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Remaking “Women” and Contemporary Chinese Feminism——Based on *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*

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ABSTRACT

The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism gives an historical retrospective of China in the past 100 years with a 20th century global perspective, probes about in-depth and multi-level Chinese women and contemporary social problems by tracing the evolution of the left-wing ideological context, and elaborates on the remaking of “women” creatively by virtue of the historical heritage of socialism. It is of great significance in responding to new changes and new issues taking place in contemporary Chinese feminism. For instance, in today’s China, while analyzing gender equality, people have to focus not only on the relationship between the sexes, but on development within women’s groups and on relations among class/strata also. Therefore, remaking “women” and how to remake “women”, in the Chinese context today, are important issues to feminists, as they will tell, to a certain extent, if gender studies can effectively respond to social issues in contemporary China.

1. The Concept of Remaking “Women”

The Chinese version of *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* by Tani E. Barlow has been published. It is both a historical book and a masterpiece of Chinese women’s studies. It is also, to me, a monograph on the history of Chinese thought: an unique contemporary Western left-wing thinker looks back on 100 years of Chinese history with a 20th century global perspective, probes and responds to the issues of contemporary Chinese women and social problems by tracing the evolution of left-wing ideological context multi-levelly and diversely.

Reading carefully between the lines, I notice that the author applies a contemporary concept referring not

only to time but to space. As it keeps moving on, the concept might refer to a social context in a certain specific historical period. It is apparent that while elaborating on Chinese issues in the 20th century the author always puts her analysis and discussions on women’s issues of each period into their corresponding social contexts whilst paying attention to the historical associations between them and pointing simultaneously toward the “future” in the so-called “past” or the “present” at the moment of confronting the society. Cruising among the time-space concept of chains and fields, the author has straightened out detailed historical factors and sequences of Chinese feminism, created a series of words of wisdom such as “catachreses” and “future anterior” used and emphasized

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here and there in her book. In the last two chapters, Socialist Modernization and the Market Feminism of Li Xiaojiang (Chapter 6) and Dai Jinhua, Globalization and 1990s Post Structuralist Feminism (Chapter 7), the author discusses issues with the perspective and approach of the “future anterior”, opening to the new century and pointing toward something. What does it truly point to? I see it as pointing to the Chinese society of the 21st century.

Over 30 years since the 1980s and in particular over a decade or so since the beginning of the 21st century China’s changes have been taking place at a bewildering rate with growth expanding rapidly. China’s academic theories and research have been keeping pace with the progressive times, as has Women’s Studies. Chinese society and women have experienced great changes in many aspects ever since the start of the new century. The growing gap between the rich and the poor, the salience of social stratification, the changes in viewpoint on marriage, the increasing weight of housing in marriage, the greater employment pressure on women, the higher frequency of women’s marriage in late age.

The “future anterior”, as a time-spatial concept, a way of thinking and a research approach the author develops in the book is of great significance and runs in tandem to the research on feminism today.

However, what impressed me most is Chapter 2. Theorizing “Women”, which the author elaborates on the evolutions of terms for women (*funü*) and their rules of play in the mainstream gender theory projects dominated by the Confucians between the 18th- and the early 20th-century cultural revolutions, during the formation of Chinese Marxist women’s concepts and theories from the 1920s-1930s in the 20th century and in the dawning of the golden era of Chinese communist familism in the 1950s. This evolution reflected the interaction and mutual formation between the “catachreses” in the development of the different “women” concepts and contemporary social life, resulting in an important creative concept of remaking “women”. This has become not only a way of academic thinking and research but an important path of practice.

In *The Second Sex*, published in 1949 in France, “Beauvoir proved, with a great deal of evidences of philosophy, psychology, anthropology, history, literature and anecdotes, that the obstacles to women’s freedom are not brought about by their biological conditions but by political and legal constraints. Her well-known saying is ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.’”^[1] That is to say, “woman” is “produced” or “made”, and

is constantly “remade” by different subjects in different historical periods, under different social contexts and to meet different needs. In Chapter 2 of *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, the author declares that “Between the eighteenth- and the early twentieth-century cultural revolutions, the dominant, formulaic historical catachresis in mainstream Confucian regulative gender theory projects was *funü*. *Funü* signified the collectivity of kinswomen in the semiotics of Confucian family doctrine”^[2]. “Early in the twentieth century the Chinese Communist Party took over responsibility for the organized women’s movement,” and gradually “an alternative, massified, politicized subject known in CCP diction as *funü* eventually superseded both the Confucian protocols of *funü* and the eroticized subject *mixing*.” Thus, “under the Maoist state’s centralizing discourses, *funü* was resituated, first within the *guojia* (state) and then, secondarily, through the magic of revolutionary social praxis and ideological metonymy, in the modern *jiating* (family)”^[2]. In broad outline, the evolution of terms for “female” in the Chinese history of the 20th century can be traced from “*nüren*” in the Confucian doctrine to “*nüxing*” in colonial modernity and then to “*funü*” in Marxist discourse. However, the latest evolution is not the one to “re-produce women/female” in general meaning, but to “remake women” in the class discourse: working women, especially rural women, began to appear on the scene. In other words, remaking “women” then was a new “catachresis” that occurred in the Marxist and Chinese context throughout the 20th century, and in the history of Chinese left-wing thought from its early modern period to the modern era, with a distinct class attribute.

2. The Relationship between Feminism and Left-Wing Thought

The year 1840 stands as an important watershed year in Chinese history. From then on in the new century China was undergoing a capitalist expansionism. As Yang Du said in his *Economic Imperialism* published in 1907, “Today, though what China faces up to are all civilized nations, it has, unfortunately, to put up with an uncivilized world.”^[3] And, at that time, the relationship between China and the Western powers was just as Liang Qichao stated in his *New Citizen*, “What is National Imperialism? They are arrogant and overbearing with their national power, engaging in aggression and expansion abroad and looking down upon China as the weakest country in the world”^[4].

China was then forced and hastily rushed into a

semi-colonial and semi-feudal society with an unequal structure. Modern thought in the early modern period had to twist its way naturally through a squeezed, oppressed and colonized context and this experience, full of tensions, defiance, the pursuit of ideals of freedom, equality and liberty at its birth, had a left-wing orientation all its way forward. Due to the impact of Confucian concepts of class and gender “men are superior to women”, women at large in semi-feudal and semi-colonial society had no other choice but to become “the direct slaves of slaves”^[2].

However, women were awakening and began to fight back because they were aroused by early modern thought and inspired by the Revolution of 1911. Their rebellion was quite different from the resistance of educated women rising from the urban society of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, since women at large who were involved then were from all classes and all areas. The “coupling interaction” between women’s liberation and left-wing thought became a significant feature highlighting this historical moment. Chinese feminism from very early in the 20th century co-existed and associated with left-wing thought in the context of a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society, endowing the history of Chinese feminist thought with a left-wing tendency. To be more exact, the issue of women in Chinese feminism was then not only inevitable in the history of Chinese feminist thought but also important in the history of Chinese left-wing thought. It was just because of this “coupling interaction” that the historical and ideological foundation and probability for re-making “women” in a Marxist viewpoint were activated.

From the emergence of Chinese early modern thought with left-wing orientation during the 19th century to the introduction and dissemination of Marxist thought in China later in the 20th century, Chinese feminism initiated a practice of re-making “women” at such time that it was connected with left-wing early modern thought and based on each of their interactions.

During these times, the two sides shared consistency in their pursuit of the ultimate goals of equality, democracy and emancipation. The important issues of national independence and liberation on which left-wing thought focused were partly women’s liberation and women’s participation in the establishment and development of a new nation. The human equality and liberation that left-wing thought showed concern for involved the women “half” and rural women in particular, as they mattered greatly to the success or failure of left-wing political practice. The people living at the bottom or on the edge of

society about whom left-wing thought cared were mostly women.

As mentioned above, the author’s ideas and approaches in her studies might refer to the future, and so might the issue of remaking “women”. In other words, the term “women” is a floating signifier that has different implications in different historical periods and fields, and can be constantly “catachresis”, meaning “re-making”. The book fascinates its readers with openness. Due to certain limitations of the time when the book was written and access to historical data, the discussions hold their steps at the chapters on “Market Feminism” and “Post Structuralist Feminism”. It is evident to the eye that, in the decade since then, Chinese feminism kept developing. Feminist thought in China was progressing and women’s issues renewed their connotation with great changes. Re-making “women” in Chinese society, in the spatial-temporal frame for open discussions initiated by the author in the book, continued without interruption or cessation. However we have to ask in the Chinese context: How are “women” “re-made”? Who is “remaking” “women”? What type of “re-making” is it?

Looking back to Chinese history since China adopted a strategy of opening-up and reform, we notice that Chinese feminism in the 1980s as Lin Chun, Liu Bohong and Jin Yihong described in their Study on the School of Chinese Feminism, was experiencing, a “separation movement” with three orientations: First, to separate women’s liberation from social-class liberation; Second, to separate Women’s Studies from the traditional theory of Marxism and Knowledge Production; Third, to separate the Women’s Movement from the pattern shaped and controlled by the state. Undoubtedly, the “separation movement” aimed to produce the independence of women, women’s issues, and women’s studies, thus turning “women” into an independent discourse parallel with “class”, so that women’s liberation would be distinguished from or even beyond social-class liberation^[5]. Under these circumstances, this was of positive significance, as people were keen to restore what was destroyed by the “Cultural Revolution” in academic research and the women’s movement a new field, ‘Women’s Studies’ opens. In the mid-1990s, a “break” occurred in the history of Chinese feminist thought which has been understood as a farewell to the 1980s, with objectives of de-history and de-politics. In a certain sense, this “separation movement” and “break” have been taken as two of the processes in “remaking women”.

3. Contemporary Society Need “Remaking Women”

In the first decade of the 21st century, Chinese feminism appeared with an orientation destination or ideological footing in mind. Instead, accompanying it was a public clamor: from being “feminists” to “stay-at-home moms and wives” from “leftover ladies” (meaning “3S ladies”= remain Single, born in Seventies, Stuck in finding spouses) or “SAS ladies” (Single, Attractive, Successful) to “rural left-behind women”. Also, the “white-collar, key member/backbone elites” to “white, rich, and pretty girls”. These all-embracing and endlessly appearing new words, social phenomenon and the social practice of the “Occupy Men’s Toilet Movement “ occurred recently as representative, no matter what forms they took in individual protests or through mass movements but stating that dramatic changes are taking place in the society while a multi-faceted prism is mirroring the current China. That contemporary Chinese feminism, to a certain extent, has been chased into a dead-end of “post-modernism because the power used by people to possess in the face of women and women’s issues has been dispersed, the goals have become fuzzy, and the value has disappeared. Thus, the seriousness of social practices relating to women and gender has been replaced by entertainment, the wider road is actually leading people towards a more narrow direction; all the issues mixed in those social phenomena are becoming more complicated with blurred definitions. Unquestionably, by now new perspectives and approaches have to be found in order to analyze well these seemingly ill-defined, rapidly changed and intertwined issues of today. With regard to issues such as gender equality and gender justice, it is nowhere near good enough if they are analyzed only within the theoretical framework of feminism or simply in the perspective of social class ^[6]. These issues can neither be simply analyzed from the political perspective, nor from the economic viewpoint, nor from the perspectives of culture and differences. Let us look at the so-called “leftover women” for example. This issue exposes political and economic reasons that are responsible for their situation and also its cultural influence. The term is overly simple as it seems to shift the political and economic responsibility of the society, it sounds somewhat amusing due to the media’s attitude. Last but not least, the term has to be analyzed in the perspective of multiclass and strata other than of gender. The term as we know it reveals a kind of discrimination, in actual fact the “leftovers” include both women and

men, though it has different implications depending on classes and locations. “Rural left-behind women” refers to another kind of “leftover” which should be examined not only from political and economic aspects but from a cultural perspective; not only from the angle of gender but of multiclass and strata. The term includes a rural female group who are living at the bottom of society, vulnerable and weak; even though they have had an inextricable relationship with the city throughout the economic changes and development. For years, they have been kept voiceless, seldom uttering their own political, economic and cultural appeals. In an “atomized” society, people put more weight on personal interest, personality and selfhood and prefer to boundary themselves with nothing beyond the immediate family. It is hard to rally and unite them as one to overcome difficulties together, since the tradition of mutual assistance and trust among neighbors has been broken. Although the discussion above as of now seems rather rough and shallow, we progress and come across more problems that seem terribly entangled. Like the two cases mentioned above, these problems are intertwined with each other: “There is something of each in the other”. To get them straightened out, we have to arm ourselves with “prism-like” knowledge, vision and approach. It follows that the current Chinese political and economic structure and social system have “re-produced” women in the social life. Women in this context are quite different from previous generations of women in economic conditions, social status, political nature, identity and cultural attribution, which results in changes in Chinese feminism and brings about new challenges for gender studies.

Facing the complicated and changeable contemporary situation, what shall we do and think? In other words, how does the intellectual community “re-make” women in its field of vision, in its theory of knowledge and research methods? We have to look for new resources and rethink them if we cannot rid ourselves of these new issues and difficulties; but where do we look and how do we approach the problems.

Generally speaking, when we take into account the phenomena and issues of contemporary Chinese feminism, we can easily pick out two “big terms”: feminism and left-wing thought. The former has had problems in history and reality; for instance, it did not take much time to reflect on or see in retrospect the harm to Chinese feminism brought about by the “Cultural Revolution” it so cruelly and absolutely abandoned the historic heritage of the socialist women’s movement and women’s liberation

that had lasted for 17 years (since 1949 to 1966). What's worse, Western feminism has not been well localized during the 1980s when it was introduced into China. It rashly and carelessly gave up the pioneering achievements gained in the field of Women's Studies of the 1980s. The latter has been to a certain extent empty talk, a tendency or possibility toward nationalism, some shrinking or withdrawal in practices, and a certain ignorance of or indifference toward the underclass in its field of vision, etc. The issues of the two sides have swept over the world accompanied with New Liberalism and struck deep roots among all aspects of Chinese society; thus, contemporary feminism has, to some extent, almost totally thrown itself into the lap of New Liberalism. Simultaneously, when feminism abandoned the tradition of left-wing thought, left-wing thought brushed aside feminism, causing the two sides to "break up" from their coupling interaction. All these problems and factors developed a joint force that resulted in a crisis for contemporary feminism, that is to say, leading it to "a dead-end of post-modernism," as was mentioned above. However, to seek and tap out new historical resources is usually taken as one of the effective ways to tackle or break through the crisis. These two "big terms" cannot be sidestepped in the Chinese local and historical context that has taken shape since 1840. It seems that contemporary society should not completely deconstruct the coupling interaction between feminism and left-wing thought even though it appeared both historically and dramatically in Chinese history of the 20th century. Since historically feminism and left-wing thought were not completely segregated from each other nor should contemporary feminism turn its back upon the left-wing tradition that had escorted it for more than a century. Therefore, to break through the crisis, we must bring vigor into academic ideology and social practice. It is essential to seriously draw on the experience and theory of remaking "women" from the history of Chinese feminist thought of the 20th century, to draw on the resources of socialist feminism that have been forgotten and to reconstruct the tradition of feminism and left-wing thought as a matter of course. True women's liberation could never do without social liberation nor without the social ideal pursued by left-wing thought of democracy, equality and non-oppression.

At this point let us go back to the discussion above. In current society, as we know, remaking "women" is not only a serious realistic problem but a complex academic one. With regard to the latter, the more important action is to get feminism sucked into the "vortex" of

the social space-time structure, rethinking about its historic association with left-wing thought, and then re-historicizing and re-politicalizing it. That is to say, we have to put together contemporary women issues and relevant social problems into a "system" which covers multi-fields including politics, economics, culture, history and geography, re-activating those ideas shared by both feminism and the left-wing thought about independence, equality and emancipation; analyzing gender phenomenon, and addressing women's issues in multi-angles of class, stratum and gender. This must be the appropriate and effective approach and method for research on feminism in China today. Undoubtedly, it is one of the important guidelines that the article '*Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*' draws for us; and, fortunately, in current academia people have begun to initiate similar studies and practices. For example, while studying social stratification scholars would bring in gender perspective, combining gender issues with social stratification. Conversely, they could take into account the differences in class when doing research on gender issues. In discussing family issues, "full-time housewives can be classified as housewives of working-class families and of new middle-class families, and so on" ^[7]. In discussing current social issues, gender, class and market are brought together into studies, so that we can understand that during times of social transformation the "labor market has become an important power in forming gender stratification" ^[8]. The expanding labor market today has constantly produced inequality between the sexes and among women themselves, widening the income gap among different social groups, which almost doubled compared to the past as the growth becomes geometric. These discussions on gender issues have been done with interdisciplinary perspectives instead of from a single angle; the gender research paradigm has become a new critique scope which has developed after "women", academically speaking, have been "remade", re-politicalized and re-socialized under the new historical circumstances. This critical scope has surpassed the "separation" and "break" not only associating with history and tradition but also keeping pace with the contemporary. Then we next maintain and enrich this new critical scope or research paradigm, making it more flexible and energetic. When this happens contemporary Chinese feminism will be steered in the right direction; Gender/Women's Studies will be helped out of the "bottleneck"; and social issues in China today will be well tackled.

Notes

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