM engages contemporary Chinese feminists, especially those of the post-89 generation, in globally recognized critical theories that "are now addressing the issue of pedagogy within a politics of cultural difference that offers new hope for a deteriorating field [of education]" (Giroux, 1992, p. 2). It is the theoretical subversion of what pedagogy means—from a practice-only, school-centered concept to a means of political and cultural production—that performing the VM, and other feminist activities alike, set as their ultimate ideal. In this light, I emphatically introduce Ai Xiaoming's theater-based pedagogical philosophy and align it with educational theories of participatory performance in regard to her leading role in importing the VM to Chinese universities. Then I discuss more recent students' experiences and elaborate on how the essentially educational idea of "becoming" is embodied in their participation in this drama.

Ai Xiaoming, the first Chinese woman awarded a doctoral degree in literature after the Cultural Revolution, has been very clear, upon successfully directing the first Chinese version of

the VM at SYSU, that to professionalize the acting crew is not a goal of her work. Performance itself, the avant-garde professor believes, cannot bring about social change, particularly in pushing forward widespread deliberation on sex, if radical change in and of society is not the artist's primary concern. She explained in a public talk in 2013:

“Why does the vagina need to talk? It is because a lot of people (women) can talk no more. When they wish to talk, they find that no language is appropriate enough. When they do talk, no one listens.”

A devotion to theorizing the often-ignored importance of pedagogy is tangible in these words. The university is a primary site of struggle over power and knowledge and the struggle is carried out with the creativity of art. The knowledge it defines as worthwhile and the value it defends have real consequences to students' lives. But seeing performance as an end in itself will cut short the mission of blurring the boundary between what is artistic and what is pedagogical and thereby reduce the engagement in comprehending unequal power relations to a matter of professionalization. In fact, abstract professionalization, an attempt to refine discipline and keep a body of knowledge enclosed, goes against the grains of the radical education that the feminist teachers and students want to realize. There is already enough separation of arts from education and education from social realities; their reintegration is what is urgently needed. When describing her “subversive pedagogy” based on her academic training in literature, Ai Xiaoming highlighted the need of a fundamental challenge to how disciplinary knowledge is taught, what limits our time devoted to literature and art, and how these limits can be broken through. Hence, only by subverting the established limits and boundaries can art and literature remain alive and meaningful, and only then can the practice of teaching be qualified as pedagogy (Ai, 2005). This statement demonstrates the gist of critical feminist pedagogy and the broad social value to implement

feminist activism within the academia. Rather than “disciplinary shifts” *per se*, it is epistemic changes and [the alteration of] the political framework of learning and teaching” that a political cultural movement, such as feminism, tries to enact through the activists’ embodiment, expression, and negotiation of “the disciplinary shifts” (Lanza, 2010, p. 74).

In this context, Ai Xiaoming succinctly laid out her advocacy for an unprofessional, but genuine, rehearsal and performance of the VM in university settings: “The feminist movement must begin with the stage and be complete in reality” (Rong, 2013; Liu, 2013). This needs a little more explanation to avoid misinterpreting what “complete in reality” means. The central value of an emancipatory theater, and emancipatory pedagogy alike, is that they share the same epistemological ground of unfinished practice of learning and transformation. “Unfinished,” highlighted by Henry Giroux, Jacques Rancière, and Augusto Boal, among other critical thinkers of pedagogy, signals the respect paid to the contingencies that occur when pedagogical theories are brought into a site of practice. As long as contingency and controversy exist in practicing radical social theories, as they always do, there is no finished or complete political and cultural production. Thus, seeing the feminist movement “complete in reality” cannot be interpreted as a short sight of the never-ending struggle over the mechanism of meaning making, which counts some people while silencing others. Rather, it is always in transforming the lived experience and the actual power that the creation of countercultural theatrical practice finds its meaning. In other words, what is complete is the process of conveying the symbol of subversion from the theater to everyday life; and the completion of this process is the start of more concrete institutional changes. This start can be extremely difficult.

The fact that countercultural theaters are readily bracketed spaces for non-mainstream, nonconforming artistic practices was the premise on which the sound of the word “yindao” could

be accepted and amplified such that the boundary between the actor and the spectator became blurred. Usually it is college students and young artists who are attracted to the performances in those theaters. They form a relatively homogeneous population that embraces heterogeneity and chaos to a much higher degree than the rest of the society and that is characterized by its engagement in the matter of representation on a nearly daily basis. But as soon as “yindao” in its textual, aural, and visual forms extends beyond the theater and enters an environment that tends to think of representation separately from reality, any attempt to close the gap between the two is much more likely to be criticized as excessively and unnecessarily disturbing. Acute criticism occurred when a group of Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) students posted their self-portraits with handwritten “My vagina says...” signs on a then popular Chinese social media platform a few days prior to their on-campus performance. In the wild circulation of their photographs, the women students became the target of attack by critics, parents, public intellectuals, and media figures who failed to acknowledge the student protesters’ intention to build dialogue upon the matter at hand—women’s autonomy in understanding, using, and protecting their bodies.

The heated disputes over the BFSU women students’ online activism “fully illustrated the idea that ‘the woman’s body is a battleground,’” wrote Wang Xiying (2013), a professor of Social Development and Public Policy Department at Beijing Normal University. A “battleground” is analogous to a radical theater but is more charged with stronger oppositional emotions from the audience. First, how the media presents and induces spectators to consume the image of a woman’s body (and her words) is a serious matter of representation that has remarkable consequences on her and all women. Rather than correctly stressing the harm of sexual abuse and its silencing, the media presented the student protest to the public as scandalous and further tended to present the

protesting women students as sexual gifts to “indoorsy men.” Second, self-claimed righteous intellectuals took the media’s misrepresentation as transparent truth, jumped up on the stage, took the mic, and denounced the “scandal” as an example of the decadence of university culture and the overall pollution of education. To put their discontent in pedagogical terms, they bemoaned that highly educated women not only attempted to know the wrong thing, but also fell into the wrong way of knowing.

But the battle over who should have the authority to determine what and how to learn is precisely the purpose of dropping the V-bomb before its audience. Creating discomfort is the means to a never-ending goal that gives the knowledge about the woman’s body its due value. This knowledge is not only about the physical body, but also questions why women have to be silenced from, and embarrassed about, speaking of their feelings about their sexual and reproductive organs—while men’s organs are worshiped with various kinds of rhetoric. It further questions how this silence results from, and is the mechanism of, the perpetration of a structural inequality called patriarchy and day-to-day rhetorical and visual consumption of the female sex called sexism. The vagina is a symbol of a taboo. Taboos needs to be understood as a field of power that draws clear lines between what can be known and what cannot, and more importantly, prohibits any inquiry as to why those lines are drawn here and not there and why they should even exist. Not knowing these why’s can generate both fear and shame about inquiring, which indicates that the institutional territorialization of knowledge and conduct has been internalized and is observed in everyday life.

But taboos do not prevent all people from transgressing the lines of knowing. Whoever is conventionally allowed to do so has the unstated power to take advantage of those prohibited from doing so. The latter either finds no language or no voice to make their suffering known, or worthy of knowing. Therefore, when the vagina is openly articulated by women, it becomes a signal of

subversion, in which women seeking understanding and care may find solace. Contestation thus arises. At the micro, everyday level, the contestation is about how the vagina can be talked about—behind the closed doors of a home or in a clinic only, or on the (broadly defined) stage vastly. At the macro, institutional level, it is about what implications can be drawn from this ear-piercing word, where even the VM actors themselves have to gather courage to say it out loud. Thus the vagina, symbolizing the woman’s body and her social position, is a battleground of “action and significance [that] are mediated by power and knowledge, but... also animated by claims to basic rights and desires” (Biehl and Locke, 2010, p. 317).

Unlike the situation in cyberspace, the BFSU students’ on-campus performance was a huge success. Nevertheless, the massive denigration online went beyond the anticipation of the student actors and their behind-the-scene supporters who had created the script (Chen, 2013). The script was created by a Beijing-based independent youth drama group named BCome. Members of BCome, including Xiao Meili, who was a main subject of Chapter 3, are Chinese feminists of the post-89 generation. They re-vised the VM by 73% and entitled it “The Way of the Vagina” (The “*dao*” of *Yindao zhi dao* is a pun, the same character simultaneously meaning the vaginal pathway and the way of Chinese Daoism, and thus hints at the larger ontological meaning of such speech acts). Since its founding in 2012, it had produced ten successful performances in Beijing, Tianjin, and Xiamen in 2013 (Ai, 2013) before bringing the show to BFSU. As the students retreated from the onslaught of slander, BCome stuck to the continuing controversy, trying to keep voices against sexual abuse heard (Chen, 2013). Reflecting on BCome’s call for a nonconforming community of learning, Ai Ke, a former member, wrote:

Our group is not simply a performing group. Apart from performance, our devotion to consciousness-raising and within-group emotional support overlap

with our consistent participation in various kinds of social activism. No one was brave from the very beginning, no matter if it was on the stage or the street. Without the encouragement and support from each other, it would have been impossible to accomplish any performance or action with just an individual's lone [protesting] gesture and cold body (Ai, 2013).

In solidarity the “transformative potential of *becoming*” is realized (Biehl and Locke, 2010, p. 317, emphasis in original). The name of the group, BCome, is self-evident of the dedication to the Deleuzian belief of becoming, that is, that individual and collective struggles are to “shake loose...from determinants and definitions” and that life is simply immanent and open to new relations...and trajectories” (ibid). The made-up word BCome is open to interpretation. But it contains two basic meanings. “B,” signifying bitch in English, or *bi* (“pussy” in vernacular Chinese), is a reclaiming of the stigmatized names for women; Come, meaning moving toward, also a vernacular term for orgasm, shows the long-suppressed courage of women in adventure and desire. The idea that “the primacy of desire is over power” refutes Foucault’s belief in the determination of power arrangements and instead acknowledges desire’s knack for “constantly undoing, or at least opening up, forms of subjectivity and territorializations of power” (Biehl and Locke, 2010, pp. 322-323; Deleuze, 2006). The undoing of territorialization, or “deterritorialization” (Deleuze and Guattari, 2005), is best animated in the radical feminist slogan, “I want orgasm, not sexual harassment,” created by Chuen-juei Ho (He Chunrui), one of the more renowned Taiwanese feminist scholars and queer movement leader (Lin, 2011, p. 119). This slogan, as well as Ho herself, have inspired the feminist movement in Mainland China since the early 2000s (Ai, 2005).

The pedagogic take of this undoing is unlearning, which, to borrow Éamonn Dunne's words, is "to take a leap of faith into the abyss of nonknowledge... to take the risk that encounters with learning ought also to be unacknowledged, unknowable, unassimilable" (Dunne, 2016, pp. 13-14). Unlearning is not the opposite of learning or the cessation of learning; otherwise it would have fallen into the same binary of right and wrong that abstracts education to be "clear categorizations" (p. 14). Rather, it interrupts and denaturalizes learning (Dunne, 2016, p. 15; Biesta, 2013) that has been turned into an unquestioned promise to success, which, in turn, makes learning unquestionable and normative. The unsettlement of unlearning instead allows something eventful and surprising to "help you stage the *becoming* of another you and another us" (Dunne, 2016, p. 18, emphasis added). In the same vein as Barbara Kruger's negative exposure of the female model's face, the negative form of learning has a subversive purpose, what Jacques Rancière calls "the emancipatory virtue of ignorance" (Rancière, 2016, p. 25; see also Rancière, 1991). The impasse that intellectual emancipation helps the learner to take a flight from is, ironically, shared by conservative pedagogues and most of their opponents who "denounce the role of educational institutions in the system of domination," (p. 26).

The flight from this educational impasse happened when BCome members added to the original VM script an unavoidable topic in the Chinese context—the "first night" of intercourse. The variety of each member's own experience was surprising. The "first night" could take place at any time of a day and the "first" time was far from having a common definition. It did not have to be between two sexes or between two people in a relationship, nor was it necessarily defined by the breaking of the hymen (Ai, 2013). As the "first night" continued to be deconstructed, it became impossible to define. Moreover, any attempt to define it was annulled; so was the obsession with a woman's chastity so deeply ingrained in many Asian cultures. As a consequence, the members

asserted that there was no such way as a “right” way for a woman to learn about her body, her relationship with another person and with the society at large. “Had it not been for the playwriting and performance of *The Way of the Vagina*,” Ai Ke wrote, “I would have never known what I would otherwise have not known.” Her reflection is associated with Rancière’s argument:

In pedagogical logic, the ignoramus is not simply one who does not as yet know what the schoolmaster knows. She is the one who does not know what she does not know or how to know it. For his part the schoolmaster is not only the one who possesses the knowledge unknown by the ignoramus. He is also the one who knows how to make it an object of knowledge, at what point and in accordance with what protocol (Rancière, 2009, p. 8).

The VM is not only a play reflecting the interstices of women’s everyday life. Had it stopped there, there would have been little chance for social change, said Ke Qianting, a disciple of Ai Xiaoming and now professor at SYSU (in Liu, 2013). The recognition of the vagina as valid knowledge and an inseparable source of knowing for the learner, the VM aims at decoupling mastery from knowledge and realizing the equality of intelligence in the here and now.

The Shanquan Drama Society and the Theatre of the Oppressed

Shanquan emerged from SYSU’s tradition of gender equality education since the turn of the twenty-first century. Its managerial responsibility was passed on to the university’s recent alumni via Ke Qianting. Shanquan, literally translated into English as Mountain Spring, gained its name from its association with Sun Yat-sen (Zhongshan) University. The members picked *Shan* (mountain) from Zhongshan to pair with *Quan* (spring), a homonymous character of *nüquan* (feminism). The Society is modeled after Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), an

umbrella concept of Boal's theatrical innovation. In particular, Shanquan inherits Boal's invention of the forum theater, central to which is the joker system. Ebru Gökdağ explains:

The word "Joker" had, in Boal's mind, the same significance as the "Joker" playing card, a card which has more mobility than any of the other cards in the deck and does not necessarily connote the idea of playing jokes (Gökdağ, 2014, p. 31).

Forum theater, as its name indicates, introduces the format of intervention in a forum and subsequently mingles the spectators with the actors. In this pedagogical framework, Shanquan's anti-domestic violence plays have visited multiple communities in Guangdong Province. A complete TO play needs local stories to be filled into the framework where the structure of oppression is depicted more clearly and can be made available for local people's intervention into the relationships between the characters. According to Gökdağ:

Theatre of the Oppressed never claims to be a finished product, nor does it profess to have discovered the only way. It is a new dramaturgical language and like many living languages, Theatre of the Oppressed changes as it encounters new situations that demand it evolve to meet the specific challenges those situations present. It is in an endless search for dialogue that will enable people to have their say (Gökdağ, 2014, p. 29).

I toured with Shanquan in March 2017 to the small town of Foshan City west of Guangzhou. I was able to observe how the young actors transplanted their forum theater to a local elementary school to raise consciousness about domestic violence. Elementary school teachers are not considered intellectual elites but carry on their shoulders the responsibility to educate children to become ethical individuals. In a small town like the one we visited, school teachers are respected

as people whose education and ethical standards are above average. Because of this respect, women who take this stable, state-sponsored job usually, but not always, have greater chance to defend their own lives against patriarchal domination passed on to them through both gender and generational dimensions. In general, school teachers are anticipated to be more sensitive and less tolerant to domestic violence than most other townspeople and are expected to be potential leaders against violence in their respective community.

Unsurprisingly, as soon as the actors started performing in the front part of a large lecture hall, an audience of approximately a hundred people, most of whom were women, quickly related the scene to “outdated, traditional, backward” values no longer relevant to or reflective of their lived experiences. “Beating wives is history,” they murmured while hostile conversations were taking place on the stage, “and the wife’s struggle with the mother-in-law is also much less hopeless than before.” Everything happening in the drama—a demanding and greedy mother-in-law, a spineless and mother-pampered man, and a vulnerable and helpless wife, all common tropes in the Chinese domestic imaginary—seemed irrelevant and distant and was no more than a made-up story just like all the other abstract and banal doctrines school teachers had to convey to students on a weekly or quarterly basis.

But the indifference to “others’ problem” ceased when the audience was invited by the Joker to intervene with the plot by playing the wife’s role, the oppressed character. The Joker’s appearance immediately broke the normalized conventions of teaching with which the school teachers were familiar. Asking a student to answer questions in front of the class does not challenge the binary between the teacher and the student, but indeed consolidates the teacher’s authority by attracting the class’s gaze to the student called upon and by projecting this solid hierarchical interaction to the whole class. Contrary to the conventional belief that nothing is possible beyond

answering the teacher's question, getting corrected if wrong, and returning to one's seat, to intentionally collapse of the boundary between the actor and the spectator is to reconfigure what Jacques Rancière calls "the landscape of the possible" (Rancière, 2009, p. 105). Following Augusto Boal's model of forum theatre, the Joker instructed the actors to replay the scenes in exactly the same way as the first time. But this time, any participant in the audience could exercise their right to intervene in the story by yelling "Stop!" to the actors. Then she or he could replace the actor playing the wife's role and change her "fate." According to Boal (2018),

Anyone may propose any solution, but it must be done on the stage, working, acting, doing things, and not from the comfort of [her] seat. Often a person is very revolutionary when in a public forum [she] envisages and advocates revolutionary and heroic acts; on the other hand, [she] often realizes that things are not so easy when [she herself] has to practise what [she] suggests (p. 117).

The tactic of *physically* placing a spectator in the role of the oppressed is to evoke empathy with the character, "which might ordinarily be absent in real life" (Gökdağ, 2014, p. 32). Similarly, Rancière argues that

The spectator must be removed from the position of observer calmly examining the spectacle offered to her. She must be dispossessed of this illusory mastery, drawn into the magic circle of theatrical action where she will exchange the privilege of rational observer for that of the being in possession of all her vital energies (Rancière, 2009, p. 4).

After the first volunteer went to the oppressed woman character's rescue by speaking as her, the whole lecture hall warmed up and became more engaged. The following thirty minutes of participatory performance successfully attracted all the audience's attention to the improvised

conversations and, more profoundly, to thinking of the possibilities of reversing the power relation between the characters. At first, the school teachers were primarily entertained by watching their colleague doing something she rarely did—performing a drama—and how swiftly her “mother-in-law” and “husband” might react to her antagonizing speech. Then, a second, third, and fourth woman teacher shed off their embarrassment and entered the scene. Each of them would “fall into” the prepared points of conflict—the husband borrowing money from his wife because of his loss in gambling, a mother-in-law’s sour opinion on the young couple’s childless situation, and so on—and was determined to let the oppressors cede to their resistance.

Meanwhile, the actors playing the two antagonist characters held fast to the patterned thought and language of a stereotypical Chinese mother-in-law and a spineless Chinese son/husband. The patterns are what Boal called the social “masks” that are shaped by class, basic social role, family relations, sex, and the family-neighborhood-work network (Boal, 2008, 176-177). Boal points out that

Each one of us, in real life, exhibits a type of pre-established, mechanised behavior. We create habits of thought, of language, of profession. All our relations in daily life are patterned. These patterns are our ‘masks’, as are also the ‘masks’ of the characters (pp. 145-146).

The social masks are usually stereotypical and overlooked. They consist of “the uses of the body, the particular circumstances of interaction and the readings made by others [which] are all involved in the taking up of a position or positions that form the basis for the enunciation of experience” (Moore, 1994, p. 3). Therefore, although it may seem uncreative at first when the stereotypical scenes of family conflict were presented in front of the elementary school teachers, the true test to the actors, which tightly grabbed the audience’s attention, was to improvise a “stereotypical”

conversation and keep it bouncing back and forth between them and the participant who moved herself from the audience's seat to the stage. How were they able to improvise seamless argument? The key is to study the characters carefully by collecting, coding, and analyzing real-life stories, a kind of invisible ethnographic work that is done behind the doors of Shanquan's office in preparation for their performances.

The participatory performance reached its climax when a male teacher walked to the front voluntarily. As he walked down the aisle, cheers arose. He confidently offered to replace the male actor and play a model, caring, wife-defending husband, and all of a sudden, his request was turned down by the Joker. The unexpected turn in the almost routinized participation created a dramatic tension in the lecture hall, triggering long-lasting laughs and continuous curiosity of what would happen in the next few minutes. The teacher sat down next to his new husband, who rounded his arm on the teacher's shoulders. The homoerotic tension could have provoked discomfort and hostile judgment among the conservative audience. But thanks to the successfully dramatized atmosphere that already blurred the actor-spectator binary, this one opened up a recognizable, albeit small, space of imagination of how same-sex relationships may fit into, or alter, normative heterosexual power relations. While all the teachers were senior to the actors, unlike the women volunteers who remained more or less "natural" to their subordination to the gender order, the male teacher was so unprepared in the cross-gender role-playing that he was deprived of his seniority *and* his gender advantage simultaneously. It would be unrealistic to think that a few minutes of collaborative acting could make a difference in participants' understanding of the structural privilege and oppression manifested in gender-based relationships. However, this was a first step to understanding the pressures from multiple and intersecting structural inequalities at once.

The pedagogical implications embedded in the forum theater provided something new that truly attracted the school teachers. Although the lecture hall has always been a public space in which public information is transmitted, from the post-performance interaction between the actors and a small number of affected audience members, it was discernible that the meaning and the feeling of “the public” had changed slightly. Turned into a forum theater, the lecture hall housed not a well-planned delivery of a policy or a lesson, but “an arena for discussing important societal topics” that transformed the onlookers into potentially responsible citizens (Breemen, 2017). The new framework of teaching and learning exemplified in this “arena” does not replace old knowledge with new, nor to use a dramatic performance to change the audience’s mind. Instead, it is to change the mode of knowing by collapsing the gap between actor/teacher and spectator/student, thereby turning the enclosed classroom unresponsive to real-time social problems into a simulation of real life in which everybody is protagonist and has to take action empathetically. In this way, it achieves the goal of engaging discussion of social inequality.

Conclusion

Understanding the post-89 generation feminists as actors in both political and theatrical terms has been the primary goal of this chapter. The “time-travel” street theater reinvigorated May-Fourth Chinese women revolutionaries’ political call to pursue freedom and intellectual equality with men. It also imagined their indignation if they had lived to the present day to see their landmark political intervention in the 1920s as the now commercialized International Women’s Day. *The Vagina Monologues* transforms vagina, the symbol of women’s objectification in the male gaze, into an agent of speech and a source of valued knowledge. Its controversial appearance in China since 2003 has always been to stimulate pedagogical and social change, rather than

facilitating professional advancement of theatrical art. Lastly, Theatre of the Oppressed makes available a theatrical-pedagogical model—forum theater—for young feminists in Guangzhou to engage different local communities into intervening with domestic violence. By denaturalizing the familiar scenes of abuse of power within the household, Shanquan actors created in a typical lecture hall an arena in which to contest the often taken-for-granted unequal power relations between generations and genders. The latter two theatrical experiments share the commitment to engendering intellectual emancipation in the here and now.

From these case studies, I wish to reinforce my argument that “students” is not simply a demographic category of the movement I am studying. Rather, representing a category of symbolic unsettlement and contestation and a special engagement in knowledge and power, it frames the way in which feminist criticisms are embodied by post-89 generation feminists. What needs to be understood about “students” as a framework for activism is the historicity of the student identity that varies across generations. Indeed, for each generation of youths passionate about political engagement, there are great values to both the individual’s growth and social progress. Nevertheless, it would be problematic to not recognize the sea changes between the post-89 generation student protesters and their forerunners in the May Fourth era and the 1980s. Three questions should be asked about the post-89 generation feminists. How has progressive Chinese students’ position in relation to Western democratic society (academia in particular) changed after 1989? How do they balance the inherent “elitism” of students with feminism’s devotion to the non-elites? And, since feminism advocates for and benefits from solidarity, how do they push forward new perceptions of the individual-collective dichotomy on the ground of China’s vast privatization and individualization? These questions will be addressed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5 Where Is Feminism?

The post-89s become feminists through various paths and find a common ground among themselves of promoting gender equality through collective teaching and creative performance. Then what happens after becoming feminists? This is an open-ended question that only assumes that the variety of the paths of becoming feminists at certain points will require some varying reflections on the common ground and the sharing of feminist identity, on how the current political and intellectual subjectivity bound with feminism came into being and affected one's life, and on where this bond will lead one. During my fieldwork, I did not ask this question of my informants. Some of them who worked at feminist NGOs in Beijing and Guangzhou at the time of interview (October to December, 2016) brought their confusion to me: "I feel that I'm just repeating the same tasks at work every day without producing much new stuff. I came here looking for an alternative way of learning and living, one that would challenge me. But I'm not making as much progress in life as I had hoped." In the follow-up interviews between March and August of 2017, I asked them if they were still confused by the feelings brought on by their work. Two out of the three of them professed that they had been living with that confusion in the past few months and were looking for new opportunities of learning. The other one had already left her work for a new graduate program abroad.

Through these three informants and three new ones, I learned that at least ten to fifteen more post-89 generation feminists, of both sexes, were troubled by the way their treatment among feminist activists and had sought paths of learning, teaching, and work outside of what they perceived as the core of the Chinese feminist network. It is impossible to find out exactly how many feminist "veterans"—if I may use this word for convenience's sake—are out there, as some

address themselves as “the underground of the underground.” Nor is it possible to calculate the percentage of the “veterans” against an indefinite population of the post-89 generation feminists. However, it is important to recognize that the definition of feminism is at stake in the diverse ways it is embodied. As the feminist “veterans” deployed themselves to new places of career and personal development, they took their versions of feminism with them and distributed it to whatever new network they joined. This new “distribution of the sensible,” in Rancière’s words (Rancière, 2009, p. 12), gives rise to a new question about the way(s) in which feminism can be learned: Where is feminism?

This chapter focuses on the reflections of two of the post-89 generation feminists on their relations with feminism. It first examines an independent feminist documentary, *The Anxiety of Desire* (2017), produced by Wan Qing, who became widely known in 2015 as the student draping a rainbow flag around her shoulders that represents the LGBTQ community at her graduation ceremony while shaking hands with Sun Yat-sen University’s president. Rather than a complete focus on a group of protesting feminists in March 2016, her documentary features multiple sides of China that are experienced by women in different life trajectories. I will look closely at three of the trajectories—college-educated feminist activists, lower-middle class working mothers, and rural women working in the city—to show how Wan Qing made use of the process of filmmaking to reconcile with the worlds she had once antagonized by pursuing her passion for feminist activism.

The second example comes from a personal journal on WeChat created by Minfang, a social worker who is serving at her second development project in a Kam-Sui village, Donglei, in southern China. After integrating herself into the village in February 2016, the vitality of the village life, deeply grounded in its ecology, subverted not only what she had learned from theories,

including feminism, but also how she positioned herself against practice after learning from theories that supposedly came from practice. Minfang's reflection raises attention to a common question that transnational feminist movements and global citizenship education are faced with, that is, what are the assumptions attached to "the transnational" and "the global," where is "the local" positioned in, or against, "the global"? Using Arif Dirlik's idea of "place-based imagination," which criticizes globalism's erasure of "place," I chart Minfang's efforts to come to terms with the human ecology of the village environment. The educational vision that Minfang's experience brings to attention is one that knows about and respects limits, an insight that gives a different understanding of feminism.

5.1 One feminist documentary, three facets of China

The Anxiety of Desire is a ninety-minute independent documentary initially made for a 2016 feminist student protest against the commercialization and sexualization of The International Women's Day. The filmmaking process turned out to be a tough, one-year-long process of growth and personal insight for the filmmaker, Wan Qing. In her activist years, Wan Qing was best known for wearing a rainbow flag while shaking hands with the president of Sun Yat-sen University at her commencement in June 2015. The president's smile and embrace seemed to signal the university's inclusion of a sexually underrepresented community, which soon proved false when the university's undergraduate student Qiu Bai sued the Ministry of Education to the High People's Court. Instead of two weeks of film editing, the year stretching from March 2016 to March 2017 contained Wan Qing's conflicting thoughts on the meaning and means of her engagement in feminist activism. Eventually, she was able to clearly tell her audience face-to-face that "this is not a publicity video of feminism. It is a film of women in China." For this case study, I do not just

analyze the film. I also interviewed the filmmaker, whose reflections are valuable for rethinking what a feminist becoming and a feminist education is.

The background of the filmmaking is the commercialization of International Women's Day, which had historically been about gender equality and had particular resonance in China and other socialist countries as it had been first enacted by the Soviet Union in 1917. The film also reflects on the sexualization of women on China's campuses, which resulted in the creation of a "Girls' Day" on March 7. Recently, many Chinese university campuses are seen decorated in early March with giant red banners that read, for example: "You are my mother's appointed daughter-in-law," "Shall I compare sleeping with you to a spring day," "Leave your lab and come to my bed," "You liberate my right hand," and "On this day, the only gift we want to give you is a set of chromosomes passed down from our ancestors." Put up collectively by male college students, these banners celebrate what has become known as "Girls' Day," where girls are only one night's distance from becoming a woman, or so the college-educated young men claim metaphorically (and patriarchally), and hence this is why Girls' Day is "celebrated" one day before Women's Day. Corporations capitalize on this new holiday by selling items such as anti-ageing products and other customized, gender-distinctive services, which take over public areas in universities days before March 7, for instance outside the dormitories or dining halls, and use this annual opportunity to establish partnerships with student associations.

Replacing "women" with "girls" is now a widespread rhetoric that is more inclusive and encompassing, as well as infantilizing, than has otherwise been thought, such as when TV shows blatantly sell the idea that women are girls regardless of age and should be confident of their pursuit of youthful beauty regardless of societal judgment. On the one hand, this popular rhetoric engenders a kind of inclusiveness that seems to set no limit on who is qualified for an unconditional

youthful beauty and in a way it does read as groundbreaking to lift up the constraints of beauty demarcated by age. On the other hand, however, the ideology underpinning this attempt of normalizing femininity consists of unlimited desire for consumption and perverted understandings of rights that characterize neo-socialist China. What is sidestepped, or simply nullified, are the time and the necessity to question what exactly it is that deprives *nixing* (women and girls) of the respect they deserve. Instead of honoring women's work in all walks of life, the March 8 e-commercial carnival hails women as super consumers, inflaming their desire to purchase excessively. New holiday names such as "Queen's Day" and "Goddess's Day" fit perfectly with the new, self-enterprising, and portfolio-driven subjectivity that constitutes the neoliberal part of China, while marginalizing the rest.

Playing off the associations with the numbers 7 and 8, Wan Qing named the documentary "Qi shang ba xia" (seven up, eight down), an idiom in Chinese that describes the perturbed status—or state of anxiety—before something happens. Instead of entirely focusing on the details of a protest, the documentary gives a view of three different ways in which the word "women" is embodied. More interestingly, through Wan Qing's camera, each of the three sets of women filmed shows to the audience a different view of China—their China—that cannot be fully incorporated into the other two. Nor is the word "oppression" experienced in the same negative way with how the anti-capitalist revolutionary actors explain it (both in the filmed protest and in the old communist film clips inserted into the documentary).

"Do you hear the women sing?"

In the student protest in March 2016, a group of ten Cantonese feminists gathered on the Sun Yat-sen University campus to sing the famous *Les Misérables* song "Do you hear the people

sing?” with new lyrics, which they called “The song of women.” For reasons of convenience and recognition, I have renamed it, “Do you hear the *women* sing?”

你是否和我一樣 堅信這世界應平等

Do you believe, as I do, that the world should be equal?

這是首傳唱自由和尊嚴的女人之歌

This is a song of women that chants freedom and dignity.

你可願和我一樣 為權利抗爭到老

Do you wish, as I do, that we’ll spend our lifetime fighting for rights?

打破沈重的枷鎖 找回女人的力量

We’ll break the heavy shackles and rediscover women’s power.

我想出門不害怕 想美麗不被騷擾

I want to walk without being afraid. I want beauty free of assault.

請保護我 別困住我 為何我失去自由？

Protect me, don’t encage me. Why am I stripped of freedom?

快醒醒吧 抓住他 犯錯的人不是我

Wake up and catch him, for the crime wasn’t mine.

我為自己而歌唱 不做你評判的對象

I sing for myself and am not subject to your judgment.

我愛我獨特的模樣 無論它上美醜或瘦胖

I adore my unique look, pretty or plain, slim or stout.

我有閃光的夢想 也有豐富的慾望

I have shiny dreams and abundant desires.

面對懷疑和嘲笑 艱難中我成長

I keep growing against all odds, in the face of suspicion and mocking.¹⁶

Two separate societies, late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century France on the one hand and twenty-first century China on the other, are connected through the revolutionary spirit of *Les Misérables*. In the process of comprehending and bringing into practice the meanings of “the political,” the post-89 generation feminists are not only influenced by second-wave feminism, but also actively reach out to the “extraordinary emotional and symbolic” manifestation of the political derived from 1790s France (Hunt, 2004, p. 3).

Observing the contemporary Chinese feminist movement from a conflicted position between a first-person perspective and an acquired, internalized political view from her contact with the (primarily male) 1989 survivors, Zhao Sile comments that the post-89 generation activists (feminists included), not having experienced the collision between flesh and guns, have always viewed the Chinese state institution as a “hypocritical, corrupted, but powerful” reality, even while largely being the beneficiaries of China’s economic and educational reforms in the last two decades (Zhao, 2018a). This observation positions the post-89 generation feminists, who are chanting “do you hear the *women* sing?” in the context of global student protest, which is akin to what Kristin Ross has called “revolutionary urbanism” (Ross, 1996, p. 70). The revolutionary urbanism, exemplified in May ’68, brings “to the forefront in an urgent manner the relation of theory to the

¹⁶ The translation is my own.

street” (ibid), where the physical/social space of the street symbolizes, and makes palpable, a revolutionary feeling of representing the oppressed. The oppressed—in the present case, the “women” in the lyrics—derives its meaning from the abstract, ubiquitous, and intimidating state institution. In turn, it makes sense of oppression in social terms that often overdetermine a lived experience and, in Adrienne Rich’s words, “[blot] out what we really need to know...where, when, and under what conditions have women acted and been acted on, as women” (Rich, 1986, p. 214). To avoid abstracting the terms about oppression, and subsequently assuming an agency in advance, the speech about women will have to let go “the view that the concept of the individual or person is only intelligible with reference to a culturally and historically specific set of categories, discourses and practices” in order to know a person, a woman (Moore, 1994, p. 51).

Understand the personal without the political

To practice knowing a woman better, Wan Qing chose to start from one of the most taken-for-granted people in her life, her mother, in the film referred to as Sister Xie (or Xie Jie). She moves her camera between the “main” site of the protest in Guangzhou and her home site in Chongqing. The audience may find it difficult to immediately relate the latter to feminist activism. But Wan Qing tries to challenge this view by following Xie Jie everywhere, from their home in the city to her workplace and to their countryside residence where Xie Jie’s mother lives. Using those episodes, Wan Qing questions and self-questions why a woman’s arrangement of her own life that shows no clear boundary between resistance and complicity has to be thought as not illustrative of feminism. Xie Jie apparently cannot speak the language of “gender identity as socially constructed.” But does she really not know, in a practical way, that gender identity is lived? Doesn’t she tacitly know that life can make individuals resist or comply (Moore, 1994, p.

49)? In response to questions after a screening of the film in March 2017, Wan Qing told her audience: “Had I only filmed the scenes of activism, the documentary would have ended up being so much less.”

Contrary to the strikingly colorful rendering of the campus protest, the filming switches into black-and-white to present Xie Jie’s everyday life. Xie Jie is put in the center of the semi-structured narrative supplemented by Wan Qing’s father, grandmother, and younger brother. For seven straight minutes, the camera focuses on Xie Jie’s reflection in the mirror, in front of which is a row of neatly lined-up white bottles of sunscreen just slightly out of focus. Below them are big bottles of shampoo, body wash, and various lotions. “This is how long it takes a woman to wear makeup every morning. This is her life.” Wan Qing explains to the viewers, not wanting them to judge the time women spend on making themselves “decent” for social interaction. The seven minutes, with multiple cuts, precludes any excuse to not keep the woman company. Observe, respect, and accompany, the camera commands the audience.

Choosing a black-and-white filter to feature her own family, Wan Qing aims to show first to herself, and second to her audience, that she is painstakingly reconsidering her position in, and the consequences of, being engaged in feminist activism while trying to repair the rift between her feminist self and her family. In one scene, Wan Qing leaves the recording camera on a low table and goes to help the tired-looking Xie Jie sweep and mop the floor. Her father’s voice comes from offscreen. The uneven distribution of domestic labor is obvious: two women and zero man. Building up a feminist criticism of the gendered division of labor would need less than a second for a well-trained feminist mind. But the camera teaches something to the audience again by sitting still, as if saying: stay and observe until you feel you are in the family. The critique of the gendered division of the home is of course an important part of the intention of the scene, but it goes further

through the didactic process of commanding the audience to also ask themselves when, how, and from what perspective to critique such gendered practices. The way of critiquing matters as much as the content and the purpose.

The next Chinese Spring Festival, Xie Jie takes her family back to her hometown in the countryside where Wan Qing's grandmother lives. Shots show Xie Jie working in the field wearing four-inch high heels, Mr. Wan climbing up the patio rails to hang string lights on a tall, barren tree, and the old grandmother taking care of her chickens. This interlude between the vibrant images of the feminist protest seems, perhaps, too uneventful and almost meaningless, to the subjects within the frame.

"Can't you film something meaningful?" Both Xie Jie and grandmother ask Wan Qing.

"What *is* meaningful then?"

"Stuff about public good, environmental protection, etc." Xie Jie tries to dismiss her daughter but is clearly also glad to have her around.

The camera stays, telling both Xie Jie and the audience that meaningful things include spending time with family. It further engages the viewers to think through another set of questions. If they think what they are watching is meaningless and irrelevant to the feminist campaign, then they must ask: Why is the framing of a woman's life excluded from a feminist's immediate expectation of a feminist documentary? How does "woman" disturb the relationship between the first "feminist" as a noun and the second "feminist" as an adjective? If one understands the filmmaker's move to a seemingly "irrelevant" scene as a departure from feminism, then what is feminism after all? The teaching/educational aspect of this film, as it elicits a deeper locating of where feminism inheres to the viewer, is to encourage the viewer to reconsider her own assumption

of whether feminism comes from everyday life and dialogue, or from books and salons where feminists conglomerate.

Different temporalities of remembering funü

The Anxiety of Desire also documents an interview with two rural women in their fifties, the Xu sisters. Quite the opposite of the documentary's title, the women have little desire to be consumers and hence were the freest from consumer anxiety. They were paid a monthly salary of ¥1,900 (approximately US\$270), not including insurance, for their cleaning work at a canteen in Guangzhou. These women lived completely outside of the world inhabited by Wan Qing and her feminist friends, where Girls' Day is an alien idea. They exhibit a sense of humor so deeply embedded in the materiality of working-class life that it almost embarrasses an urbanite's fantasized modern life.

"Did you see the Girls' Day celebration [outside the canteen] the day before March 8?" the narrator questions.

"Dunno. That one was too complicated."

"It's a festival when boys give girls presents and confess their feelings to them. Do you wish someone would do that to you?"

"I do!" Old Xu says, turning to her sister. "You are just laughing at me."

"What gift do you want?"

"I'll ask for what I need."

"What do you need?"

"Everything. Shampoo, laundry detergent [laughs], clothing, shoes, and pants."

"Whom do you hope to get these things from?"

“Isn’t that you?” Old Xu jokes.

The filmmaker-interviewer could have prepared to continue the topic from whichever answer Old Xu gave and directed it to the cause and effects of consumerism for those living on a lower social rung. But she bows to the working-class humor. The “subaltern” speaks, and in doing so, wins her own representation. Old Xu also corrects the interviewer, “We’re called ‘elderlies,’ not ‘*funü*.’”

“How do you spend Women’s Day?”

“Wipe these tables. That’s all we do. We heard long before from older people that they had a day off on Women’s Day. But now we don’t have it, so we get a bottle of shampoo here. But nothing happens in our hometown.”

The gap between the grand state policy objectives of women behind the term “Women’s Day” and the sisters’ lived experience, in Gail Hershatter’s (2011; 2016) words, is one between something the government states at the macro- or institutional level and something that happens on the ground. The idea that there is a big History, marked by the signposts of policy and campaigns, and many histories, measured and remembered in “domestic time” is what Hershatter has called the multiplicity of “temporalities” (Hershatter, 2011, p. 27). This idea may be disturbing to “sequence-minded historians” (ibid). The campaign time and the domestic time “are quite different, but they are constitutive of each other” (Hershatter, 2016). This relationship between temporalities—a point in need of much emphasis—is key to understanding the dynamic between the political and the personal. Although, since second-wave feminism, the political and the personal are known to be interconnected, it has generally been ignored how they are related to each other. It is even more problematic to simply confound them and claim “everything is political.” Kristin Ross cautions that while the concepts of power and resistance permit us to move

from “everything is policed” to “everything is political,” the latter simply evacuates the political of meaning (Ross, 1996, p. 71).

Rather than teaching the rural women about the political origin of Women’s Day, Wan Qing invites them to describe it in their own language. By letting their memory jostle against the political, the rural against the urban, and the spoken against the speaker (in a “Spivakian” sense), the interview places “domestic time” on an equal level with “campaign time.” By documenting the different women’s descriptions of their jobs—activists, working mother, women cleaners, as well as a woman worker leader, a college dorm staff who would not reveal her identity, and many more not analyzed in this study—Wan Qing decentralizes the power of (re)defining Women’s Day. The documentary achieves a balance between “we the women” and “I, a woman,” drawing attention to the historicity and singularity of “becoming a woman” without losing sight of the political significance of collective action. In doing so, it fulfills an easier-said-than-done democratic pedagogy, reminiscent of what Jacques Rancière has called intellectual emancipation: “all people are equally intelligent” (Rancière, 1991, p. xix).

Reflection

In creating *The Anxiety of Desire*, Wan Qing taught herself a few things that came from her repeated struggles with the confusions that emerged from interacting with the larger Chinese feminist network. I interviewed her in March 2017 about her reflections on what she had learned from these struggles and how she hoped to communicate that within her film. Below are my summaries of her reflection, with an expanded discussion of the afore-mentioned feminist “veterans” who questioned in my interview and on their social media pages why a good command of gender theory did not help solve real-life problems for themselves, their families, or at work.

First, critical theory is important, she believes, for it makes visible the abstract interconnections between the empirical and the structural through which an ideology is enacted, and within which power is distributed unevenly across different groups of people. She reported that developing a critical position has pushed her to think broadly of what is wrong with society. Reviewing in our interview her participation in the “anti-March 7, pro-March 8” activity as a cameraperson, Wan Qing clarified that her purpose, “was not to publicize the self, but to create a space of resistance for one’s subjectivity.” While that particular event had little to do with self-publicizing, her overall enthusiasm for being a feminist activist, which she examined repeatedly in the months of producing the documentary, appeared to be troubling to her. “Giving that passion a retrospective look back, I can’t avoid seeing my eagerness to be recognized and popular, to feel I was somebody, that I was embedded in the motivation of engaging in feminist activism. It was individualistic and naïve.”

A further realization of this point is that Wan Qing has found that the feminist movement fails to explain to its participants what exactly power is, both in the practice of theory and the theory of practice, precisely because it uses the word “power” all the time and does not spend time discovering what it means in actual social practice.

Second, theory cannot replace life, but it has an attitude toward life. To expand on this lesson, a lot of nuances in life can be overlooked or deemed trivial by theories. But in the meantime, theory abstracts life’s nuances with an authority that enacts this abstraction without consent, thus totalizing it in a way that flattens these nuances so that they no longer resonate with real life, or diverse positions and lives within a movement. To theorize, and believe in the theory of, women’s subordination as a “universal particularity,” one needs “a passion for difference” that separates the biological from the cultural (Moore, 1994, p. 19). But theory itself is powerful and

that power has not been checked by most feminists. Wan Qing professed in our interview that she once was so eager to bring home what she had seen, heard, and learned about in Guangzhou that she impatiently used feminist theory to criticize and politicize everything at home.

“The change in me astonished my family. It made them push themselves away from me. A sense of opposition emerged between us. It grew so large that it went out of my control. I wrapped myself in an entire discursive system that made them very uncomfortable. Only many months later, did I realize that in my passion for action, I dropped something experiential. I wasn’t comfortable with lived experiences. During that time, I only picked up contents and signs that could attest to the ideology I upheld. But life is not as cleanly arranged as is described by theory. Therefore, I made up my mind to re-learn how to get along with family and with lived experiences.”

To bring change to people’s minds is an educational process and it may well cause some discomfort at any point of this process. Discomfort can be used as a means to provoke new thinking that transforms the old ones, as *The Vagina Monologues* does. But the VM achieves its educational goal by the subjectification of the audience, not through objectification and stereotyping. Its discomfort comes from the creation of a richer vocabulary of materials that is eventually made accessible to the actors and the audience to describe their subjectivity. The materiality of the language, Wan Qing realized, is the key to “breaking though the monotonous language” that most urban, modern, and cosmopolitan individuals speak with and it must come from a mind not consumed by the will to make discomfort the beginning *and* the end of a conversation.

Theory itself has power over the theorized and this power can be exercised on occasions as minute as everyday conversation. While feminism’s emergence from the criticisms of the

European Enlightenment was precisely because in its intellectual tradition theory was put in front of experience, it is generically theoretical. As Lydia Liu suggests, “theories that invest so heavily in self-contemplation on behalf of metropolitan European languages cannot but replicate Eurocentrism in the act of criticizing it” (Liu, 1997, p. 83). Moreover, although feminist scholars, following Joan Scott (1986), in recent years have been trying to adopt the concept of “gender” as an analytical category (Liu, 1997; Hershatter and Wang, 2008), it easily slips out of the scholarly framework and surrenders to “the strategic impulse of identity politics” in practice (Liu, 1997, p. 107). Henrietta Moore also confirms the difficulty of preventing this slippage from happening, stating that gender identity being constructed and lived is a point easy to make and disseminate, but there are practical challenges to develop it analytically or act upon it politically “Moore, 1994, p. 49).

Lastly, Wan Qing and other feminist “veterans” found that they had been trained by feminism to think about power structure everywhere except within the organization of feminist activism. Power functions within the feminist network in ways that members find it hard to articulate “based on their common belief in the flat structure of it” (Charlene, interview in November 2016); and yet they feel it and have to listen to it on a daily basis.

In my last two fieldwork trips to Guangzhou in March and August 2017, I noticed that those in “the underground of the underground” were passing around Jo Freeman’s concept of “the tyranny of structurelessness”—how with the absence of a formal structure, friendship ascends through an informal structure of organization to formulate and elite and perpetrate hierarchy within the self-claimed structureless group. This concept was transported to them from Chinese feminist students studying in the US. While it helps the feminist “veterans” to relocate themselves from previous engagements in activism and feel comfortable

staying at a distance from the center, it does not undercut their commitment to feminism as a methodology of observing the world, what Charlene calls “political ethics,” with which to challenge gender-based power abuse. Wan Qing concluded:

After all the internal struggles, I will not introduce myself as a feminist in the first instance. Instead, I prefer identifying myself as an independent filmmaker, an artist, a lesbian, and many others. But I am not against feminism and I clearly know how deep the public’s misinterpretation of it can be. I will announce that I am a feminist when women are offended or when feminism is intentionally distorted. But those are the only moments I need to show my feminist identity.

5.2 Reconsidering power

Wan Qing’s reflections on her film producing, and her move from the center to the margins of the feminist network, is a process that I call “undoing elitism.” The idea of the “elitist,” American feminist, political scientist Jo Freeman argues in her article, “The Tyranny of Structurelessness” (1973), “is probably the most abused word in the women’s liberation movement” (p. 153). It is often mistakenly used to refer to an individual. But if understood correctly, “an elite refers to a small group of people who have power over a larger group of which they are part, usually without direct responsibility to that larger group, and often without their knowledge or consent” (ibid). Because elites exist informally within groups, rather than deliberately or conspiratorially, it takes a member’s tacit knowledge to find out who to listen to and engage with more than others. Then, it depends on the presence or absence of a structured network within a group to determine the extent to which the elites—built upon friendship or sisterhood—may impose authority over the others. A structureless group, which many feminist

groups are proud to be part of, has less counterpower to its elitism because it sounds absurd to prioritize personal annoyance above the activist agenda, but meanwhile it is impossible to go beyond personal feelings and relationships to speak out about the power hierarchy.

Freeman points out that in order for people of dramatically varying personalities and interests to come together to form an organization, there has to be either a formal structure or an informal structure (p. 152). In a self-claimed “structureless” organization, feminist tenets preclude the adoption of a formal structure, but inevitably build upon one or more informal structures that are not regulated by the whole. Wherever an informal structure is formulated, the rules of decision-making lose transparency, which in turn gives rise to elitism. Freeman explains:

To strive for a “structureless” group is as useful and as deceptive, as to aim at an “objective” news story, “value-free” social science or a “free” economy. A “laissez-faire” group is about as realistic as a “laissez-faire” society; the idea becomes a smoke screen for the strong or the lucky to establish unquestioned hegemony over others. This hegemony can be easily established because the idea of “structurelessness” does not prevent the formation of informal structures, but only formal ones (p. 152).

Power may exist in a community in which no one is guilty for power’s existence. While “power” and “structure” are among the most frequently used words in feminist movements, few have questioned what these words really mean. Because power and structure are ubiquitous does not mean they are exercised in the same way across all institutions. But it does mean that feminist organizations are not sanctuaries. In a separate interview, Ryuu, a former colleague of Charlene (the anthropology student in Britain who in Chapter 3 talked about young Chinese women’s

experiences transferring from high school to college), spoke of her frustration with how the seriousness and formality of politics was undercut by the unspoken prioritization of private affect.

I am not fond of the word “sister” (*in the context of political activism*). When it appears, such as in “the five feminist sisters” (*nüquan wujiemei*, its English translation drops the word “sister” and they are known as “the Feminist Five”), it dilutes the compassion with which we strive for our common goal, and instead emphasizes on the private affect between “sisters.” This kind of private affection is different from the bond between comrades. The usage of sister usually indicates that two people have a close relationship under the table, meanwhile they may share the same political aspiration. The nature of this private network is reflected in the appellation they use to address each other.

I am skeptical of this appellation because of my experience of participating in the Model United Nations (MUN) in high school (note: MUN is a popular formal high school and college student activity in China’s global cities. It is meant to develop students’ visions of global affairs, lobbying ability, speaking skills, English proficiency, and hone them to become state and world leaders). When we modeled the UN General Assembly, oftentimes we would see delegates from countries that had few shared interests draft a joint proposal. The collaboration was very awkward. It existed only because there existed a personal bond between the delegates. The delegates joined hands not from the perspective of an actual situation their countries had to attend to, but from a perspective that they were friends and that they were happy practicing lobbying together.

Therefore, I loathe it when private affection is injected into public vision and public affair (Ryuu, interview in October 2016).

Ryuu's words attest to Freeman's argument that "elites are nothing more and nothing less than groups of friends who also happen to participate in the same political activities" (p. 154). The unregulated overlap between political engagement and friendship, which "creates elites in any group and makes them so difficult to break" (ibid), is protected by structurelessness. Therefore, it can be argued that grassroots activist organizations' proclivity for informal structures of power complicates, rather than, enhances, the struggle for justice. This concern has been addressed by many post-89 generation feminists in Beijing and Guangzhou, including Charlene:

You first enter activism with an innocent idea of justice. You see everybody as brothers (and sisters). You treat everybody as an equal being. It is like the working of an on-campus interest-based society or campaign. But once you bring this collective interest to an NGO frame, you have to have this collective institutionalized. That is, you have to distinguish superior positions and inferior positions. You have to have the superior tell you what to do. You have to rely on your sponsor. Then it is inevitable that a hierarchy will appear. I think this reality is somewhat contradictory to the initial shape of the collective that was imagined in our ideals (in terms of an equal society launched from a flat-structured collective). As your working relationship develops, you'll feel confused as to why your ideal has been betrayed and why reality is so cruel. But I believe activism cannot avoid this.

To be sure, the rule of "friendship" does not only take place within women's movement groups. According to Freeman, past women's movements centrally attacked the informal structure

within male-dominated interest groups and asked for formalization to increase the transparency of decision-making, so that group members, both men and women, could equally follow the rules. However, not knowing and consciously speaking about the difference between formal and informal structures of power, the revolutionary role of any dissenting group is likely to be diluted once the group attains power.

Power and institution must be recognized as gendered in themselves. This is a key argument I share with Lydia Liu (2003). Power in the hands of women's can also be patriarchal, although, when used with a deliberately and democratically planned formal structure, this is necessary to counterbalance male domination of power. Based on this argument, I propose a different question: Where is feminism? My answer is: feminism is where power isn't.

5.3 Feminism is where power isn't

Certainly, power is everywhere. But it does not mean that feminism is nowhere. Nor do I fully support the idea that by empowering the powerless, the power structure will be more balanced. Redistributing power can be very dangerous, as China's socialist revolution proved—unless it is slowly done through emancipatory education, through many dialogues and compromises with *local* habits and patterns of living. The only thing that will prevail in this game of power is power itself, and the only thing that will dominate the course of empowerment in the knowledge-based economy is capital. Neither of them is favored by feminist philosophy. Thus, to find a place both *for* and *of* feminism, one needs to go back to check what attitude one holds toward “somewhere,” any place, when claiming “power is everywhere.” Is it “power” that is being stressed, or is it *everywhere*? Does place even matter in this statement? As Henri Lefebvre wrote:

Any revolutionary ‘project’ today, whether Utopian or realistic, must, if it is to avoid hopeless banality, make the reappropriation of the body, in association with the reappropriation of space, into a non-negotiable part of its agenda (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 166-167).

Taking place seriously, then, is the way to avoid falling into the banal reproduction of politically charged words and symbols and accumulating the power the feminist movement aims to subvert. What is exactly the power that Western and Westernized feminist movements both want to resist and subvert by emphasizing women’s lived experience and have largely reproduced so far? This has to do with an unsolved problematic of the asymmetrical dichotomy between the global and the local. Derived from this asymmetry, “a modernity driven by capitalism” in Arif Dirlik’s words (1999, p. 184), are long-standing inequalities between races/ethnicities and between classes. Thus, it is important to reconsider philosophically and practically how feminism may function effectively to counter this asymmetry. The key to it, as I will elaborate shortly, is to put a moratorium on “localization”—learning the master language/knowledge and bringing it back home and readjusting it to fit the local characteristics—and instead ground the vision of hope and change in concrete place.

In what follows, I will review Arif Dirlik’s article, “Place-Based Imagination: Globalism and the Politics of Place” (1999), with an emphasis on problematizing the universalism of new social movements. Then, drawing on Dirlik’s reconceptualization of “place-based consciousness,” I will provide an archival study of a post-89 generation feminist, Minfang’s journal of her career in two Chinese ethnic minority villages in Southern China to present an alternative feminist becoming and feminist education.

Finding place, undoing globalism

Dirlik's main argument in "Place-Based Imagination" is that modernity is a power that grows infinitely by eliminating place. To counteract power, then, one needs to "conceive of places and place-based consciousness as a project that is devoted to the creation and construction of new contexts for thinking about politics and the production of knowledge" (pp. 151-152). The first step is to decipher how the global and the local are conceptualized—for instance, why do the streets in Washington DC invoke an image of the global whereas streets in Guangzhou are deemed local, or at best globalized? Dirlik points out that the global and the local each derives their meanings from one another and also that "global" is not a "geometrical" term describing the globe (p. 152). Hence, "the global" contains assumption and bias that privilege those who can talk about the world as *their* common world, while marginalizing and excluding those who cannot and who still need a country (if not necessarily nation-state) in which to ground themselves. "[A] new kind of universalism" privileges the abolition of the quintessential importance of space, time, and the historically fabricated social relations of a lived place and subordinates it to off-ground global capitalism.

Second, Dirlik helps us understand new social movements' (in the immediate interest of this study, feminist movements') inherent paradox. That the majority of Chinese feminists since the 1980s are frequent cross-border travelers and residents in Chinese diasporas is a key element of the political context that embeds comparative and international education in the late capitalist world. They are the dynamics of theory's traveling and an essential dimension of this dynamic, as Lydia Liu (1997) emphasized, is the direction of this travel. But what needs to be stressed here more than the collision of hierarchically ranked ideas at a certain locality is the fundamentally changed meaning of place: an ecological vacuum as a result of the traveling activist-intellectuals'

incarnation of globalism. The concept of place is reduced from “a ‘foreground’ of everyday lived emplacement” to a background, that is “geographies of struggle and resistance” in the increasingly popular writing of “representation, gender and political action” (Feld and Basso, 1996, pp. 4-6). Dirlik terms this phenomenon “the spatialization of place”: “the fixity of places and the limitations set on the production of place by its immediate environment” (Dirlik, 1999, p. 154) are dismissed in the belief that all places are “open and porous” (Massey, 1994, p. 5) and that it is just a matter of time until the boundaries “are replaced by hybrid and fluid zones” (Feld and Basso, 1996, p. 6). In other words, while place means limitations, space indicates potentials. The role that education plays today is to orient every learner to look at potentials—those of their own and of spaces—and to overlook and conquer limitations. This is a lesson that Dirlik finds missing in the “NGOization”¹⁷ of new social movements:

Most importantly, the very movements that struggle against capital and its globalizing forces are themselves globalized in significant ways. Contrary to those depictions of space/place in terms of categories of capital versus class, gender and ethnicity, it is quite obvious that these latter are themselves globalized in various measures, internalizing in the categories themselves the contradictions between their locally concrete manifestations (p. 159).

¹⁷ The term “NGOization” is used by Aziz Choudry and Dip Kapoor (2013) to critique the professionalization and depoliticization of social action. They argue that if a study of NGOs fully considers their operational background of “a globalizing capitalist colonization of territories, nature, peoples and culture,” it will find that NGOs are complicit in “power, dependence, and/r complicity with state, market and multilateral/international institutions” (p. 1). The same concern focused on the post-89 generation Chinese activists can be found in Zhao Sile’s serial introduction of this particular generation’s attention to health, environmental protection, gender, disability, and municipal administration (Zhao, 2018b; 2018c).

In short, it is counterproductive to want to help the people, lives that the power of modernity conquers by “modernizing” the places they live, with the idea that it is their local places that prevent the people from attaining a global vision of justice, equality, and progress.

Lastly, upon illustrating the inherent paradox of new social movements, Dirlik calls for “unthinking the ways in which we have become accustomed to thinking the world and our places in it” (p. 184). He emphasizes the “nondivisibility of humans and nonhumans” (ibid), which challenges the habitual educational practice that separate humans from nonhumans in pursuit of self-differentiation. While many feminist workshops in and out of China have been organized to teach people about the categories of difference in order to counteract the structural inequalities resting upon difference, they are still reinventing the compartmentalization of knowledge, or the delivery of knowledge in readily made packages, a way of knowing that is hierarchical and patriarchal, rather than democratic and feminist.

In what follows, I apply Dirlik’s “place-based imagination” as a self-critiquing and self-educational model to Minfang’s learning and working experience in the villages in which she has worked. I also adopt Gert Biesta’s concept of “weak education” to frame how Minfang exercises a feminist becoming, an appreciation of her “ignorance” of the diversity of lives lived in China, as an answer to what comes after becoming a feminist.

“Go into the field. Live ardently.”

The above quote is Minfang’s signature on WeChat. Minfang is a social worker who has worked on development projects in rural China. Since early 2016, she has been serving the development project of a Kam-Sui ethnic minority village in southern China named Donglei. She is a friend of Shi’er, Shanquan’s director who also played the joker in the Theatre of the Oppressed

(from Chapter 4). They both graduated from Sun Yat-sen University a few years ago and both believe that “story and theater are comparatively democratic, because their format encourages empathy and sympathy between different life experiences” (Minfang, 2016). Thanks to Shi’er, I had the good fortune to meet Minfang in August 2016 in Guangzhou, where she was taking a break before return to the village.

Minfang created her WeChat journal in January 2016 to document the stories of women whom she encountered in Donglei, as well as her own stories of encountering those women. She cleverly named her journal, “Women in the Wild Field” (*Nüren zaiye*), and later changed it to “Barley in the Furrows” (*Tiangeng li you mailang*). “Zaiye” has a multiplicity of meanings. The most used version denotes the meaning of an oppositional party. But Minfang wanted its literal meaning—in the wild field—to describe the wildness of Women’s (*nüren*) vitality. Hereafter, I use Women with the capitalized W to refer to *nüren*, to distinguish it from the revolutionary construct of *funü* and to follow Minfang in respecting Women’s primal liveliness. The character “ye” may refer to both “wild” and “field,” calling for the imagination of the nature and the land. Minfang was obsessed with its primal force. She writes in the mission statement of her journal:

I find that “ye” is a perfect character to illustrate Women’s life: forceful, sturdy, and vital. “Zaiye,” then, is to be in a wonderful and diverse state. It can be interpreted as marginal, queer, but strong, capable of resisting the mainstream. It also spells out the liberated and untamed life of Women when breaking free from restraints. Even more importantly, it expresses the connection between Women and the land, the soil. “Ye,” in the meantime, is also Women’s battleground, either grandiose or personal. But we confront it together on the

site. For me, I do hope that I, as a Woman, will unleash an inexhaustible vitality in the field (Minfang, 2016).

The first minority village in which she worked is located in northern Guangdong Province. It has extremely polarizing seasons around the year.

In the winds and rains, on this land, Women work the hardest. Against extreme weather, they devote themselves to reproduction and production. They leave home and migrate. They constantly fight in the arena of everyday life, engendering much strength. Their life experiences are a mixture of tensions arising out of gender, ethnicity, and the urban-rural divide (ibid).

What pushed Minfang to formally create a journal was the termination of the development project due to policy change. What she and her colleague had contributed to the village, including lots of women's work, faced the possibility of elimination, too. The women's work they were engaged in, if considered part of the larger women's movements, was carried out in solitude. Minfang found it not comparable to, and not in conversation with, the widely connected feminist activism in the cities. Besides, rural women's experience was much less visible than urban women, thus claiming little, if any, authority of speech in the women's movements. She also compared herself anxiously with her feminist friends who aggressively carried out one action after another, while she accomplished "nothing and remained cowardly" (ibid).

Minfang's self-doubts brings to mind the philosophy of the weakness of education, which Gert Biesta (2014) called "the beautiful risk of education." It is understandable that if the more able and capable members of an institutionally disadvantaged group do not take actions effectively and firmly, the less protected will suffer real life risks of life, and those risks are ugly. Thus, campaigns against domestic violence and sexual assault are very much in need. But what I am

discussing is a different issue. The issue at stake is one of the training of trainers/teachers, about the “*attitude* expressed in the desire to make education [of the ‘subaltern’] strong, secure, predictable, and risk-free” (Biesta, 2014, p. 3; emphasis in original). Questioning to the price at which education will work (p. 2), a weak education deliberates on the modern logic of modernity, how its power differentiates and reproduces itself, and what exactly the emancipation is that it promises.

My tempting answer to Spivak’s question “can the subaltern speak?” is that the “subaltern” has always been speaking until their home became “local” as opposed to “global,” until their place was reformed to the extent to which their history could find nowhere to rest. Donglei village had a stadium built by the entire village a few decades ago. In the summer of 2017, the stadium was going to be turned into an activity center. The villagers’ protested to preserve their history. As a government’s employee, Minfang opposed the villagers’ objections and conflict arose. Reflecting on this later, it made her proud to be with the villagers who resisted the capitalist logic behind the infrastructure project, which in turn stripped of the social workers of their self-entitlement, forcing them to rethink who they were, what position they held in relation to the village in which they served, and whether their work threatened the cultural and environmental ecology of the village’s vitality. She realized that the difficulties that arose from facilitating a project because of the villagers’ contesting opinions was exactly what democracy and education were about. To impatiently reach for an end and accomplishment entailed “powerful intervention” from the outside, which by definition amounted to colonialism (Biesta, 2014, p. 7).

Having spent a couple of years in Donglei, Minfang now understands why her supervisor dampened her eagerness to show off her joy at being a Kam just five months after her arrival. “Yao si jam, yao si ran Dongluai (I am a Kam; I am a Donglei person)” is a statement of gravity. The

Kam people are desperately in love with their land and their places, despite that the industrialization and post-industrialization of the cities have deprived villages like Donglei of its strongest labor. Because, in the long term, the spatialization of place and its people becoming a “local” representation are possibly how this and many other indigenous cultures will tragically end up, claiming an identity means serious commitment and responsibility to the whole community, in ethnic, national or any other dimension. Hence the title of her article: “Growing Flowers in Front of the Bulldozer.”

To be honest, Donglei village always makes social development workers feel frustrated and useless, and even self-denying. Why? It’s because this is a brutally vibrant community. Once you enter it as an outside social worker, and especially as an ethnic other, all the cultural lineage, personal cognitions, and scholarly ideas of development pattern that form your background are smashed to pieces (Minfang, 2018).

This very unpopular way of learning is precisely “the educational way”—it is “slow, difficult, frustrating, and weak,” and the modern person will find it hard to give such “way” its due value as she or he is fast forwarding on a highway to a desired outcome (Biesta, 2014, p. 4).

Conclusion

Both case studies in this chapter are intended to think through the challenges and rewards that come after an identification with feminism. They demonstrate how, through new avenues of cultural production and social engagement, feminism is lived in more diverse ways. The major question raised in this chapter—where is feminism?—aims to provoke thought on the limitations of adhering to a fixed, politically charged identity, one of the problems of which is not having

sufficiently emphasized the importance of limits. There are limits with our bodies, networks, and the places we live. Those limits are usually eliminated to make space for globalism in the form of trade, knowledge, and development. In the language of educational studies, as Biesta expresses in *The Beautiful Risk of Education*, the strong desire to eliminate limits in the course of teaching and learning paradoxically increases the risk of “turning education uneducational” (p. 146). This critique applies to modernist assumptions of education that feminist movements do not necessarily contest, and even reinforce in certain circumstances.

Taking issue with the vacuous reproduction of feminist ideology, Wan Qing looked through her camera lens for language and practice in everyday life. In contrast to the activists’ dramatic performance of abstract and grand theories of women’s oppression, Xie Jie and the Xu sisters, representing the lower-middle and working classes, are shown as more limited in their choices in their interaction with Wan Qing. The documentary, *The Anxiety of Desire*, is an experiment in which the filmmaker puts herself comfortably between the different attitudes toward limits, extending our understanding of the locations in which feminism is to be found.

In Minfang’s case, the chasm between what she learned and what she actually saw in the villages led her, and her journal readers, to think if feminism can indeed exist without self-announcement and whether only in its silence does feminism become a forum or platform for the “subalterns” to speak on their own behalf. What they speak of, as Minfang learned, might not be in line with the social progress a feminist wants to see. At times, it is chaos rather than order that is presented before her; but then she realizes that controversies and continuous debates are in and of themselves forms of the participatory politics that she, as a social worker, was trained to promote. Her perception of participatory politics resonates with what Gert Biesta (2014) has

warned of the preoccupation with a secured outcome of learning and participation, which inevitably invokes authority.

To conclude with the insight of Henrietta Moore, “however crucial the concept of the knowledgeable actor is to an emancipatory social science, we must be wary of positing the actor as superhumanly knowledgeable; that is, we must acknowledge that no one can ever be fully aware of the conditions of their own construction” (Moore, 1994, p. 53).

CHAPTER 6 Conclusion

This dissertation has studied the contemporary Chinese feminist movement, as it was quickly unfolding in multiple dimensions from 2015 to 2018, placing it within both the deeper historical context of gender struggles in China's long twentieth century and within the context of both Chinese and global educational systems. As I reflect on the challenges that showed up in the process of doing fieldwork and writing, the issues I studied are still unfolding, and the post-1989 generation is still in flux, both reacting to world events and, perhaps, changing them in the process; this is the promise of activism but also its uncertainty. In this conclusion, I reiterate the key arguments made in each chapter and briefly discuss the challenges I was faced with in the processes of research and writing. I end with a final coda that considers the current unfolding of the MeToo campaign, as it appears in its Chinese manifestation, which began after I had returned from the field and had begun writing. Here, I look at how this is a special phenomenon that is more than a testimony of feminism in China. Through my reinterpretation of the significance of MeToo in China, I address the potential of integrating feminism into radical popular education.

6.1 Summary

First, the contemporary Chinese feminist movement is different from prior women's liberation movements in twentieth-century China. Though they share the concerns for women's well-being, empowerment, mobility, and leadership, it is hard for the current movement to assert historical continuity with the past. The difference lies in the very distinct historical contexts in which they emerged. Unlike the post-89 generation that was born and subsequently grew up in the global environment of late capitalism, the previous generations of Chinese feminists

conceptualized the rights of women primarily in nationalism and socialism, rather than an identity issue. Feminism to the post-89 generation, however, is a relatively distinct and independent realm of discourse that is enriched by socialist awareness of capitalism's damage to the structural protection of women's well-being. The separation of feminism from state socialism distinguishes the feminist activism of the post-89 generation from the consciousness-raising work done by previous generations of women reformers and revolutionaries. In the sense that feminism is a distinct system of thoughts that are marked as a form of educational or cultural capital, the contemporary feminist movement carried out by some of the post-89 generation students is in fact more akin to the lineage of Chinese student protests beginning from the May Fourth Movement in 1919. It is on this foundation that I have analyzed their activities and subject formation to show that the contemporary Chinese feminism sheds new light on the potential and limitations of international and comparative education.

Second, instead of possessing an inherited status as feminists, whether political or intellectual, the student activists of the post-89 generation are in the process of forming "a new social group (as soon as they can be counted)" (Lanza, 2010, p. 6). Their politicization is realized as they break through the normative behaviors assigned to students, which in turn problematizes what a student, a school, or university should be. This micro-politics increases tensions between the students, their supervisors, and their parents, invoking patriarchal domination of both socialist and capitalist origins. The individual stories of becoming feminists thus complicate, rather than simply add to, the pile of becoming feminists narratives. By emphasizing the singularity of individual experience, this study attempts to keep the irreducible nuances and complexities of this self-educational process as a productive space of contemplation.

Third, politics and theatrical art are combined in many of the post-89 generation feminists' forms of activism. By acting out political demands in dramatic ways in the public space and thereby creating street theater in which random pedestrians are the audience, they transform what is seen and objectified into a subject who sees and actively delivers the message. On other occasions, when the activism takes place within a formal theatrical space, they call upon empathy and/or intervention, forms of democratic participation that civic education promotes, by eliminating the boundary between the actor and the spectator. In what might seem to be exaggerated expressions of women's fear, pain, bitterness, and desire, the personal is introduced as a politically charged narrative revealing structural injustice and inequality.

Lastly, in the endeavor to define what feminism is, there is always the potential for contestation over who is eligible to define feminism via their actions and speech. This has the effect of building informal structures of power within what is publicly claimed to be a structureless organization, thereby creating new hierarchies of power. The laissez-faire philosophy of organizing feminist networks, which shares rules of the free market, actually has the potential to give rise to elite group(s) among the activist feminists. That elitism can be felt but is hard to critique, which can marginalize members with different voices. Thus, aside from the preoccupation of what feminism is and who can be counted as feminists (as Janet Richards has said, feminism wants to count far too many people in it), I find it also helpful to ask, "where is feminism?" This inquiry has followed Jacques Rancière's educational philosophy of intellectual equality, in which the knower and the learner are equal, and the learner is believed to possess the capacity of knowing how to learn. Hence, when looking for feminism in everyday life, one cannot assume that it is located in the minds of certain people and not in others. The aim is to build dialogue between those

who have been trained to be conscious of gendered inequality and those who have no less ability to make sense of their own lives.

6.2 Challenges

I have encountered many challenges, both in fieldwork and in the process of writing. The first has been negotiating the activist/academic divide. As mentioned, I considered myself an inside-outsider. But the activist/academic divide somehow made this position quite uncomfortable because, on many occasions, feminist activism requires a clear political stance, which contradicts my training as a critical ethnographer and analyst dedicated to inquiring and problematizing why an action is taken one way and not another, whether there might have been an oversight in the way an idea was delivered, and whether an outsider's criticism, if reasonable yet hard to accept at the moment, has been taken into account. Although throughout my writing, I tried to avoid imposing an image of the Chinese feminists as a networking "circle" (*quanzi*), terms like *nüquan quan* (the feminist networking circle) and *jinquan* (entering the circle), have frequently been used by my interviewees and others belonging to the cohort of post-89 generation feminists. The notion of the "circle" has been wittily summarized by a participant of the "Anti-March 7, Pro-March 8" protest in Wan Qing's documentary as "no circle, but, yes, boundary." Analyses of how a circle-less boundary is drawn in the feminist community are worthy of a new project, but are beyond the scope of the present one.

Second, like any newcomer to an existing organization, a researcher entering an activists' network needs to learn how to act in an activist way, including—but not limited to—sharing some of the same interests unrelated to work (keeping in mind that life and work are mingled), detecting who has more authority than others (without access to a guide book), studying how the distribution

of friendships came into being via past collaboration, conflicts, and miscommunications. As an ethnographer, I was cautioned by some of the more experienced activists to not interview some people. To neglect such suggestions had the potential to upset the balance between sub-groups within the larger feminist network, and thus presented as an ethical problem. A further research problem I encountered was the extent to which the research design or progress came to be overtaken by the fieldwork. Hence, I must acknowledge that taking sides would be biased, but for the ethnographer to not take sides—or silence—is also a stance. Once this research is written down and published, it, too, will have some consequences on the unfolding feminist movement.

Third, researching on an ongoing social movement that is dispersed all over China and the rest of the world (though mainly the US and Western Europe), with thousands of messages sent across the internet at all times and hundreds of new communication groups being conceived of as a form of actualizing ideas, it is hard to synthesize what is happening and immediately tease out the deeper connections between one event and others at different times and locations. Research on contemporary, ongoing activism runs the risk of missing information and evidence: failure to capture the rapidly accreting conversations or read the e-articles published daily by twenty feminist WeChat journals, as well as many more posts and comments on the feminists' personal account. At the same time, it also risks getting lost in the sea of information and losing track of the purpose of this research: what the movement looks like and what it means to have an alternative path of education via participation in feminist activism.

Another important challenge I should acknowledge is that, as someone who studies feminism, I find it very hard to introduce my study to most Chinese people unfamiliar with social sciences and humanities. This is a common challenge for most Chinese feminist activists. But as someone also influenced by the philosophies of emancipatory education and struggling to put into

practice the idea of intellectual equality, I cannot think of my audience, listeners, and readers as “ignorant” of feminism, and subsequently step into the hierarchical role of teacher by lecturing them on some basic feminist theories. This would be “banking education,” in the words of Paulo Freire, a way of educating that is least educational because it is too obsessed with the learning outcome. This challenge about communication leads me to re-examine Li Xiaojiang’s argument that China needs its own women’s studies, but not really Western feminism. Because of this viewpoint, she has been criticized since the 1992 Harvard conference by the CSWS members for failing to recognize that “feminism is universal, not Western,” and that “Chinese feminism is feminism, not a variant of it” (Li, 2000, p. 2). The argument between them rests on a crucial problem of the “Westernization” of Chinese feminism as a result of generation after generation of Chinese students being immersed in the discourses created in Western academia, learning critical theories but not necessarily being (self-)critical of this learning process. Feminism is one of the great examples of the growing trend of a “Westernized” paradigm of critical thinking. It reverberates with and complicates the existing Chinese Marxist foundation of education, which entails another research to explain.

A possible way to understand Chinese feminism being “Westernized” is that it has cultivated a cohort of Western viewers and needs to be in touch with them now and then. But these viewers are not constantly watching China. They mostly pay attention to China when something happens, something that attests to China’s suppression of human rights. However, what they see about China at those moments of shock, such as the detainment of the Feminist Five in 2015, the legal crackdown in the same year, the deaths of student protesters on Tian’anmen Square in 1989 etc., may be a closed, incomprehensible, and homogeneous entity. Left outside this view is the

everyday life that Chinese people live and the way in which they make sense of the complexities in life.

To me, a better way to justify the saying that “feminism is universal, not Western,” one needs to say that there are indeed many people in China who believe in gender equality and are working hard toward that goal for themselves and for others. This effort, when placed in the Western context, is feminism. In the Chinese context, however, it can be interpreted in many ways. For the purpose of the convenience for communicating with Western listeners, such efforts can be expediently categorized in the works of “gender” defined in Western theories. But this translation of “Chinese reality” back to “Western theory” risks reducing the historically constructed nuances of the meanings to which that effort is dedicated. Perhaps a more meaningful investigation to be done as part of a long-term Chinese feminist educational project would be to construct a platform to preserve the “crude” nuances of lived, gendered experiences without applying the gender/sex division to them, and let those who have had such experiences do their own theorizing work. The platform operator, as Rancière writes of the “ignorant schoolmaster” (1991), plays the role of a guide, rather than the master of knowledge.

6.3 Coda: The MeToo campaign

At the very end, I turn briefly to the MeToo campaign in China. This campaign has unfolded post-fieldwork, but it is illustrative of many of the issues I have discussed in the chapters. Most importantly, perhaps, it illuminates a potential horizon for feminist activism as radical popular education.

MeToo was said to be kicked off in China on January 1, 2018 by an accusation of a Chinese woman (now living in the U.S.) against her former mentor’s sexual harassment back when she was

a doctoral student at Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics (Beihang). Triggering heated debate over the grounds upon which her complaint could be considered valid, this single event opened the year with new hope and controversies over what feminism would accomplish in China. In late March, a male graduate student committed suicide due to intolerable harassment from his supervisor who claimed to have an allegedly father-and-son relationship with him. In early April, a two-decade-old case regarding a woman student's suicide was exposed by her former classmate, who is currently teaching in a top university in the US. The case pointed at her supervisor, then a Peking University (Beida) professor who was recently appointed by Nanjing University (Nanda) to receive a high national honor for academics and educators, the Yangtze River Scholarship. Immediately following this re-opened case, students at Renmin University besieged a classroom where a professor suspected of sexually assaulting multiple women students taught. Students in these top research universities collectively petitioned their respective institutions to take action to investigate, rather than shelter, the accused famous faculty members. The students' outcry against institutional corruption and dishonesty invoked the mission of modern Chinese universities modeled in particular after Beida and Nanda: truth, integrity, and not bending to bureaucratic power.

A later wave of MeToo campaign hit the domains of non-profit organizations and public intellectuals in the summer, triggering doubts about the scholarship and integrity of those popularly known as carriers of the hope of Chinese democratic education. In July 2018, a criticism of MeToo delivered by a famous Tsinghua professor, Liu Yu, who defended the many accused male intellectuals, exacerbated dispute over who those who had come forward with MeToo claims resembled: were they reminiscent of Mao's Red Guards with their big character posters or of the French students of May '68 (Chen, 2018). The focus here is not which comparison is more

legitimate, but what it means to associate feminist activism with past student protests. As so many of the students who participated in MeToo did not claim to be feminists, should feminists think the widespread support was an achievement for feminism? Were the supportive students already feminists even though they did not acknowledge it? Did the students' responses to the anti-sexual harassment campaign prove that feminism would have a place in China's future? Or, to flip the association, had feminism played a supportive role to the provocation of suppressed student politics since 1989? Was feminism a key symbol of resistance, a counterhegemonic symbol whose power only comes into full fruition in the absence of clear subcultural labels and yet can be shared among people with differing foci and commitments in life?

These questions make MeToo a special case in which feminism may be redefined and rediscovered. It recalls early twentieth-century China when many men and women fought for women's rights for education and employment, a manifestation of feminism's integration into larger goals of social change, which included a new mission for higher education. As in the cases of Beida and Nanda, enraged students called upon the mission of university education promised a hundred years ago to criticize the failure of today's practice of teaching and educational system. Yet, with the successful and bruising lessons of feminism's institutionalization under state socialism, with the awareness of the emergence of a new class constructed on the economization of creativity, and with radical educational philosophies (such as those discussed in this study) to draw upon, it may be time to start envisioning a new horizon for feminist movements in China.

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