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Contents

Editors' Introduction

We are pleased to present issue 9.1 of the *Journal of the British Association for Chinese Studies*.

This issue focuses on Chinese female (academic) identities in a variety of different contexts, starting with a thought-provoking essay by Yan Wu (Swansea University) on the experience of being a Chinese female academic in the UK.

Meng Li (Hong Kong Polytechnic University) follows by asking in what ways well-educated Chinese women are stigmatised in popular culture. Li argues that it is the two motifs of estrangement and escape that reflect how Chinese intellectual women are represented and rendered in the Chinese popular cultural context with frequent animosity, prejudice and discrimination.

Kailing Xie (University of Warwick) investigates how gender affects the career and reproductive choices of China's well-educated daughters, particularly those working in academia. Drawing on a sub-set of a larger data sample, Xie analyses how the existing socio-political discourse constructs a naturalised female subject bound by reproductive norms, and discusses the implications of this for women's careers.

Yejun Zou (King's College London and the Humboldt University of Berlin) takes a comparative and historical view by examining the practicality of socialist feminism as an alternative model for contemporary Chinese feminism through an analysis of the depiction of women in the literary works of Ding Ling and Christa Wolf. Zou offers insights into the way their writings negotiate women's concern with the official narrative of life in socialist states, and the extent to which these texts illuminate alternative Chinese feminist approaches in a contemporary context.

Denise Kwan (University of Westminster) returns to the UK context in her examination of how practices of dressing and adornment are employed to manage the otherness experienced by second-generation British Chinese women. Employing a creative ethnographic methodology with a focus on material practices, her research vividly demonstrates the significance of everyday actions and objects in the negotiation of power and the formation of ethnic women's identities.

The first issue of 2019 clearly reflects our mission as an open access, free, and forward-looking academic journal. We are committed to promoting Chinese Studies as a distinct discipline, and to providing dedicated editorial support for PhDs and ECRs. Gender and ethnic equality in Chinese Studies is of particular concern to us. Come and join us in a round table discussion on new models of open access publishing in Asian Studies at the AAS in Denver on Saturday, 23 March.

Finally, a big shout-out to Sarah Dauncey for her many years of selfless dedication to *JBACS*, and a warm welcome to Heather Inwood, who has now joined Gerda Wielander as co-editor.

We hope you enjoy the new issue, and that it will inspire you to submit your next research article to us.

Gerda Wielander and Heather Inwood

Where to Belong? The Intersectionality of Discrimination Faced by Chinese Female Academics

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When web forums first emerged in China in the 1990s, an internet satire concerning women holding higher education credentials went viral almost overnight within online communities. This satire compared women holding higher education degrees to the three female prototypes in Louis Cha Jing-yong's (Jin Yong 金庸) martial arts and chivalry (*wuxia* 武侠) novels. Bachelor degree holders were compared to "Little Dragon Maiden" (Xiao Longnü 小龙女), an indifferent, but elegant and beautiful martial arts master who was loyal to her first and only love. Master's degree holders were compared to Li Mochou 李莫愁, a middle-aged martial arts master who morphed into a brutal killer after her lover betrayed her. PhD degree holders were compared to the elderly "Abbess Annihilation" (Miejue Shitai 灭绝师太), who was compelled to avenge the death of her lover and turned into a merciless man-hater and man-killer. In the novels, these three characters were rewarded or punished in narratives centring around their relationship to men—the youthful and loyal Little Dragon Maiden reunited with her lover eventually, while the other two characters (who happened to be much older and more experienced) were driven to their respective deaths due to their lack of love, despite their formidable martial arts power.

   Ever since the late 1990s, this satire has been reposted, recycled, commented, discussed, and turned into memes—and it is still going strong online today. The

popularity of this satire in the past two decades, to a large degree, reflects a sustained sexist belief in Chinese society that single women with power, intelligence, and the wisdom that comes with age are dangerous. They should either be "converted" into wives for more powerful men (in the case of Little Dragon Maiden), or destroyed entirely if their power becomes too mighty to control. Some male internet users even summarised the unattractive features of female PhDs: they tend to be older than other eligible, single women; they tend to have a sense of superiority due to their academic achievements; and they tend to be scientific and unromantic.

In socialist China, the Communist Party adopted a form of "state feminism" in mobilising women, and brought them into the public arena. However, the Chinese Communist Party did not seriously confront the patriarchal system, upon which they gained the support from the peasantry and working class people (Stacey, 1983). The economic reform and the adoption of a socialist market economy from the late 1970s, on the one hand, provided women, alongside men, with opportunities to produce economic success; while on the other hand, the partial withdrawal of the state allowed the re-emergence of traditional patriarchal values which discriminated against, and excluded, women in education and employment (Rai, 1992). In the meantime, despite the rise of grassroots feminism in the country, Confucianism still plays a strong role, or has even enjoyed a renaissance. Women are still regarded as participants in sustaining sexist practices that conform to Confucian ideals in Chinese society. Being a highly-educated, strong-willed, self-determining individual is not an expectation for women.

Driven by various motivations, I came to the UK in 2002 to pursue a PhD degree. It seemed like a dream come true when I was offered an academic position with Swansea University immediately after graduation. My job involves teaching, research, and administration, just like my British colleagues who hold PhD degrees. Ever since gaining this employment, I have known, or worked with, many intelligent, ambitious, and aspiring young Chinese academics in the country. Among them, many either hold a PhD degree or are in the process of obtaining one. Starting an academic career after completing a PhD, if possible, outside of China, is on everyone's mind. When I wrote the title for this article, I recalled a voice from a few years ago, when a young woman confidently told

me: "You did it; you proved that a Chinese woman can obtain a PhD, find a job, and have a family in this country. I could do the same." Hence it is almost my mission to share with these young people the unique intersectional experience of being Chinese, and female, in the British HE environment.

Britain has been several steps ahead of China in terms of safeguarding gender and racial equality in the workplace. The general public also holds a much more accepting attitude towards women with PhD degrees, and HE institutions, in particular, have made major progress towards ethnic diversity and gender equality in recent years.

On the surface, British universities have achieved a high level of gender equality. According to Higher Education Statistics, among the total number of 206,870 female and male academics holding permanent or fixed-term contracts in 2016-2017, 46% of academic staff were women, who contribute to the prosperity of UK HE. Although male academic staff members outnumbered female academic staff members in general, at first glance, the discrepancies between genders are not significant in most areas. It is when we consider different types of work, and types of employment, that the differences become obvious. There are 1.3 times more male than female staff-members doing research; 1.6 times more men work in Teaching and Research than women. As a recent development, the University and College Union (UCU) has warned that

> fixed-term and hourly paid staff are faced with job insecurity which blights our further and higher education systems, bringing with it inefficiency, inequality and personal stress. Alongside this, part-time staff are too frequently not being employed on pro-rata pay and terms and conditions of service (University and College Union, 2018).

The insecurity and inequality associated with part-time jobs seem to affect more women than men. The areas where female academic staff members dominate are mainly in part-time employment. In almost all types of part-time employment, female academics outnumber their male counterparts. Most notable is the part-time research-only contract, where female staff (combing

both permanent and fixed-term contracts) account for more than two thirds (67%) of the total.

In the same academic year (2016-2017), non-EU academic staff members accounted for 12.4% of the workforce—a minority that contributes to the global expansion of UK HE, and the internationalisation of British universities.

Being ethnic minorities, BME staff in general face more hurdles in career development compared to their white colleagues. There are no specific statistics about non-EU BME female staff members; hence, it is difficult to gauge the representation of this group at various levels. What I am discussing here is a unique intersectional experience from a small, yet growing, Chinese female academic community.

Firstly, Chinese female academics face the same barriers in their career development as their British counterparts. The gender pay gap, the lack of institutional childcare support, a male-dominated HE culture, and the lack of female leadership are all factors affecting female academics of different nationalities. I was lucky enough to be working in a university that has been actively reforming male-dominated HE culture, and has promoted a number of inspiring women to professorial and senior management positions in recent years. Nonetheless, changing the HE systematic structure is anything but easy. According to the UCU, the gender pay gap in the UK is the highest in the European Union; 36% of female lecturers are paid in the bottom half of the 8 point spine, compared to 32% of male lecturers (University and College Union, 2018). There is no specific data concerning the position of non-EU female academics in the gender pay gap, but nonetheless, Chinese female academics are not excluded from this discrimination.

Although, in general, many EU countries boast a good work–family balance by offering state-subsidised childcare, the percentage of grandparents providing care for grandchildren has been on the rise. The UK has the second highest percentage of grandparents providing care for grandchildren among the 11 European countries studied, falling behind Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Portugal, Spain, and Italy (Glaser et al., 2013: 8). Compared with British or European female academics, Chinese female

academics are less likely to seek support with childcare from extended families due to the geographic distance involved. Combining these two factors, it is not difficult to draw a connection: the generally inadequate childcare provision at most HE institutions means that the reasons contributing to the gender pay gap, such as interrupted careers due to child-birth or childcare, tend to affect Chinese female academics even more.

Secondly, racial discrimination is still experienced by Chinese academics working in Europe and North American HE institutions, although in these countries, overt discrimination is outlawed. In general, Europe is an open, tolerant, multicultural community, but on the other hand, ethnic minorities, in particular immigrants, face prejudice. This includes "persistent stereotyping, stigmatisation and discrimination at all levels of society" (Kamali, 2009: 1). Discrimination today most often takes the form of subtle or covert, or even unintentional or unconscious bias, which artificially creates boundaries between "us" and "them" due to differences in culture, religion, beliefs, practices, and so on. British HE institutions have a very tolerant and multicultural environment in general. However, the feeling of not being trusted or included is often felt by Chinese academics, both male and female, simply because of the country they come from.

On the one hand, no institution would deny the financial contribution made by growing numbers of students, research funds, and research opportunities coming from China. The rise of China has created unmissable recruitment, research and collaboration opportunities for UK HE, so much so that a Chinese female colleague told me she was given heavy teaching and administrative responsibilities associated with looking after Chinese students by her university, which left her little time or access to research. As she fears, such lack of research opportunities will lead to a lack of opportunities for future career development.

On the other hand, the rise of China as a world political, economic, and military power is often viewed with mixed feelings; these mixed feelings could be subconsciously reflected in the way Chinese individuals are treated. There seems to be a shared misunderstanding among many that if a Chinese individual has decided to stay in the UK for career development, s/he must be a political dissident who has fled to freedom and democracy. If s/he is not a dissident but

stays in the UK to develop his/her career, that decision itself is puzzling or could even be treated with suspicion.

In October of 2018, Michigan University unexpectedly closed its connection to the China Data Centre, which had been part of the University since 1997. The university spokesperson explained that the closure was due to an internal review, which revealed that the centre would have required the university to make costly repairs and upgrades. But the Chinese academic who heads the centre said that its financial status had been healthy (Leung, 2018). Even worse, several Chinese postgraduate students in the US were reported as having been arrested, allegedly for espionage. Within the UK, according to the BBC, "British security officials are particularly concerned about universities being targeted for research and intellectual property" since universities are regarded as "a soft target for economic espionage" (Corera, 2018). There has not been an equivalent crackdown on Chinese academics in the UK, although the overall mixed feelings toward China contribute to a distrust of Chinese academics in general. One frustrated colleague told me that her proposal to set up a China Research Centre within her university was not successful due to the fact that the senior management team did not like the idea of constructing a Chinese "ghetto".

Black feminist bell hooks wrote *Ain't I a Woman* (1987), examining how the intersectionality of gender and race put black women under systematic oppression by both white and black men, and by white women. I feel that this unnamed, and unspoken, intersectional experience felt by many Chinese female academics deserves a place in the public discussion about the HE sector. In the end, working in a British university has been our choice—due to a commitment to an academic career, a belief in the liberal culture cherished by British universities, or even a change in personal circumstances. Who knows? Whatever the case, this commitment, trust, and freedom in making personal choices should not be mistreated.

How would we position ourselves—Chinese female PhD degree-holders working in UK universities? Well, in Louis Cha's less known novel, *Swordswoman Riding West on White Horse* (*Baima xiao xifeng* 白马啸西风), he depicts the rare, strong, female protagonist Li Wenxiu 李文秀. Li is a Han orphan brought

up among Kazakh people in Northwest China. The various strands of love and morality have pulled this remarkable swordswoman between the Han and the Kazakh, between the depraved and the righteous. By the end of the novel, she has won the battle and become the last woman standing. Surprisingly, the loveless Li was not punished by the narrative with death. Instead, the heroine was set free. She trespasses both worlds, from the Gobi desert to the south of the Yangtze River, with a sword in her hand and a white horse by her side. She savours both, belongs to both and owns both. Maybe, Li Wenxiu shows us a possible reality: that of capable women who have fought for what they choose in life, despite the fact that they, at the same time, have to be burdened with the prize they have paid for such autonomy.

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Portrayals of the Chinese *Être Particulières*: Intellectual Women and Their Dilemmas in the Chinese Popular Context Since 2000

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Abstract

This article studies the tension between post-Mao Chinese intellectual women and their dilemma in post-2000s Chinese popular media. TV dramas, films, songs and reality shows in which Chinese intellectual women and their dilemmas are identified, mis/represented, mis/understood and addressed are the research objects of this article. By foregrounding the two motifs of estrangement and escape in understanding and characterising post-Mao Chinese intellectual women, the article seeks to answer the following questions: In what ways are well-educated Chinese women consistently stigmatised under the unsympathetic limelight of the public? And for what reason are Chinese intellectual women identified as the être particulières *in the popular context?*

Keywords: intellectual women, dilemma, estrangement, escape, popular cultural context.

Efforts to define the femininity of intellectual women and explain why intellectual women, "*une être particulière*" (Ernot, 1998: 102, cited in Long, 2013: 13), are exposed to stigmatisation has been the focus of my research of the previous decade. Both Luce Irigaray (1985) and Chen Ya-chen (2011) have proposed viewing female desire and language, as well as feminism itself, via a multi-dimensional lens. Their proposal has received active responses from Chinese intellectual women. Such responses can be seen via the prevailing multi-dimensional perspective in understanding issues of Chinese women and gender in the last three decades (Tong, 2008: 68). My research defines "intellectual women" as women with higher education who demonstrate independent thinking and feminist self-consciousness in their intellectual activities. These intellectual activities, to adopt Antonio Gramsci's categorisation, enable these women to become "creators of the various sciences, philosophy, art" and "'administrators' and divulgators of pre-existing, traditional, accumulated intellectual wealth" (Gramsci, cited in Gottlieb, 1989: 119). Therefore, instead of viewing intellectual women in terms of another influential Gramscian demarcation of the "organic intellectuals" and "traditional intellectuals", this article specifically identifies female professionals, artists, writers, academics, and students pursuing or holding college degrees or higher qualifications as intellectual women.

Timothy Cheek's monograph on the narrative history of Chinese intellectuals meticulously categorises intellectuals from 1996 to 2015 (who are unanimously male) as establishment intellectuals, academic/public intellectuals and independent intellectuals (Cheek, 2016: 267). His lucid demarcation of post-Mao Chinese intellectuals invites comprehensive understanding of intellectual activities in contemporary China. Rather than adopting his demarcation, this article focuses on the portrayals of intellectual women's activities in what Cheek names "the many worlds of Chinese intellectuals" (2016: 280): the official world

(which I understand as the tension they experience with the State-imposed discourse in marriage, birth and family values), the commercial world (how intellectual women are consumed as targets of mockery in popular media), and the academic world (how intellectual women are portrayed as undesirable in the marriage market due to their high level of academic achievement).[1] The portrayals of intellectual women in these three worlds puts them in a dilemma, or, to use Cheek's words, in "the lonely world of dissent" (2016: 285).

The dilemma of post-Mao Chinese intellectual women is situated at the intersection of the dilemmas of the post-Mao Chinese intellectual and that of Chinese women. The dilemma of Chinese intellectuals merges the coexistence of the pride and privileges granted by epistemological advantage and cultural capital (Xu, 2016: 45-46), and with tensions with state ideology. The relationship between post-Mao Chinese intellectuals and state ideology is often marked by uncomfortable marginalisation in both the political and cultural senses (Yu, 2003).[2] This marginalisation is coupled with anti-intellectualism, a haunting political tradition in Chinese history from the Maoist era to the post-Mao era (Cheek, 2016: 278-9). Anti-intellectualism, with its implications of hatred, doubt, discrimination and even hostility is against the intellect and intellectuals (Yu, 2014: 2). When the above-mentioned dilemma incorporates Chinese women's struggles against sexism, staggering negotiation between both modern and traditional gender norms, as well as state-imposed gender and marriage ideals,

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[1] In Cheek's study, all value spheres of Chinese intellectuals of the period 1996 and 2015 include: "the official world of public and political life; the academic world of universities and scholarship; the commercial world of making, buying and selling; the associational world of public intellectuals, religious groups, Internet communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other tolerated groups; and […] the *waiyu* world of 'foreign language communities'" (2016: 273). He also includes discussion of "the lonely world of open dissent" (2016: 285).

[2] A similar argument can be found in Mok Ka-ho's *Intellectuals and the State in Post-Mao China.* Mok sees a lowered social position of post-Mao Chinese intellectuals and he argues that the post-Mao Chinese intellectuals remain "appendages of the working class". See Mok (1998: 201).

a gendered and intensified version of the plight of Chinese intellectuals results: the dilemma of Chinese intellectual women.

In my previous research on the fiction of the female writer Huang Beijia, which largely focuses on the lives of intellectual women characters, I foregrounded two motifs which characterise the subjectivity of Chinese intellectual women: estrangement and escape (Li, 2013: 87). I also proposed that these two motifs can be the lens through which the femininity of Chinese intellectual women can be understood (Li, 2013). My next step in the study of Chinese intellectual women will present how the tension between intellectual women and their dilemma is manifested via estrangement and escape. Both estrangement and escape are associated with certain characteristics of intellectuals including outsidership and an autonomous and precarious status. These qualities are captured in terms such as "free-floating intelligentsia" (Mannheim, 2000: 159),[3] Sartrean solitary self-orientation as "hav[ing] no mandate from anyone but ow[ing] his status only to himself" (Sartre, 1972: 44, cited in Long, 2013: 19), the metaphoric "strangerhood" (Pels, 2013: 193) and "privileged nomads" (Pels, 2013: 176), and the romanticised model of "powerless exiles" (Said, 1994: 47). These characterisations enable intellectuals' detachment from any class as well as their formation into a single class. Their remoteness, detached position or experience of distance thus allow intellectuals to broaden their view in society and life (Mendel, 2006: 38-9).

As for intellectual women, such detachment is, from a feminist perspective, intensified by women's marginal position in patriarchal society. Therefore, Pels' salient understanding of intellectual women's location of inbetweenness maps

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[3] In her study on Mannheim's "free-floating intelligentsia", Iris Mendel similarly states that intellectuals are a "heterogeneous collective whose social and political position is difficult to locate". See Mendel (2006: 34).

out the dilemma of being an intellectual woman:

> It is her peculiar intermediate condition of an outsider within, her distance position of marginality *in the centre* and the double consciousness which is induced by it, which is taken metonymically to reflect the standpoint of the "class" of women as a whole (Pels, 2013: 165).

My proposal of the term "estrangement" is a continuation of Pels' concept. Estrangement emphasises the status of "being different" and "being away" from others. It emphasises the pride of the intellectual, which centres on their role as the knowledge elite. My research on estrangement foregrounds two perspectives of intellectual women: one is the self-orientation of intellectual women, and the other is the way they are viewed in different cultural discourses and contexts. Both perspectives demonstrate intellectual women's self-identities, as well as identities imposed by others.

From the perspective of self-orientation, intellectual women highlight their own superiority through their education and knowledge, ideals, lifestyle and taste. This estrangement also functions in intellectual women's negotiations with the Confucian, Maoist and post-Mao discourses in which they orient themselves even as they are viewed externally as "different" for distancing themselves from the dominant discourse.

Escape accentuates what intellectual women actually do with their lives which manifest their independence and their autonomy/subjectivity. Escape also involves two dimensions: one is the way intellectual women emancipate themselves in the form of escape while the other focuses on their physical and social mobility, including Chinese intellectual women's connection to the West.

In the first dimension, intellectual women seek emancipation from the binds of family, marriage, and gender conformity which bespeak the patriarchal order. In the dimension of escape, intellectual women in the post-Mao popular cultural context can often be seen performing their escape by imagining, consuming and attempting a "life elsewhere", notably in engagement with the West (Li, 2013).

This article studies the tension between Chinese intellectual women and antagonism toward intellectual women as represented in the popular context in post-2000s China. It renders this animosity not just as hatred against woman. It will demonstrate that the ill feeling towards intellectual woman comes from both men and other women, who are, in the words of Sartre cited in the epigraph in the second volume of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, "[h]alf victims, half accomplices, like everyone else" (Sartre, 1955: 189). The remainder of this article illustrates the adaptability of the two motifs in the post-2000s Chinese popular media. In what follows, I first offer a comparative study of the intellectual women protagonists in the films *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt* (*Yima de houxiandai shenghuo* 姨妈的后现代生活, 2006, dir. Ann Hui),[4] and *And the Spring Comes* (*Lichun* 立春, 2007, dir. Gu Changwei). Both films characterise intellectual women in related ways, illustrating the tentative social status they secure in difficult situations.

The second section maps out the unfriendly and sometimes prejudicial portrayals of intellectual women in the popular media since the 2010s. I argue that these labels and metaphors of vilification underscore intellectual women's estrangement. Seasoned cynically with pretentious self-depreciation, "Song of an Elder Artistic Woman" (Daling wenyi nü qingnian zhi ge 大龄文艺女青年之

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[4] Due to her identity as a Hong Kong filmmaker, Ann Hui's cinematic representation of Chinese intellectual women is sometimes questioned by Chinese critics and audiences. The focus of this article, however, is the representation rather than the verisimilitude

歌), the signature song of folk singer Shao Yibei, will be read as a fight-back against the animosity targeted at intellectual women.

Bitter Cinematic Representations of Intellectual Women in *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt* and *And the Spring Comes*

In this section, I present a comparative analysis of two representations of post-Mao intellectual women in early twenty-first century Chinese cinema: the characters Ye Rutang in *Postmodern Life of My Aunt* and Wang Cailing in *And the Spring Comes*. Both films feature intellectual women as dreamers, placing them in situations in which they struggle to manifest their subjectivity as intellectual women. In many ways, both films represent intellectual women as misfits, and such representations intensify the bitterness and poignancy shared by these female characters. Here, these films are read in light of the proposed two motifs, estrangement and escape.

In *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt,* Ye Rutang (Aunt Ye) leaves her construction worker husband and baby daughter in the industrial city of Anshan in the early years of the reform era. She lives alone in metropolitan Shanghai, earning a living as a freelance English tutor. After having led years of a middle-class lifestyle, the retired woman then has her lifelong savings stolen by her lover. Now bankrupt, she returns to Anshan to live with her husband, with whom she sells leather shoes in the local flea market. The female protagonist Wang Cailing in Gu Changwei's *And the Spring Comes* is a college vocal teacher in a backwater town. She has ambitions of becoming an acclaimed soprano and endeavours to be selected to join the National Opera in Beijing. She is disgraced by her attempt at a romantic relationship with a like-minded frustrated young artist. Her dreams crushed, Wang abandons her singing career and opens up a

butchery.

Both Ye and Wang are well-educated intellectual women who distinguish themselves through their refinement in what Theodore Adorno may define as "high culture". In the case of Ye, it is her predilection for Peking Opera, Chinese painting, horticulture and exquisite connoisseurship of food, and for Wang, her love of Italian operas, Schubert's Lieder and 19th century Russian literature. Their artistic and cultural engagements are for the most part unappreciated and misunderstood by the supporting characters of the films. Wang is portrayed as a character of contradictions. Her dark complexion, freckles and pointed teeth typecast her as being not sexually attractive to men. In contrast to her unpleasant appearance, she has a mellifluous voice. Wang is therefore characterised as what Luce Irigaray may see as not "within the discourse of truth," which maintains that "the feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subjects" (Irigaray, 1985: 86). Wang's colleagues and neighbours have little knowledge of the Western operatic works she sings; nor is she willing to communicate with them. She voices her disappointment in being a well-educated woman of refined taste in such a small town by quoting Anton Chekov's play *Three Sisters*, stating that "in this city, knowing three languages is an unnecessary luxury. Not even a luxury, an unnecessary appendage, like a sixth finger" (Chekov, 2014: 15).

Figure 1: Wang sings Mendelssohn's *On the Wings of Songs* in the public square of her town. Her luxurious Westernised costume and hairstyle put her in great contrast to her audience, whose clothing signifies a less-modernised status (see *KKNews*, 2017a).

In *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt*, Ye's estrangement is overtly suggested by the title "postmodern", which already highlights her contesting subjectivity against established gender norms and traditions across the Maoist and Post-Mao Eras. Focusing on Ye's fractured identities, Gina Marchetti treats Ye as a "post-feminist", a concept which originally refers to women in the Western world but could also be applied in a contemporary Chinese context (Marchetti, 2009: 135). As a dominant social, cultural and commercial discourse in contemporary society, especially the West, post-feminism invites a multiplicity of interpretations and is characterised by an ambiguity fraught with contradictions, conflicts and uncertainty (Holmes et al., 2011: 180). This ambiguity is a typical hallmark of the discussion of postmodernism, which is elusive in its acceptance of multiplicity, ambiguity, contradiction, uncertainty,

chaos and conflicts (Bordo, 1993: 40), as well as in its celebration of schizophrenic fragmentations as fundamental aesthetics (Jameson, 2013: 28).

The post-feminist and neoliberal situation of contemporary China exacerbates the dilemma of the intellectual woman. Though Marchetti does not identify or stress this aspect of Ye's identity, her discussion is relevant to my emphasis. Marchetti points out that Ye has clearly demonstrated a fragmented gender role incompatible with the Confucian ideal of womanhood, the market economy and socialism feminism (Marchetti, 2009: 124, 137-8). Ye has obviously benefited from the post-1949 changes in gender roles, and has an enviable education and a comfortable home in urban Shanghai. What makes Ye "post-modern" and "post-Mao" is her disorientated life trajectory, which appears in the eye of her nephew Kuankuan (who is the witness of Ye's life) as unconventional and weird.

Figure 2: Ye proudly sports her full-body swimsuit, which is designed and knitted by herself (see *Baike*, 2015).

Another dimension of Ye's estrangement lies in her retirement and financial independence. Ye's retirement ensures her ample spare time to engage in her fine tastes, and her well-paid job as an English tutor signifies financial independence. The enjoyment of leisure time and a financially independent existence signifies a leisure-class existence, which, according to Mannheim, is "a source of estrangement from reality, for it conceals the frictions and tensions of life and invites a sublimated and internalised perception of things" (Mannheim, 1968: 160).

Ye's status as a university graduate is important to her characterisation in the film. After graduation, she moves to the northern industrial city Anshan as an educated youth and marries a factory worker. This marriage is an ideal one for the dominant ideology of the Maoist era. According to Mao, educated youth needed to be "re-educated" by the proletariat masses (i.e. peasants, workers and soldiers). Therefore, marriage to a member of the proletariat was considered a repudiation of the "filthy" intellectual class (White, 1998: 413). However, Ye is unsatisfied with her marriage. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, when educated youth were again granted the opportunity to work in urban areas, Ye leaves her baby daughter and husband behind, later cutting contact with them altogether. In this sense, Ye's escape from her husband shows her repudiating the traditional role of mother and wife, instead allowing her to perform her subjectivity as an intellectual woman.

Escaping from her family, Ye settles alone in the metropolis of Shanghai, working as a private English tutor. In Shanghai, Ye performs her estrangement from expectations of women by means of her own elite cultural tastes and behaviours. She demonstrates her high-brow taste via her appreciation of Chinese paintings and Peking opera. She looks down upon her neighbours, whom she calls "badly educated", thinking that no one could match her

intellectually. Ye is extremely annoyed by her next-door neighbour, Mrs Shui, who constantly showcases her material affluence. When her nephew Kuankuan mocks Ye for being jealous of Mrs Shui, Ye is infuriated. She proclaims her dignity as an intellectual and former model-worker:

> The people in this building are all wretches. Very few are college students! Unlike me! I used to win "Model Worker" awards every year! Everyone sang my praises. She's just rich. So what's she good for? […] I've always lived an upright life (10'12''-10'36'').

Here, Ye defines her superiority by means of cultural capital defined by her educational practices ("products of learning"), and her preference of high culture (Bourdieu, 1996: 29), whereas Mrs Shui does the same by means of her display of affluence and economic capital, which Ye does not possess.

Ye's estrangement also brings about embarrassing moments of social interaction. Like the discerning Wang Cailing, Ye, who works as a private English tutor, is proud of her British accent, which she deems "more tasteful [than an American accent]" (18'44''). Yet, she is fired by her employer who insinuates that her high taste is a mismatch for contemporary Chinese society. "Yes," he says, "so is classical Chinese. But who speaks that now?" (18'55''). This scene echoes with Marchetti's remark that Ye could not be identified as a "paragon of socialist feminism: her independence hides her isolation, her education seems out of touch with the marketplace", and instead she is "the contradictory representative of modern, urban, enlightened Shanghai and the decaying dreams of the 'rust belt' of the Northeast" (Marchetti, 2009: 124). It is evident that Ye is estranged from the prevalent value of the market-oriented economy of post-Mao China.

The romantic experiences with men enacted by the female characters in these films intensify their estrangement and ultimately their suffering. In both films, romantic adventures conclude bleakly. In *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt*, Pan Zhichang (Chow Yun-fat) fulfils Ye's fantasy of an ideal romantic partner by means of his cultural refinement. He is also the same person who cheats away her lifelong savings. In *And the Spring Comes*, Wang's romantic expressions are shared by three male dreamers: Huang Sibao the self-taught artist, Zhou Yu, the ambitious amateur singer, and Hu Jinquan, the ballerino.

Gu Changwei, director of *And the Spring Comes,* seems to favour the romance between Wang and Huang Sibao, the young frustrated artist of all of the heterosexual romances that the female protagonist is involved in. The scene in which Wang poses for Huang, his first opportunity to paint a nude (figure 3), is used as the film's selling point and is often shown in the film's promotional posters (figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3: Wang poses for Huang (see *Sina*, 2008).
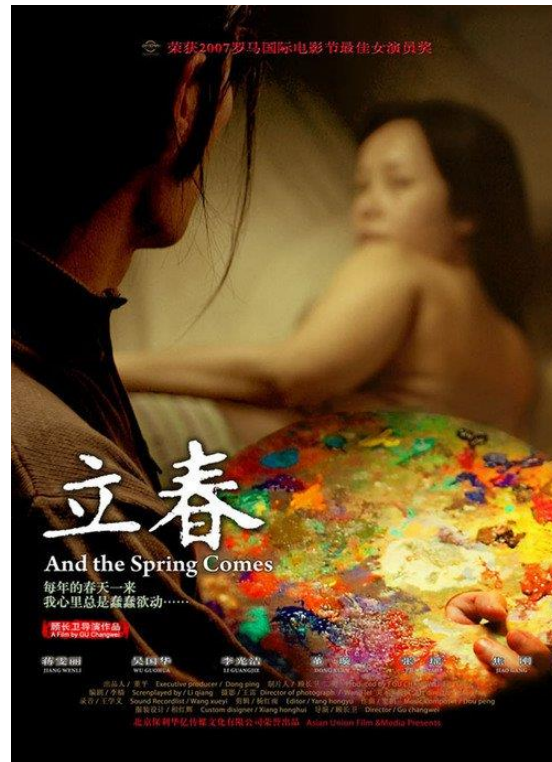
Figure 4: The official poster of *And the Spring Comes* (see *Alchetron*, 2018).

Before meeting Huang, Wang considers none of the locals a suitable match for her on an intellectual level. Huang, who dreams of becoming the next Vincent van Gogh, has failed several times in gaining admittance to study at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. He comes to visit Wang after hearing about her connections to Beijing. Like Wang, Huang finds it impossible to realise his big dream in the small town where he makes a living as a factory worker. Exhilarated by this spiritual bond, Wang poses for Huang and even contemplates procuring Beijing citizenship for him with her own savings. Wang considers herself attractive to the young artist who, however, is more interested in her connections with Beijing. Wang has her first ever sexual experience with

Huang on the night when he rushes into her place, heavily drunk, weeping about his failure at becoming an artist.

Afterwards, Wang consciously dresses up with make-up and a silk scarf, which she never does in previous scenes. This change draws attention to Beauvoir's observation of an absurd paradox characterising the situation of intellectual women: intellectual women are criticised by misogynists for renouncing the idea of femininity imposed by male-centred custom and fashion. In the meantime, intellectual women are admonished to stop primping themselves in order to be equal to men (Beauvoir, 2009: 740).

Obviously, Wang does not demonstrate awareness of such an absurd paradox; neither does Huang share her blissfulness. Upon waking up the next morning, Huang realises he slept with Wang while drunk. In a great fury, Huang shouts during Wang's singing class in the school playground that he "feel[s] like [she] raped [him]" (37'21''). He shoves her into the ground in front of all the students and staff and leaves Wang weeping, lying in the dust and dirt. Wang's relationship with Huang is thus made public as is his painting her nude. Since posing in the nude is considered promiscuous behaviour in the town, rumours about Wang's "infamous deed" soon spread widely and further her humiliation. Clad in her best opera costume, she attempts suicide by jumping from the pagoda, and in this way her first romance ends with trauma.

Huang Sibao's friend Zhou Yu is a more enthusiastic suitor. Zhou, a factory worker, comes to know Wang from a radio broadcast. He is struck by her beautiful voice and decides to learn vocal art from her. He lacks talent for singing but thinks himself a good match for Wang because he is financially stable and, upon Wang's recovery from her suicide attempt, he expresses his love with his material abundance. Wang, however, considers Zhou a poor match on an

intellectual level. Wang is a consumer of high culture, as indicated by her love of classical music and opera, while Zhou consumes and prefers low culture. He continuously woos her with cassettes of the latest popular music. When Zhou asks for her hand, promising her a well-off life, Wang refuses and remains in her life as a school teacher, self-sufficient and single.

Wang's relationship with the ballerino Hu Jinquan is characterised by more mutual sympathy. Hu is ostracised by the local people because of his dancing career and homosexual disposition. Both Hu and Wang find each other misfits in the small town in which no one understands their artistic inclinations. Over-burdened by the gossip and humiliation of local people, Hu asks for Wang's hand in marriage. To Hu, marriage will offer them both an escape from stigmatisation. Wang refuses Hu's proposal of a marriage of convenience. Here Wang's hunt for ideal love ends.

Ye, in *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt*, is no more successful than Wang in her pursuit of an ideal romance in urban Shanghai. Her romance with an urban underdog, Pan Zhichang, brings about a more pointedly embarrassing moment that also positions Ye as out-of-date. Ye comes across Pan practicing Peking opera in the park. Pan expresses his enthusiasm for both Peking opera and classical Chinese literature, and Ye is deeply fascinated by this shared intellectual taste and falls in love with him (figure 5).

只可惜　肚皮鼓着
Just one problem your pot belly!

Figure 5: Ye and Pan having a ball performing Peking Opera in the costumes of the female roles (see *Dailymotion*, n.d.).

Upon his insistent demands, Ye relinquishes all her lifelong savings to Pan to invest in a cemetery. Pan runs off with her savings and leaves her penniless. Shocked, Ye faints on the stairs and breaks her leg. Lying in hospital, Ye sees her daughter for the first time after her years of escape. She is reprimanded by her daughter for her repudiation of the Confucian gender roles in a scene that can be read as a criticism by the patriarchal order of the intellectual woman's autonomy:

> They called me unfilial, but are you a good mother? Did you ever do right by me? [...] You stayed with us when you needed our help. But as soon as you can move back to Shanghai, you got divorced just like that. Shanghai means more to you than Dad and I do (1h25'30''-1h25'53'').

The travel between urban cities and the second-tier cities mark the motif

of "escape" for both intellectual women in these films. Wang tries every means to escape from the town where she sees no hope for her dream. Her travelling is marked by her attempts in escaping from the dull and hopeless town to Beijing (figure 7). She travels frequently to Beijing in order to display her singing skills to the top-ranking National Opera Theatre. Time and time again she is rejected in the National Opera Theatre interviews. She tries by every possible means to stay, even exhausting her savings to buy a permanent residence in Beijing (the prerequisite for employment), and begging the theatre staff to offer her a position as an usher. Having undergone all these frustrations and failures, Wang goes back to her town, masquerading as a well-educated woman and famous local opera singer, thus setting herself in stark contrast to her subservient ways in Beijing. She tells the local people that her talent is greatly appreciated by the National Opera Theatre authorities who have invited her to work in Beijing as soon as possible (figure 6).

Figure 6: Wang returns to her town and proudly tells her neighbour about the hospitality and respect she received from the National Opera Theatre (see *KKNews*, 2017b).

In so doing, Wang falsely elevates herself to the pinnacle of the art world, enjoying the admiration of less-educated locals who worship her not only for her voice but also her connections to the outside world, the metropolis Beijing. Pierre Bourdieu might describe her as affirming her claim to a legitimate superiority over other locals by not just her aesthetic disposition, "one dimension of a distant, self-assured relation to the world and to others" (Bourdieu, 1996: 56), but also her educational and social capital, which entitle her to an "aristocracy of culture", which is also shared, as indicated before by Ye Rutang in *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt*.

Figure 7: Wang waits anxiously outside the Capital Opera House until the opera *Tosca* begins. In this way, she is able to buy discount tickets from the scalpers. Wang's consumption behaviour here may remind us of Bourdieu's "ascetic aristocratism",[5] an expression of her aristocracy of culture (see *Duowan.com*, 2008).

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[5] "The ascetic aristocratism of the teachers (and public-sector executives), who are systematically oriented towards the least expensive and most austere leisure activities and towards serious and even somewhat severe cultural practices." See Bourdieu (1996: 286).

In *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt,* Ye escapes from the industrial city of Anshan and settles in Shanghai without bringing her husband and daughter along. For years, Ye enjoyed her independence as a financially sustainable intellectual woman of refined taste. Having experienced disastrous financial loss and eventual recovery from her injury, Ye returns to Anshan and lives with her husband again. In the latter half of the film, Ye's escape is portrayed as repudiating the identity and lifestyle of an intellectual woman. The camera is set in the dusty and shabby apartment of a factory worker where Ye no longer appears as a vigorous and neatly-dressed intellectual woman. In this scene, Ye is busy mopping the floor while her husband sits on the sofa, brushing his teeth, focusing on the noisy TV comedy and spitting on the floor where Ye has just mopped. Seeing that, Ye cleans the floor again wordlessly. Ye is thus performing a dystopian version of the Confucian woman via her subservience to the husband.

In most scenes set in Anshan, Ye remains silent and appears to be doing housework. But the final scene is set in the flea market where Ye sells shoes with her husband. There, Ye turns on the radio, which plays the same excerpt of Peking opera she used to practice in Shanghai (figure 8), and is lost in her meditation. This final scene is open to several readings: Is the music reminding her of her identity as an intellectual woman? Is she satisfied with her choice to abandon that life? Is she satisfied with either of her attempts at escape? Does being a non-intellectual-woman mean less autonomy in demonstrating her subjectivity?

Figure 8: The ending scene in *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt*. In the chilling winter morning, Ye is eating steamed buns and selling shoes in the flea market. The very Peking Opera song she used to sing in Shanghai with Pan is played from a radio somewhere nearby (see *Sohu.com*, 2007).

In *And the Spring Comes*, having undergone a series of emotional and spiritual traumas, Wang gives up hope on marriage and love, and is also estranged from the power that comes with her fame as a lyric soprano who is about to move to Beijing. Wang escapes from the town and moves to a more remote area, giving up her singing career and becoming a butcher. Towards the end of the film, a close-up shot features Wang and her adopted daughter in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. They speak with a northern accent rather than the Beijing dialect, asserting their identities as outsiders of the city which highlights Wang's periphery vis-a-vis the centre of power (figure 9).

Figure 9: Wang and her stepdaughter chant rhymes in Tiananmen Square (see *KKNews*, 2018).

Wang's imagination soon merges with this ending scene. In the coda, Wang envisions herself singing *Vissi D'arte* from *Tosca* in the National Opera Theatre. The film score plays the latter half of the aria, which laments the woman's tragic fate, thus strengthening the tragic tone of the film and the tragic fate of Wang Cailing.[6]

Both *And the Spring Comes* and *the Postmodern Life of My Aunt* represent post-Mao intellectual women's pathetic/tragic and even comical struggles. Although both women are staged as idealistic pursuers of true love with artistic temperaments and a taste for a high-class lifestyle, their struggles reveal a less than idealistic negotiation with the possibilities of being intellectual women. At

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[6] The English translation of lyrics is provided as follows: "Why, why God? In this hour of grief, do You repay me this way? In tribute to Your beautiful creation, I gave jewels to the Madonna's mantle, and offers my songs to the stars and Heaven. Why, why God, in this hour of grief, do You repay me this way?" (Fisher, 2004: 297).

the conclusion of both films, Wang and Ye fail to maintain their roles as intellectual women and to uphold their identities as intellectual women. Their life trajectories, marked by practices of estrangement and escape, finally turn themselves into the particular "sixth finger(s)" who seem to be less necessary in a rapidly changing society dominated by a conjunction of Confucianism, socialism, post-socialism and neoliberal values.

The less than idealistic negotiations appear not only in the cinematic representations of middle-aged intellectual women, but also in the lived experience of young intellectual women in the early twenty-first century, which will be presented in the next section.

Intellectual Women, Prejudicial Labels and the Fight-Back Response in the Post-2000s: Cyberspace, Propaganda, and Other Popular Cultural Products

While modern Chinese feminist forerunners in the early twentieth century often celebrated their celibacy as a sign of emancipation and independence from the patriarchal system, celibacy among educated women is seen as a "problem", or as bringing "trouble", a century later. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the major concern for young intellectual women captured in popular culture is still the destiny of love and marriage. Cases of female holders of, or candidates for, doctoral degrees, as well as older single women, figure prominently in media discourse in the first decade of the twenty-first century, in which the estrangement and escape of Chinese intellectual women are viewed as problems for Chinese society.

This public concern over women with high educational qualifications, especially those holding or studying for a doctoral degree, poses the question of

their proper location in the cultural order. As public female images, they are vilified because they are seen to abandon or reject the importance of heterosexual romance, love and marriage. This, in turn, leads to embarrassing moments for a new generation of intellectual women.

In the early 2000s, a popular quote appeared in wide circulation in Chinese cyberspace, which read: "There are three types of people in the world: men, women and female doctoral degree students/holders" (Anonymous, 2011). This evolved and blurred into the further claim that "female doctoral students/holders are equivalent to the Destructive Nun (Miejue Shitai 灭绝师太)" (Fu, 2007).[7] They are "UFO (ugly, foolish and old)" (Wang, 2012). These internet and social media phenomena underscore the discrimination directed at female doctoral students/holders. The Destructive Nun is an evil female character in a martial arts novel by Louis Cha (also known by his pen name Jin Yong 金庸). Another insult seen in Chinese online discourse which is used to characterise educated women includes not only female doctoral students/holders, but also those who hold or undertake lower academic degrees:

> Female undergraduates can be called Little Dragon Daughter (Xiao Longnü 小龙女). Female postgraduates (those who undertake master's degree) are Li Mochou (李莫愁). Female doctoral students/holders are therefore entitled to be called "the Destructive Nun" (Ye, 2010).[8]

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[7] Destructive Nun is a Buddhist nun with superb martial art talents, who is known for her wrath in Jin Yong's novel *The Return of the Condor Heroes*. The novel was serialised in *Ming Bao Daily News* beginning on May 20, 1959.

[8] Little Dragon Daughter is the protagonist in Jin Yong's *The Return of the Condor Heroes*, and is known for her chastity and immortal youth and beauty, whereas Li Mochou, somewhat older, is the villainess in the novel, and is noted for her beauty and viciousness. The Destructive Nun, as noted above, is old and completely lacking charm, inspiring only fear.

The publicly perceived dilemma of female doctoral students/holders is also well illustrated in the meme "When Man Meets Woman. Woops" (当男人遇到女人, Figure 10), virally popular on Chinese websites at the end of 2011 (Gongfu, 2012).
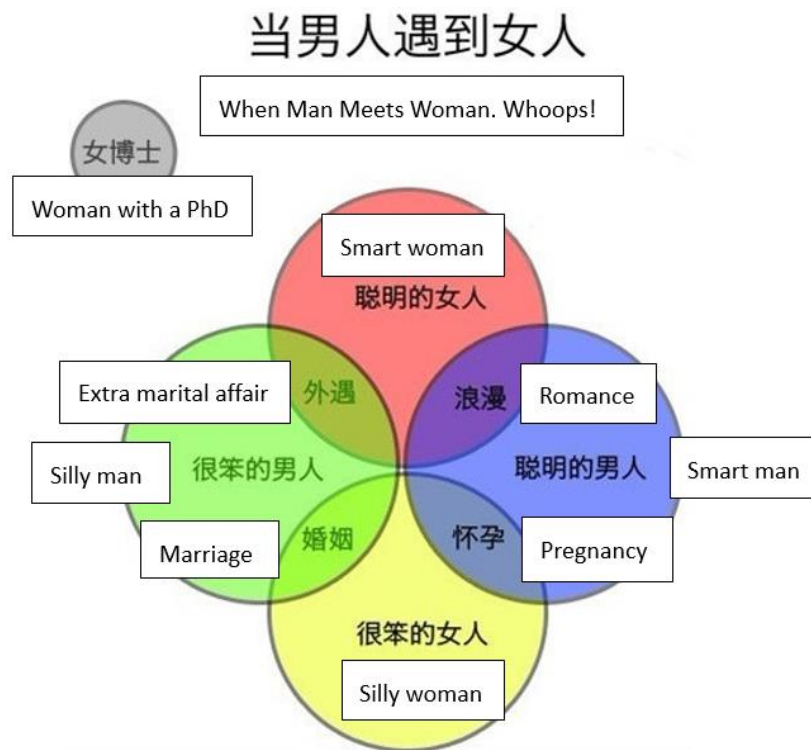
Figure 10: "When A Man Encounters a Woman, Woops" (see Liu, 2011).

The image depicts a series of possibilities for heterosexual relationships and encounters, and the female PhD in grey remains estranged from them all. Both the Destructive Nun phenomenon, and the meme depicted above, convey that the higher a degree the woman achieves, the less attractive and charming she becomes. These slogans and memes generated waves of heated discussion on online discussion forums, blogs and leading bulletin board systems, in which

there was a consensus that "female doctoral students/holders lack femininity" (*nü boshi mei you nüren wei* 女博士没有女人味) (Anonymous, 2010). This stereotypical configuration bears similarity to my definition of "estrangement", that is, becoming an intellectual woman (by attaining a high academic degree) sometimes means the rejection of patriarchal norms of femininity. In such a configuration, women assume the place of the castrated Other. Thus, they are often perceived in an antagonistic way as unnatural manly women who are, as Christopher Prochasson noted, "quite the opposite of a mother or wife, as the meaning behind the facts changes, she becomes a man, but an incomplete, impotent and vicious one" (Prochasson, 2001: 57, cited in Long, 2013: 14, 112).

The globalisation of elite single professional womanhood has emerged as a new global phenomenon in the twenty-first century (Berg-Cross et al., 2004: 34). In recent decades in China, much public attention has been drawn to the heterosexual relationships and marital status of women with educational achievements in match-making TV reality shows, for example in the especially controversial show *If You are the One* (*Feicheng wurao* 非诚勿扰), which has aired on Jiangsu Satellite TV since 2010. The show consistently fails to find a match for its female participants who have or are studying for a doctorate. Sun Lin's observation of the stigmatisation of female doctoral holders in the show is helpful in understanding the hostility and hostile discourse against intellectual women in public media. Sun takes these female participants as transgressors (*jianyuezhe* 僭越者), who do not abide by the normative gender ideal of being a submissive mother and wife (Sun, cited in Wang & Lü, 2016: 284-5).

The transgressive subjectivity of intellectual women here again fits well with my description of intellectual women as actors of estrangement. As Sun observes, female doctoral-degree holders are often portrayed by the public as exaggerated stereotypes suffering from problems with employment, psychology,

love and marriage. Upsetting the patriarchal order, these women are thus punished. As "kindly" suggested by propaganda media outlets such as *Liberation Daily* (*Jiefang ribao* 解放日报), aiming to "vindicate female doctoral holders", these problems are resolvable only when high-achieving women demonstrate their equal capability in managing household affairs (Sun, 2016: 285, 279). Clearly, these Chinese reality shows and propaganda media aim to preserve patriarchal gender constructions and perpetuate the stereotypical gender roles of women via their "kind suggestions".

Similarly unflattering and prejudicial portrayals are also highlighted in Hannah Feldshuh's study of popular TV shows and romance TV series, including the aforementioned *If You are the One*, *Let's Get Married* (*Zanmen jiehun ba* 咱们结婚吧, dir. Liu Jiang, 2013) and *iPartment* (*Aiqing gongyu* 爱情公寓, dir. Wei Zheng, 2011). Feldshuh's research demonstrates that the sexist media-constructed myth of *shengnü* (剩女, meaning leftover women), in which intellectual women are depicted as strange and abnormal (Feldshuh, 2018: 42), "being not easy to cope with", "having little knowledge about romance" and "being too picky in choosing partners" (Ka, 2017).[9] Both the "third sex" and *shengnü* discourses contain "semantic derogation" (Feldshuh, 2018: 42) against well-educated women. This can also be understood as linguistic violence (Jiang & Niu, 2008: 46-7) whereby the media accentuate the stereotypical portrayals of intellectual women who are pedantic, lacking social skills and sexually unattractive. In so doing, discrimination against single women, especially the educated ones among them, is exacerbated (Gong, Guo & Jiang, 2018: 5). Therefore, the mass media legitimises the othering of intellectual women from the social order established by the patriarchal ideology. The othering of

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[9] These are netizens' comments made about Zhang Xiaochen, a female contestant in *If You Are the One* in 2012. Zhang was 30 at the time. She held a PhD from The London School of Economics. Zhang claimed in her personal statement that it was much easier for her to be offered a degree at Oxford University than to get a boyfriend.

intellectual women is well reflected in the case of *If You Are the One* contestant Xu Yali in 2015. Xu introduced herself as an associate professor as well as a PhD holder who admitted to concealing her degree from others. Such abnegation reflects the dilemma: educational advancement is a desirable credential for the career market but undesirable for the marriage market.

The "leftover women" phenomenon caused notable public concern in the popular media around 2006, and "*shengnü*" was listed as one of the 171 new words of 2007 by the Ministry of Education in China (The State Language and Writing Commission, 2007). "Leftover women" refers to single women twenty-five years or older who have advanced degrees, a successful career, a decent income and a bank account. However, the connotation of the pejorative term is that these leftover women experience a problem linked to their higher standards for a husband. Their education, social status, and income threatened Chinese men from pursuing them, resulting in their leftover-ness. In fact, "leftover women" is a word play on "saintly women" in Chinese, which indicates the superiority as well as estrangement thought to characterise these intellectual women. The older the leftover women becomes, the less possible, it is imagined, that she will get married. In the same year, state media outlet Xinhua News Agency published the definition of "leftover women" provided by the All China Women's Federation (ACWF). According to this official definition, single women over the age 27 are categorised as "leftover" (Fincher, 2014: 3; see also To, 2015: 1). It is necessary to incorporate here Leta Hong Fincher's pioneering research on, and substantial coverage of, China's state media campaign on the leftover women. An official statement from the ACWF website published in 2011 is worth noting here:

> Pretty girls don't need a lot of education to marry into a rich and powerful family, but girls with an average or ugly

appearance will find it difficult. These kinds of girls hope to further their education in order to increase their competitiveness. The tragedy is, they don't realize that as women age, they are worth less and less, so by the time they get their M.A. or Ph.D., they are already old, like yellowed pearls (cited in Fincher, 2014: 3)

Ironically, the statement was published after International Women's Day, a day commemorating women's liberation and gender equality. The official depreciation against single women of "marriageable age" as well as the insulting anti-intellectualism is made clear.

In 2012, Jiayuan.com (*Shiji jia yuan wang* 世纪佳缘网), the biggest online dating website in mainland China, published "Confession from the Leftover Women" (S*hengnü zibai shu* 剩女自白书), a survey conducted on the "leftover women" phenomenon with 88,516 participants (Feng, 2012). The survey gives a detailed description of "leftover women". Most of these unmarried women were born in the 1970s and 1980s, and are well-educated, economically stable, charming and intelligent. They are also characterised by what is frequently described by the Chinese media as having "high taste" in choosing their partners/husbands. These statistics indicate that most of those who identify themselves as "leftover women" are noted for their higher incomes, higher education, and higher social status. Their elite situation is also captured by other labels concerning *shengnü* such as: the "3S" women—Single, Seventies (most of them were born in the 1970s), and Stuck; "High Education, High [Professional] Position, High Income"; and "Great Sage Equal to Heaven" (Q*itian Dasheng* 齐天大圣), for leftover women over 35 (Fincher, 2014: 27-8); as well as "White-collar, Backbone, Elite" where the first character of each of the three words compose Bai Gu Jing (白骨精, the White Bone Demon), the name of the female

demon in the classical novel *Journey to the West*.

In other words, the more education a woman receives, and the higher the income bracket she attains, the more unwelcome she is to the prospective suitors, and therefore, the more difficult it is for her to get married. According to Gong Haiyan, CEO of Jiayuan.com, the elevation of women's education levels and financial capacity in recent years allows them more spiritual and material independence (Weili, 2009). This can be taken as a sign of estrangement, when these well-educated, high-salaried single women live a different lifestyle which gives them more freedom and independence but detaches them from the socially valued ideals of femininity. Thus, being estranged, they escape from the patriarchal gender construction of women as wife or mother. Their spiritual and material independence also results in "more idealistic expectations" concerning love, as love is not indispensable to them. It is believed by Feng Zhijun that most leftover women choose to maintain their celibacy (Feng, 2012).

Responding to these prejudicial labels against intellectual women was what I would call the fight-back response in post-2000s Chinese popular contexts. Often featured in a positive manner, the fight-back response manifests the lifestyles and outlook on relationships of the Chinese "*être particulières*". "Song of an Elder Artistic Woman", a ballad by Shao Yibei (邵夷贝), is replete with the innuendo of this fight-back (seasoned with ridicule) against the sexist *shengnü* discourse*.* The song is based on the singer's own experience. Then in her early twenties, this 1980s-born graduate of Media and Communication at Peking University was constantly bothered by her mother's endless complaints about her celibacy (Ma, 2012: 96). In a Chinese cultural context, *daling* (大龄, over-age or mature-age) followed by the word *qingnian* (青年, youth) is used exclusively for those who have already reached marital age but are still single, while *wenyi*

(文艺) is defined by connoisseurship in literature and art.[10]

The video of Shao singing the song in February of 2009 spread quickly in Chinese cyberspace. The protagonist, "Miss Wang" bears Shao's own self-image (Ma, 2012: 96). Miss Wang becomes a headache to her parents and friends because she has not found a suitable husband-to-be. They offer her two suggestions: she can either date male artists who share her interests, or economically stable men who can offer financial support for her artistic endeavours. However, the song goes on to represent male artists as self-absorbed philanderers. Marrying a rich man could be the wise or pragmatic decision, but Wang does not fit the gender stereotype favoured by the rich, who prefer traditional housewives with excellent culinary skills. Women who cannot fulfil this traditional gender ideal would end up being only their mistresses, still considered despicable in both Maoist and post-Mao discourses and contexts (Evans, 1997: 207). The song concludes with a comment on Wang's culinary capabilities, highlighting that she has some capacity with domestic chores; she can stir fry tomato with scrambled eggs, one of the most ordinary Chinese dishes that requires only elementary cooking skills.

The song brims with light-heartedness. The self-deprecatory humour is well expressed by its lyrics and solo guitar accompaniment. Shao is an ardent enthusiast of folk-rock, and it is evident that this song insinuates, in a subtle way, the ethos of rock: the resistance against or attempts of subversion of the dominant ideology. Therefore, it can be assumed that she has inherited Chinese rock-n-roll veterans' understanding of rock music as a form of "authentic self-expression and emotional release in the face of oppression" (cited in Murray, 2016: 5; see also Jones, 1992: 91). In the case of "Song of an Elder Artistic

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[10] Wang Cailing in *And the Spring Comes* is hailed as a paradigm of artistic youth by the Chinese media. See Xiari Qiangwei (2015).

Woman", Shao challenges the dominant narrative in contemporary China that women should be married off in the so-called "prime age" for child-bearing and be skilful in the art of household management. Her resistance is expressed in a subtle and cynical self-deprecating way, which showcases her indifference towards the admonishment of her mother, and the prevalent public attitudes against unmarried older women.

Apart from "Song of an Elder Artistic Woman", another fight-back act became evident in the emergence of the "blossoming women" (*shengnü* 盛女) phenomenon. "Blossoming women" is a Chinese wordplay on "leftover women", which also gives rise to a positive self-identity of being the *particulières*. This wordplay reflects especially intellectual women's changing views towards family and marriage in the early twenty-first century. Similar to Shao Yibei and her alter-ego Miss Wang, leftover women have to "brave the tide of political, cultural and parental waves pushing her towards marriage" (Lake, 2012). An interesting indication in the Jiayuan.com survey is that 48% of the "leftover women" indicate that they are actually enjoying life as single women (*Shenzhen Daily*, 2012). At least some of these women proudly name themselves "blossoming women" in cheerful recognition of their identity as single women (*Shenzhen Daily*, 2012). The blossoming *shengnü* thus becomes triumphant title for many independent single women who battle against male-dominated society.

Research on the emergence of the "leftover women" phenomenon has proliferated in recent years. Attention is drawn especially in the areas of Chinese women's socio-economic status against the backdrop of China's booming real estate business (Fincher, 2015), the well-educated leftover women's "emergent adulthood" resulting in the negotiation of womanhood and marriage norms (Gaetano, 2014: 124), as well as their social mobility (Gaetano, 2015: 18).[11] This

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[11] Research also includes ethnographic studies of female migrant workers.

research suggests the rising autonomy and independence of the Chinese leftover women, many of whom, if not all, can be defined as intellectual women on the basis of their education level and career.

Intellectual women's celibacy, one of the telling signs of autonomy and independence, is often criticised by state media as evidence of their being "too picky" (Fincher, 2014: 20).[12] However, the criticism did not stop the celebration of "blossoming women" on popular media which takes the shape of TV series and films themed with the lives of well-educated and single women in urban China. These may include TV series such as *The Golden Age of the Blossoming Woman* (S*hengnü de huangjin shidai* 盛女的黄金时代, dir. Lan Zhiwei, 2011) , *Ode to Joy* (*Huanle song* 欢乐颂, dir. Kong Sheng, 2016) and its second season (2017), *The First Half of My Life* (*Wo de qianbansheng* 我的前半生, dir. Shen Yan, 2017), *Women in Beijing* (*Beijing nüzi tujian* 北京女子图鉴, dir. Li Zhi, 2018) and the film *I Do* (*Wo yuanyi* 我愿意, dir. Sun Zhou, 2012), to name a few. These popular cultural products offer new interpretations of Chinese women, especially the well-educated middle-class among them, and of how they manifest various partner choice strategies. Key female characters in these popular products stun the audience by their educational background, professional success as well as sense of fashion and taste. Among them, the successful professional woman Tang Jing in *The First Half of My Life,* and An Di in *Ode to Joy*, a CFO who used to study and work in New York, are the paragons.

However, apart from these women's shining credentials, these stories are also punctuated with the female protagonists' romantic relationships with men. In these stories, the blossoming women could often be seen negotiating with

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[12] According to Sandy To's qualitative research conducted among 50 unmarried professional women in major cities in China, male superior norms also account for discrimination against professional women in the marriage market. In this sense, accomplished women are criticised as "being too tough". See To (2015: 32-54).

gender role perceptions and social constraints in their relationships. One may find Sandy To's research on the late marriage phenomenon among well-educated Chinese professional women relevant in viewing these emotional entanglements (even though they are fabricated). Based on her interviewees' marriage views, economic values, gender role perceptions, patriarchal and filial constraints, as well as partner choice strategy, To categorises Chinese leftover women into traditionalist, maximiser, satisfier and innovator (To, 2015: 161).[13]

Indeed, the research suggests that Chinese leftover women are not unanimously estranged from traditional marriage views. In the above-mentioned cultural products, the blossoming women, however, all have marriage outlooks and partner choices that fit in the category of either satisfiers or innovators. Both satisfiers and innovators uphold democratic views and egalitarianism in relationships. For them, male partners' patriarchal control over their work-life styles are highly undesirable (To, 2015: 161). For the satisfiers, marriage is indispensable. In *The Golden Age of the Blossoming Woman*, Liang Shuang and Ou Lele find their Mr Right by the end of their love adventures. The TV series portrays the ideal male partner/husband as someone who holds egalitarian views and respects her work-life choices. Unlike the satisfiers, the innovators, like Chen Ke in *Women in Beijing* and Tang Jing in *The First Half of My Life*, do not consider marriage as their ultimate life goal. They are prone to aspiring towards non-traditional relationships, in which they can benefit from more autonomy and satisfaction (To, 2015: 161), and achieve further career success.

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[13] According to To, both traditionalists and maximisers consider marriage as their ultimate life goal, prefer slightly asymmetrical household roles with partners, and want to have partners of similar socio-economic background. Compared to the traditionalists, the maximisers have concrete partner choice strategies including: looking for "open-minded" Westerners and men who are much more accomplished in their careers. See To (2015: 161).

It is worth noting To's optimism towards the label "leftover women", which she took as a compliment (Cheng, 2013). The optimism is also shared in these stories of blossoming women. The female characters, albeit negotiating with gender constraints and marriage norms in post-Mao China, lead a confident and self-fulfilling lifestyle regardless of their relationship status (To, 2015: 27), be it single, divorced, in love or married. These stories conclude with an optimistic tone. As discussed earlier, Aunt Ye in *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt* and Wang Cailing in *And the Spring Comes* give up their ideal work-life style as their stories end. Unlike them, these blossoming female characters demonstrate personal satisfaction in their work-life style. They have the autonomy of escaping from various gender, social and economic constraints. Their autonomy enables these female characters to become *particulières*. As the stories conclude, these female characters remain comfortably single and professionally successful (the cases of Tang Jing, Chen Ke, and Fan Shengmei in *Ode to Joy II*), or embark on a new round of ideal-man-seeking adventures (the case of Tang Weiwei in *I Do*). In this way, these "blossoming women" present diversified versions and possibilities for female identities which may be a reminder of how Irigaray understands women's sexuality, imaginary and language, as "not one" (1985: 23), as is also reflected in To's subtle categorisation. Again, this not-oneness could be regarded as another a sign of being "*particulière*". It can be argued that the fight-back response gives rise to positive cultural representations of Chinese intellectual women who were prejudicially labelled in cyberspace and state media in the previous decade.

Epilogue

The Chinese intellectual woman's future is clearly at stake as demonstrated by the labelling and the pathetic comedy of Wang Cailing and Aunt Ye that is

discussed in this article. The labelling perpetuates the prevalent discrimination and animosity against intellectual women. The films *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt* and *And the Spring Comes* represent intellectual women's fruitless struggles against an environment that is unfriendly to their personal satisfaction as well as career and life pursuit. The two cinematic works and the prejudicial labelling reveal the situation of contemporary Chinese intellectual women. This situation could hardly be described as satisfactory.

As indicated by "Song of An Elder Artistic Woman" and the "blossoming women" phenomenon, the fight-back response in popular cultural products constructs positive and optimistic images of the Chinese intellectual women, i.e., the confident "*particulières*", while promoting alternative gender values for Chinese women in the twenty-first century.

However, the fight-back response still appears more feasible in media representations than in reality. The "Online Survey on Gender Issues in Mainland Chinese Academic Institutes" (*Guonei xueshu jigou xingbie wenti diaocha* 国内学术机构性别问题调查) may provide supplementary evidence addressing the existing discrimination against intellectual women in contemporary China. Published in 2015, the survey received 1,600 responses online from students and academics in more than 40 Chinese academic institutions. The findings suggested that discrimination against women had driven a fair number of female scholars away from furthering their academic undertakings. Compared to their male colleagues, female scholars were more susceptible to discrimination in both their career and life. Academic supervisors and directors, it was revealed, are the major source of discrimination. The report also discloses a dire statistic that women occupy only a small number of senior academic positions, accounting for only 20%, according to the report (Luo, 2016; see also Wang et al., 2015).

Another figure published by the Ministry of Education in 2016 suggests an exacerbation of this gender imbalance: the number of female PhD was 132,132; this accounted for 38.63% of the overall number of PhD students in China in 2016 (Zhang & Li, 2018; Shen, 2018). One may argue that gender discrimination against female scholars is the catalyst of intellectual women's escape. Gender discrimination deters intellectual women from pursuing their careers and fulfilling their ambitions. In 1907, Otto Weininger published his highly essentialised research the character of women, maintaining women's deficiency in areas such as logic, memory and consciousness (Tuana, 1983: 65). More than a century later, the misogynist ghost of Weininger is haunting the other end of the Eurasian continent, manifesting itself through the highly-educated male knowledge elites in China.

Addressing the issues of Chinese intellectual women in the early twenty-first century, the two motifs of estrangement and escape reflect how Chinese intellectual women are represented and rendered in the Chinese popular cultural context with frequent animosity, prejudice and discrimination. It would be simplistic to say that estrangement and escape are universal characteristics of the Chinese intellectual women and that they will always cling to such trajectories. Instead, this article indicates that estrangement and escape mirror how Chinese intellectual women contest normative gender politics while constructing their subjectivity and gender roles within a rapidly changing society, as indicated in my analysis of *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt*, *And the Spring Comes*, "Song of An Elder Artistic Woman" as well the "blossoming women" phenomenon.

Chinese intellectual women are still paving their way along what promises to be a long march, struggling with this dilemma and armoured with their estrangement and escape. Echoing the global campaigns against sexism and

misogyny, the Chinese #Metoo movement has gained momentum since 2017. As the movement escalates, female consciousness, long-heralded by Chinese "*être particulières",* continues to be coupled with a spirit of rebelliousness and fighting.

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The Naturalisation of Motherhood Within Marriage and its Implications for Chinese Academic Women

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Abstract

As a result of the one-child policy implemented in 1979, daughters born into urban households have benefited from unprecedented educational investment due to the lack of competition from brothers (Fong, 2006). In recent years, a Confucian discourse of filial piety was adopted by the party-state to tackle population risks and counter individualism, which drew on "traditional" notions of gender and generational hierarchy to reinforce the heterosexual family as the main welfare provider (Zheng, 2018; Qi, 2014). The 1980s only-child generation raised under this ideology has now reached the age of marrying, child-raising and establishing a career. This paper investigates how gender affects the career and reproductive choices of China's well-educated daughters, particularly those working in academia. Drawing on a sub-set of a larger sample, I focus on data from interviews with eight women who currently work in Chinese universities and are at different life stages. I illustrate how, in spite of being at the top of the ivory tower, the gender stereotype that a woman's primary responsibility is towards her family poses a major obstacle to those who seek career progression. I analyse how the existing socio-political discourse constructs a naturalised female subject that is bound by reproductive norms, and the implication of this for women's careers.

Key words: China, academic women, motherhood, domestic labour, heterosexual marriage.

The success of China's economic reforms launched in 1978 has made China a world power and resulted in immense changes in Chinese society. The market economy has reduced poverty, but gender and income inequality have increased (Riskin, 2001; Wu, 2010). Though new possibilities of self-expression

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have opened up, there has also been a backlash against the claims for gender equality associated with "gender sameness" based on the male standard promoted during Mao's China (Evans, 1997). Young women were actively encouraged to choose a career appropriate to "female capabilities", which led to male preference in job allocation in the 1980s and pushed women to engage in work that is traditionally considered the purview of women (Honig & Hershatter, 1988). As urban unemployment rose, women were called to return home in the 1990s (Evans, 1997). The commercialisation of female sexuality has become an ever-present phenomenon as the market economy prevails (Zurndorfer, 2016). Reports show the widening of the gender pay gap in various professions (Catalyst, 2016). As a result, many Chinese feminist scholars conclude that women's liberation has encountered serious setbacks in the era of economic reform (Wu, 2010; Wolf, 1985). Despite these changes, Chinese women's labour force participation remains relatively high—63% compared to the world average of 49.49%, although it has fallen 10% since the 1990s (World Bank, 2016). While the market economy disadvantages older and less educated women in the labour market (Liu, 2008), this paper addresses the experience of the most educated women in the Chinese population, who grew up under the one-child policy.

The controversial "one-child policy" went hand-in-hand with marketisation, which was designed to facilitate economic growth by having "fewer but better quality" children. It has created a unique generation and fundamentally shaped the demographic landscape of contemporary Chinese society. While the policy led to a gender imbalance as a result of exacerbated son preference, an unexpected consequence was that the (vast) majority of urban girls born in this only-child generation have enjoyed unprecedented educational investment from their family due to the lack of competition from brothers (Tsui & Rich, 2002). Their upbringing fostered a desire for personal success, as well as confidence in their career prospects (Xie, 2017).

The one-child policy marked a steady increase in women's participation in higher education, rising from around 30% for the pre-1980s birth cohort to nearly 50% for the 1990–1992 cohort (Liu, 2016). Despite Chinese women's increasing representation in higher education and high labour force participation, gender discrimination is not new in the workforce, with rare

female representation in senior positions (Zeng & Thorneman, 2014). A national survey carried out in 2010 reveals that more than 72% of Chinese women had a clear perception of "not being hired or promoted because of gender" discrimination (Yang, 2012). Liu Jieyu (2016) illuminates how re-sexualisation of women sustains a heteronormative masculine organisational culture that marginalises women in white-collar professions, positions many university women graduates aspire to, contributing to the persistence of the gender pay gap. The World Economic Forum (2017) ranked China 100 out of 144 countries and territories in the Global Gender Gap Report in 2017, lagging behind of both the US (49) and Russia (71). The same report also noted a widening pay gap between the sexes for similar work. A recent survey done by China's major hiring website Zhaopin showed that women earn 22% less than their male counterparts, on average, due to the cultural assumption that women are homemakers (Li, 2018).

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) policies have long assumed Chinese women's dual roles as worker and mother, but the latter has been heightened as primary in its recent policy moves, such as the two-child policy and its reemphasising of traditional family values substantiated by Confucian discourse (Hong-Fincher, 2018). In both popular and official discourse, the ideal woman is viewed as a "life support machine to a busy and successful husband" (McMillan 2006: 15), a view that the All China Women's Federation (ACWF) have endorsed (Hong-Fincher, 2012). As the national body formally responsible for women's affairs, the ACWF, like other state institutions, has served as a "transmission belt" between the Party and society. With its cadres appointed and paid by the party-state, it often faces a recurrent dilemma of reconciling the often incompatible goals to serve the interests of the Party and those of its members with a top-down approach to subordinate gender issues to the priorities of the Party (Howell, 1996). The party-state has ensured the monopoly of representation of women's interests through ACWF by using regulations that restrict the operation of "similar" independent organisations, as reflected in the recent change of laws that practically made foreign women's and LGBT rights NGOs unable to function within China (Saich, 2000; Hancock, 2018). The close ties between the party-state's agenda and the ACWF's position is also reflected in a speech given by President Xi to the new leaders of the ACWF in 2018, where he points out that family work and utilising the "unique function" of Chinese

women in family and society should be the main focus of ACWF's service to the "bigger picture" and women (*Xinhua wang*, 2018). The speech states that the "ACWF should lead women to love both the small private family but also the big national family […] encourage them to utilise their advantages to facilitate family harmony, the healthy upbringing of children, caring for the elders, as well as managing the relationship between work and family well, in order to contribute to both society and the family" (*Xinhua wang*, 2018). It becomes apparent that the current state vision for Chinese women is contributing to society through her "unique" service to the family.

Against this backdrop, this paper focuses on the experience of eight highly educated women at different life and marital stages, who currently work in Chinese academia. Although my small sample only offers indicative, not representative findings, it illuminates the continuing restrictive influences arising from the naturalisation of motherhood within marriage upheld by the official discourse on women's career progression. By offering empirical evidence based on these privileged women's experiences when facing this structural constraint, it argues against the common assumption that gender equality follows the economic growth and educational enhancement extolled by the Chinese state and the ACWF (*Xinhua wang*, 2014). I begin by describing the study from which the data is drawn.

Methodology

This article draws on data gathered in a larger study that looks more broadly at the gendered lives of China's privileged daughters: well-educated women from urban China born in the 1980s' only-child generation. In particular, it explores how these well-educated heterosexual women experience their gendered adulthood, and employ varying strategies to negotiate and rework the notion of being (good) Chinese women. Adopting a feminist approach, this research used in-depth interviews to uncover the experiences of women facing the structural oppression mutually sustained by a hybrid of capitalism and patriarchy distinct to the Chinese context (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I initially interviewed 33 women and 12 men in 2015, and subsequently added four women academics in 2017. All of my participants were university-educated, with a four-year bachelor's

degree at a minimum. They were all in full-time employment in various white-collar professions, such as schoolteachers, bank managers, government employees, and office staff in private firms, with some variation in their incomes.

I applied a thematic and narrative analysis with the intention of looking at constructions of femininities among these women, while also paying attention to distinct cases. In the following sections, I primarily examine the accounts of eight academic women (see table 1),[1] because they appeared indicative of Chinese women's experiences at the top of the ivory tower, despite facing the same normalised life course as the rest of the cohort. They were also selected because they offered more nuanced accounts of the experience of academic women at a time when popular wisdom and official discourse suggested that gender equality followed higher levels of education.

To understand the rationale behind their career choice, I included questions exploring their ambitions and family expectations, as well as childcare arrangements when applicable. Vignettes, "mini-narratives or scenarios, usually centred on a problem or dilemma facing an imaginary protagonist, designed to elicit responses on what a person would or should do in the situation depicted" (Jackson et al., 2016: 37), were used to probe participants' opinions on topics around sex and reproduction, which are still relatively sensitive topics even among close friends. One of these vignettes, which I call the "DINK vignette",[2] is particularly relevant for this paper:

> *Luqi (a woman) has been married for two years. The couple have been busy at work, thus do not want children. However, both of their parents urge them to do so. What do you think?*

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[1] Despite being born before the One Child Policy, Tong's experience is included to highlight the tension Chinese academic women face today.

[2] DINK refers "Double Income No Kids". In this context, it connotes a married couple, who are biologically able and financially capable.

Name	Highest degree obtained	Marital status	Professional title	Age	Discipline
Gingko	PhD	Married with young baby	Junior researcher	29	Environmental Science
Jo	PhD	Single	Junior researcher	28	Social Science
Linda	PhD	In a stable relationship	Junior researcher	29	Humanities
Lulu	MSc	Divorced with a five-year-old daughter	Lecturer and leader of a research lab	32	Computer Science
Muyu	MSc	Single	Junior researcher	27	Medical Science
Tong	PhD	Single	Lecturer	45	Environmental Science
Xiu	PhD	Single	Junior researcher	31	Environmental Science
Yuhan	PhD	Married with two children	Lecturer	35	Design

Table 1: List of female academics.

The vignette was deliberately phrased in a way that does not assume only women face the pressure to have children within marriage; therefore, it leaves space for my participants to interpret it according to their experiences. Responses to the vignette have revealed a unanimous assumption that it is a women's problem. It is her body, and decisions in this scenario fall under close scrutiny in Chinese society, as will be discussed below.

The Necessity of Marriage

The universality of heterosexual monogamous marriage permeates the psyche of Chinese people, such that marriage is not been a choice but an obligation (Evans, 2002; McMillan, 2006). The 1950 Marriage Law first enshrined free-choice monogamous marriage under the CCP's rule as the central pillar of its explicit goal of gender equality. Despite its revolutionary nature, Evans (2007) points out the law still was premised on a naturalised and hierarchical view of gender relations, where a woman's obligation within monogamy was to serve her husband's interests and needs. A brief historical review shows that heterosexual marriage in China had not been a matter of private enjoyment but was supposed to serve the interests of society as a whole (Mann, 2011; Evans, 1997). From giving explicit advice to young people about marriage and love in the 1950s, to giving nearly no advice on such topics in during the Cultural Revolution, the state's interventions have aimed to ensure that the youth have a correct sexual morality and attitude that fits into the political priorities of the time. The AWFC has sponsored much of the discussion concerning women's social and economic status, according to the Party line of the time (Evans, 1997). Even encouraging individuals to master sexual knowledge for sexual satisfaction in the reform era is backed by state's concern with promoting modernisation and social stability by avoiding family breakdown (Wong, 2016). The intimacy of state power in China has long preyed upon marriage as a powerful institution linking personal desires with state goals, premised on the forging of female subjects committed to its designed ideals (Friedman, 2005).

Meanwhile, there has been a demographic alarm unveiled by the 2010 national census data, which suggests that 24.7% of Chinese men above the age of 15 have never been married, comparing to 18.5% of unwed women in the

same age group (PRC Population Bureau, 2010). Son preference exacerbated by the one-child policy has contributed to this figure, which left 20 million more men than women (Peng, 2011). Following the norm that men marry down and women marry up, large numbers of social and economically marginalised men struggle to find wives. These involuntary bachelors, unable to bear fruits for their family tree, and often referred to as "bare branches" (*guanggun* 管棍), have added to the Chinese state's concern for social stability (Li, 2017). Both popular lore and conventional evolutionary thinking suggest that more males lead to more violence (Hudson & den Boer, 2004), and Chinese history also provides ample evidence of social stability being threatened by social and economically marginalised "bare branches" (Mann, 2011). Combined with a rapidly aging population and a low birth rate, the dire demographic trend poses particular threats to the economic growth and political stability that is at the heart of the CCP's concern (Wang, 2010). Consequently, the state has shown keen interest in relying on women's reproductive labour to mitigate these social risks (Hong-Fincher, 2018). Switching to the two-child policy in 2016, and implicitly pressuring educated women to marry through its propaganda machine, including the AWFC, are just two indicators' of the state's intentions (Hong-Fincher, 2012).

The marriage dilemma of high-achieving women, and their stigmatisation, are not news in China, despite the skewed gender ratio (Journeyman, 2012; Poston & Glover, 2005; Hong-Fincher, 2014). To (2013) argues that the persistence of the Chinese patriarchal structure is the leading cause of this phenomenon. It is the consensus among my participants that the desirability of a woman is tied to her youth, whereas men's seniority in age adds merit to his attractiveness[3]. "It is extremely difficult for a woman to find a spouse after a certain age […], no matter how good she is in other aspects" (Namei). The ACWF has been found complicit, attributing these women's marriage problems simply to them "having unrealistic demands" or "amoral sexual behavior" (Hong-Fincher, 2012). The close ties between the ACWF and the state suggests there has been a "propaganda push" directed at these unmarried women, which explains their tolerance if not direct endorsement of patriarchal attitudes. Marriage pressure

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[3] Due to this view, men can dedicate more time to building up their careers, and face less time pressure to marry.

is an ever present issue keenly felt by Chinese youth. As Hershatter (1984: 238) put it, because of the assumption that "everyone will marry, finding the proper spouse is a major concern of young people in their early and mid-twenties." Thirty years down the line, marriage remains a thorny issue among my participants, particularly because it is also closely tied to the reproductive norms regulated by the state.

Safeguarding Reproduction

Xie's study on Chinese women's attitudes towards premarital abortion reveals that marriage remains the only "right" place for childrearing, and single motherhood is frowned upon and practically difficult (Xie, 2018). McMillan (2006: 69) notes that reproduction is naturalised for Chinese women as "a psychological instinct, at least in women, and having a child is almost as much an inevitability of the female body as dying". When shown the DINK vignette, many indicated some difficulty in fully comprehending voluntary childlessness within marriage. Childlessness in this case is often interpreted as a mistake for the woman. "She will surely regret it when she gets older" (Lulu). Therefore, marriage is a necessity, if childbirth is anticipated.

In addition, eugenic practices have been long rooted in China's population planning policies (Greenhalgh & Winckler, 2005). A generic Baidu (Chinese search engine) search "*zui jia shengyu nianling*" (最佳生育年龄; the best time to give birth) will bring you much "expert" advice, claiming that "scientifically speaking" the best time to reproduce is between the ages of "23-30" for women and "30-35" for men, ensuring the quality of the egg and sperm in order to avoid genetic diseases and abnormality. With barely existing public support, and widespread social prejudice against disabilities, Chinese families are easily persuaded about the benefits of eugenic practices. However, men are rarely the focus of public scrutiny. Preserving women's fertility and reproductive capacity has been central to the discussion around reproductive health—a view that has been consistent since the beginning of the CCP's rule (Evans, 1997). My participants confirm the wide reception of such messages, agreeing that "it is best to give birth before 30, and after 35 would be too risky" (Lulu). If social reproductive norms compel women to marry, widespread eugenic beliefs

impose a rather rigid timeframe on highly-educated women. It creates a kind of panic, in which one is "running to meet a deadline", as I indicate in the following diagram, based on my participants' accounts (see figure 1 below):
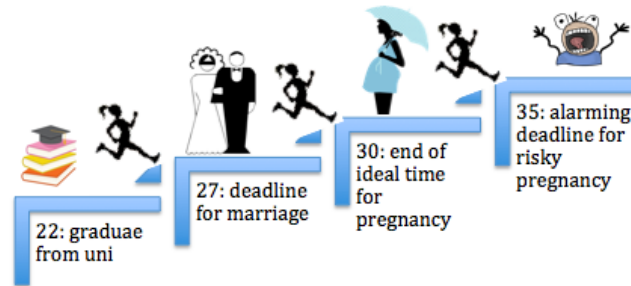
Figure 1. Running after the deadline(s) for university-educated Chinese women. Created by the author using clip-art and based on data collected.

It is worth noting that the prohibition on dating during school years is commonly inculcated by both teachers and parents (Farrer, 2006), although from 2005, university students were finally allowed to marry without facing the danger of dismissal (Farrer, 2006). Dating was still semi-secret in universities for my participants. Typically, Chinese students finish their undergraduate degree at the age of 22. Then, young women have five years to secure a career and pin down a husband before they are labelled as leftover women at the age of 27. If they have managed to be married by then, they have three years in which to give birth, at least to the first child under the current two-child policy. For women pursuing an academic career, their timeframe is further tightened, as the master's degree usually takes three years, and it is common to take over four years to complete one's PhD depending on the individual's achievement of the publication quota.[4] The average time to finish a PhD in China reported by my participants is about 5-6 years. Their prolonged education does not exempt them from facing social "deadlines". As Gingko says, "you can afford a break in work. If you decide not to have children because you are busy, how about if your body doesn't allow it?" Reproductive concerns remain central to their

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[4] It is set as a requirement for Chinese PhD students to have at least one or two publications in key journals to apply for graduation. The exact number varies at each university.

envisioned future, which exacerbates the time pressure women academics experience.

The Pressure to Succeed

Despite their career and academic achievements, without a married family life, women are unlikely to be viewed as "truly" successful by society. Tong gained her PhD in Germany, and now works in a top-ranking university in China. Single at 45, she shares her insight on how Chinese women's success is commonly measured:

> In universities, most people measure success by professional title, project grants, award, and income; what kind of car you drive and how big your house is. Though it is more hidden, people still judge you based on material things. Furthermore, for women, there are additional criteria: what kind of man you marry and how well your kids are doing. […] Because I am not married, and I do not have children, half of a woman's success is unrelated to me. [Quiet laugh.]

When probed on her response to this view, Tong rejects it by stating she has diverse values and does not apply a single rule to herself. Nevertheless, she admits the many practical difficulties of living as a single woman in China: "it is not easy. For a long time, you need to face your emotional struggle and self-doubts. Plus, you need to deal with social pressure including malicious gossips and various speculations. Loneliness, social isolation, and safety concerns etc., you need to face all these on your own." Tong's narrative reveals the central role the heterosexual family plays in living a successful Chinese life, from organising an individual's social space, to providing reliable welfare and social recognition. All directly affect one's well-being.

The state's efforts at inculcating a belief in heterosexual marriage for personal happiness have had an effect, as all of my participants believed that having a happily married family is the most socially desirable life trajectory for women, despite many struggling to fulfil it. Becoming a mother, as described by Muyu

and Namei, is a "must" for women—a crucial life experience if one is to "feel complete". Paradoxically, the popular image of a "sacrificial" good mother further romanticises motherhood as self-fulfilling, which coincides with the self-determination commonly shared among young women, to "experience it all, otherwise you are somehow lacking". However, married women with children often expressed ambiguity regarding such fulfilment, which suggests that these attitudes may shift with women's experience.

Choice of Working in Academia

Many note that commercialised femininities in the post-Mao era have transformed many women into glorious housewives, whose very existence marks their men's social status (Zurndorfer, 2016; Evans, 2000; Hooper, 1998). Despite a revitalisation of traditional gender values that attach women to the private sphere (Sun & Chen, 2015), my participants' perception of work as an integral part of living a meaningful life remains strong, which might be explained by their urban upbringing and university education, which shaped their outlook. While most of their mothers have worked in the socialist *danwei* (单位; work unit), all my participants reject the idea of being a full-time housewife, and view unemployment almost as a personal failure. "I will NEVER be a fulltime housewife! [...] Although I am career-oriented, family life is also very important. [...] I also think that a woman without her own career, but just family, is [...] not very secure. [Laughter.] Also, her life seems to be lacking direction, in the realisation of her value" (Muyu). Regardless of marital status, they were all employed full-time in different white-collar professions including university lecturers, which is a privileged identity-marker in the country's new middle class.

However, it would be a mistake to assume my participants would prioritise career ambitions over family life. On the contrary, work is commonly perceived as an important element for enhancing "marital harmony". Women commonly worry that "without a public role in society to keep up knowledge exchange", it will make them "lag behind" and become "disconnected" from their husbands "if only he is progressing" (Gingko). Such a view, widely shared by women I interviewed, reflects their careful strategizing when facing the rising possibility of divorce in China (Zhou, 2017). Importantly, most middle-class men these

women marry cannot afford a stay-at-home wife, which makes a double income a necessity for maintaining the family's standard of living in China's materialistic culture (Croll, 2006). Women are fully aware of the requirements of keeping oneself desirable both in intimate relationships and in the market economy, and for stabilising their gendered position in the respectable middle-class.

Maintaining a good marriage remains the major concern for my participants when making decisions about work. There remains an internalised sense of domestic duty, so their work should adapt to domestic needs. Contemplating the possibility of being a housewife, Gingko jokes: "Only if he becomes president, and it is no longer suitable for me to go out in public [*pao tou lu mian* 抛头露面]! [Laugh.] But I don't think he will! […] If I must become one, I will consider it." This reveals the traditional elite gender ideal: men leading the outer domain and women leading the inner domain. Though told as a joke, it shows that Gingko still privileges her husband's work, and if that required her to give up her own work, she would. Similar thoughts were shared by many of those I interviewed.

Therefore, the role of men as the main symbolic breadwinner is kept intact both in discourse and in practice among my participants. A women's job should give her stability and the flexibility to look after her family. For instance, Liu's parents' want her to work as "a civil servant or teacher, no other big expectations", because "stability is good for girls", whereas their "family business is not suitable as it is too much hard work for girls" despite it entailing a much higher income. Gingko's accounts of her husband's career decisions reveal similar gendered choices about professions:

> Most boys I know would choose to work [outside academia]. […] They prefer to start earning early. Like my husband, he thinks that a man's responsibility is to earn a living. Men should not always hide in the "ivory tower" [...] and studying does not guarantee you a golden house [*huangjin wu* 黃金屋]. […] Many mothers-in-law now ask for the men to provide the marital home; maybe women don't have such financial pressure, so they can choose to study further.

University here is perceived as a shelter from the "real world", whereas men should go out to embrace more risk and financial reward.

Chinese universities have only just started (since 2016) to widely implement contracts of employment instead of a lifetime guarantee (Huang & Xin, 2016). Compared to other private companies, most Chinese universities are still publicly-funded, and a lectureship does not require staying in the office from nine to five, which provides better flexibility and stability for women with domestic responsibilities. For this reason, Yuhan's husband pushed her to complete a PhD, because he thinks it would give her more time to take care of their two children. In addition, women working in education are widely believed to be better equipped to raise "quality children". Higher education also symbolises class-privilege in a culture that traditionally values education as the primary path of upward social mobility (Chen & Uttal, 1988). Consequently, it has become a suitable profession for well-educated women supported by their families, despite its modest income,[5] enabling them to "have it all". Examining the experience of women academics soon reveals a different reality.

Naturalised Female Gender

One obvious paradox I observed among these women is that on the one hand, equality between men and women is widely accepted as if it is the norm, thanks to the party-state's rhetorical claims about equality. Yet the party-state's long history of using "scientific knowledge about sex" to regulate people's sexual conduct according to its moral and social boundaries means there has been a tendency to legitimise the subordination of women as a natural condition rooted in heterosexual assumptions. As Evans (2007: 54) states, despite an increasing focus on psychology and culture, and society's influence on sexual difference in recent years, "continuing adherence to the biological construction of sexuality severely restricts conceptual, as well as political, possibilities of

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[5] There is wide disparity among individual incomes in higher education, depending on variables like professional rank, discipline and success in research projects. In general, the male-dominated fields of science and engineering earn more than the more female disciplines of the humanities and social sciences. For more discussion, see Zhihu (2013).

change in gender relations". This paradox often led women, like Muyu, to justify and accept gender inequality as a natural condition:

> I don't think there should be a fixed responsibility within the family. To make a family work, efforts have to come from both sides. However, to raise emotionally healthy children, women should contribute more. […] Objectively speaking, it is to do with the biological differences between men and women. Women are much more sensitive and softer, which is very helpful when communicating with children, and taking good care of them.

The dominant construction of gender distinctions is built on a naturalised link between female sexuality and their reproductive role (Evens, 2007), which severely constrains Chinese women's agency to navigate competing demands as worker and mother. Whilst childbirth reinforces women's domestic roles, becoming a father boosts Chinese men's symbolic responsibility as the main breadwinner. Men's commitment to long working hours is often read as self-sacrifice to serve the needs of the family (Yang et al., 2000). Consequently, he is excused from many family chores so he can pursue his career. The gendered division of labour between couples becomes increasingly identifiable after childbirth. Despite the fact that Yuhan and her husband both gained PhDs and work in Chinese universities as lecturers, he left childcare completely to Yuhan, who describes it as "widowed education" (*sang'ou shi jiaoyu* 丧偶式教育). She explains: "This popular Chinese term basically means only mothers are present while kids are growing up! It is like their dad is dead! [Laughter.]" Since her husband is dedicated to building his research career, Yuhan's mom is her main helper. This childcare arrangement represents a common pattern shared among my participants, in which family elders' support with childcare and housework is crucial in helping Chinese working mothers to juggle between work and family (Chen et al., 2011).

Although some research indicates that Chinese fathers have become more involved in childcare (Li & Lamb, 2013), in my sample, the husband's occasional involvement with children is still viewed as exceptional and far from the norm: "If one dad accompanies his child to some extracurricular activities among my

friendship circle, he will surely be highly praised!" (Yuhan). Like their American counterparts in the 1980s (Hochschild, 1989), men also have more freedom to choose tasks according to their preference, whereas women are more likely to take up routine and undesirable house chores. "Dad can only play with the baby a bit after work […] so the rest is all me!"(Gingko).

Gender Discrimination at Work

The party-state has never completely forgone the domestic role of women as mothers; instead, it has naturalised gender differences with "scientific truth". So, women's participation in the labour force alone has failed to deliver gender equality. Robinson (1985) argues that social and economic policies since the start of the reforms have created conditions which are imposing sex-differentiated roles on women (and men) in production and reproduction, and which sustain the traditional definition of women as reproductive labourers. Despite the perceived suitability for women of working in the education sector, the reality of securing a permanent academic position has proved to be increasingly difficult. The growing casualisation and intensification of academic labour following market rules has increased the demand on research output for career progression (Li & Liu, 2015). In this regard, Chinese academia resembles what the Res-Sisters (2017: 268) observed in contemporary British academia, where a particular type of subject: "enterprising, highly productive, competitive, always available, and able to withstand pre-carity" is favoured. Within this structure, individuals, often men, without domestic responsibilities, have competitive advantages. The increasing demand of economic efficiency following market logic means that Chinese women's subordination in the workplace has become ever more apparent, and academia is no exception.

Although gender discrimination in employment is technically illegal in China,[6] the lack of practical safeguarding measures means that women constantly face overt discriminatory practices. Employers, whose primary concern is with efficiency and minimising cost, consider women incapable of devoting themselves to jobs as fully as men do. Practices of male preference from

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[6] See more details in the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests, Labour law and Employment Promotion Act.

recruitment to promotion are widespread. Women have to demonstrate excellence while competing for the same job with men who only need to meet the basic requirements. As Namei observes: "Discrimination is for sure. At the same level, if girls are slightly better than boys, it must be the boy that got the job!"

Unlike in the UK and US, where interviewers are legally not entitled to ask questions about marital and childbearing status, probing questions around the age of women, their marital status and their children during recruitment are commonplace in China, said my other participants working in HR. Employers who do not want to assume the cost of women's maternity leave can reject her upfront, as Gingko experienced: "They heard I am pregnant, so rejected me directly, because 'the job requires fieldwork in the wild.'" Young women who check the box "already married with children" (*yihun yiyun* 已婚已孕) stand a higher chance than their peers who have yet to do so. Fully aware of this prevailing discrimination, women often choose to self-declare if they are married with children to increase their chances.

In order to secure their job prospects, women often commonly make extra sacrifices to show their worth. Facing increasing demands from work, Tong had a breakdown in 2013 because of overwork, which she acknowledges is a common practice in her university. In order to avoid leaving a bad mark with her boss, Lulu terminated her first pregnancy. As a new employee, the timing of Lulu's pregnancy was "problematic". She believes going on maternity leave too early would risk her career prospects, establishing her as a "stereotypical woman" who prioritised family over work. In China's relational society, unspoken rules matter: she needs to carefully consider the implications of her pregnancy at multiple levels: her age, career plan and family expectations. Similarly, Muyu's colleague became pregnant while doing a research project, but she decided to keep the baby: "Our boss was not happy. He moved her to a featherbed post. Though it is good for her to care for her kids. But objectively speaking, her research career is finished." Expecting increased maternal responsibilities under the two-child policy, and aware of the rudimentary legal protections in a workplace prioritising economic efficiency, Muyu laments: "I am at the age to get married and have children. Then it would be difficult for

my career to develop. […] It seems really hard to change! It is impossible to ask your danwei (work unit) to change for you!"

The official maternity leave was 98 days at the time of the interview,[7] which is substantially longer than the much shorter, unestablished paternity leave (Encyclopedia, 2017). In order to keep their job prospects in a male-privileged workplace, many women cut their maternity leave short—like Gingko, who returned to her post-doc within one month of childbirth: "This child turned me into a superwoman. I have to keep working, though desperate for some sleep, and it is 365 non-stop." But for many women, "various family duties make it impossible for academic women to be free to take up workloads that can increase their promotion chances" (Tong), which reinforces the impression that women are simply uncommitted to work like Muyu's boss believes: "for him, it is a waste of the department's resources to invest in women […] so he prefers men".

Gradually, and unsurprisingly, vertical gender segregation comes about, as shown by the example of Yuhan and her husband. They started as lecturers in the same discipline; the criteria for career progression applied equally to both. However, due to her family responsibilities, she fell far behind her husband: "He is now an associate professor and has his own research team. I am still just a *'small'* lecturer". Lacking publications, Yuhan is unable to move to a better university where her family lives. She has to commute every week between two cities, juggling the double demands of being a mother of two, and a lecturer. It also means she is on a contract instead of holding a permanent post in the university. It bears a resemblance to what Reay (2014) noted as the gendered nature of the casualisation of academic labour in the UK, where women are disproportionally found in subordinate positions serving those who generate academic capital, overwhelmingly men. With frustration, Yuhan asks: "Why can't men take paternity leave? Only then will he know what it is like after he returns to work when his position is replaced by others, and promotion has vanished."

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[7] There was a slight increase when the two-child policy started in 2016.

An Ongoing Battle

The marginalisation of women in Chinese academia revealed above has been consistent with previous findings on Chinese women's work experience elsewhere, due to their naturalised reproductive duty, which has been upheld by the party-state's official discourse since the beginning of its rule (Evans, 1997; Hershatter, 1984; Wolf, 1985). Meanwhile, my data reveals that women are commonly perceived as the weaker sex due to an essentialist discourse; therefore, they are unsuitable for certain tasks, including going on work trips. Moreover, a largely male-dominated business culture that frequently consumes female sexuality to facilitate deals means that women need to tread a fine moral line if they are to forge ahead (Zurndorfer, 2016; Liu, 2008). Similar issues are commonly faced by both women academics and the white-collar women I interviewed. Consequently, on both symbolic and practical levels, the upward and outward mobility of women into the world of men is constrained. It also shows that access to education alone does not lead to gender equality for women, with further complications brought about by the two-child policy.

As the current pressure on women's reproductive labour rises, so do the demands of gender equality among young people. China has given birth to large numbers of well-educated women. These young women form a solid base for its burgeoning young feminist movement (Hong-Fincher, 2018). As Wolf (1985) proposed: "[Chinese] women must make their own revolution", since the revolution promised to Chinese women from the state has under-delivered. However, the party-state has shown a strong intention to hold onto the family as the foundation of society by reinforcing traditional family values, with institutions including the ACWF and the CCP Youth League coming to its aid. Despite the pressure of conformity when living in China's patriarchal authoritarian society, using Hong-Fincher's term (2018), the reality is that many young women have devoted considerable amounts of time to developing their careers, like Xiu, and have refused to compromise, but will only marry for love, as my participants confided to me. Women I have interviewed have started to pursue different ways of life outside of conventional marriage, willingly or not. Maybe a silent resistance is underway, as the recent marriage and divorce rate indicates (Zhou, 2017).

Linda, an ambitious young researcher, comments on the way forward: "'Gender equality' is written on paper; we should take full advantage of this official rhetoric and participate in paid employment, entering places of influence and power like politics, the media and academia." Despite facing major obstacles, talented women are entering academia, as Tong observed: "I do respect those capable and talented women, despite being labelled as a 'third gender' or as 'female strong men'. They do not let their talent go wasted." I hope that, nevertheless, Chinese academic women will persist.

Conclusion

Since family-based heterosexual marriage remains a basic governing site for social stability (Sigley, 2001), women's reproductive choices carry political significance, which makes them a target of the state's policing. Therefore, their gendered subjectivity combines pressure from cultural and biomedical discourses on women's marriage and childbirth upheld by the party-state. Their education, and China's socialist past, on the other hand, have normalised their desire to participate in public life. Consequently, these women's lives embody multiple contradictory state policies from the past and present. They become tension-bearers for the reconciliation of the conflicting demands of the party-state on individuals, and on women in particular. Regulating women's personal decisions around marriage and reproduction becomes the key to solving problems faced by the party-state, including declining birth rates, an aging population and social risks posed by large number of surplus men. Facing a powerful state with an increased interest in harnessing women's reproductive labour to stabilise its contemporary governance, women constantly face battles against discriminatory practices both in the marriage and job markets. The essentialist discourse on gender and sexuality, upheld by the official discourse, bind women to their naturalised gender positions, and further obscure the gender oppression experienced by women with a public claim to equality.

By exploring the lives of privileged women, who are at the top of the ivory tower, gender inequality is thrown into sharp relief. It contradicts the popular belief that education and economic development lead to gender equality. On the contrary, the naturalisation of motherhood within heterosexual marriage

means that women are hugely weighed down by their domestic responsibilities, which restricts their career progression. With work remaining an important identity marker, well-educated women need to master precise time management practices and astute resource deployment skills. Academia, a career deemed suitable for well-educated Chinese women, instead of enabling them to "have it all", becomes another place that mirrors the dominance of men in Chinese society more broadly.

In 2018, a report showed that 1.8 times more men are taking doctorate degrees, with an entrenched gender divide according to discipline, with 1.6 times more women in education than men versus 2.3 times more men in engineering (*Sohu News*, 2018). Detailed analysis of women's experience based on disciplines is beyond the scope of this research, and the cases presented above only offer indicative, not representative, findings regarding the experience of Chinese women working in academia. The issues presented in this article do reveal the major obstacles widely faced by well-educated women in Chinese society, which raise serious questions about women's liberation within the current official framework, and the desperate need for autonomous women's organisations to exist. It also resonates with many of the contradictions women face under transformed patriarchy regimes combined with capitalism around the globe, where an emphasis on economic efficiency and privatisation has often left women bearing the burden of public costs made private.

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Female Solidarity as Hope: A Re-Examination of Socialist Feminism in the Literary Works of Ding Ling and Christa Wolf

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Abstract

Recent scholarship has questioned the validity of Western feminism as a model for feminist movements in contemporary China and highlights a gap in the scholarly understanding of the tradition and trajectory of socialist feminism in China (Song, 2012; Wang, 2017). In this article, I will examine the practicality of socialist feminism as an alternative model for contemporary Chinese feminism by comparing the depiction of women in the literary works of the Chinese writer Ding Ling and the East German author Christa Wolf. In Ding Ling's novel In the Hospital*, she strives for gender equality via collaborative work between men and women, while incorporating this feminist task into the agenda of socialist revolution. Christa Wolf's novel* The Quest for Christa T.*, in contrast, explores female friendship as a means of overcoming stagnation and cynicism in the GDR. I ask how both authors articulate their concerns and criticism of inadequate gender practices in socialist states through the lens of women's perspectives. This article thereby offers an insight into the way their writings negotiate women's concern with the official narrative of life in socialist states and the extent to which these texts illuminate alternative Chinese feminist approaches in a contemporary context.*

Keywords: socialist feminism, comparative literature, women's writing, GDR, China, transnationalism, Christa Wolf, Ding Ling.

In recent years, scholars in China and abroad have been working on the current relationship between Chinese feminists and the state from various perspectives, calling for a re-examination of socialist feminism in contemporary China.[1] In

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[1] For instance, writing from a political and economic perspective, Song Shaopeng identifies a rupture in the knowledge of the socialist feminist legacy in China, particularly since the 1990s, where the privatisation of means of production and the retreat of the family into the private

Finding Women in the State, Wang Zheng highlights the lack of attention given in Chinese feminist studies to the efforts of socialist state feminists to promote and implement policies for gender equality in the newly founded People's Republic of China (PRC), particularly from around 1948 to the early 1960s (Wang, 2017). While acknowledging Chinese feminists' efforts in campaigning for gender equality in China today, Wang Zheng points out that they could engage more with the legacy of socialist feminists' attempts to create a gender-equal socialist state in the early period after the foundation of the PRC (1949-1964) (Wang, 2017: 25-26). In light of this observation, Wang Zheng calls for a re-examination of the overlooked history of socialist feminism in China and highlights a need to "inform young feminists of their foremothers' beautiful dreams, strong commitments, tenacious struggles, bitter frustrations, formidable constraints, serious limitations, and astonishing accomplishments" (Wang, 2017: 26). For Wang Zheng, a re-examination of the history of Chinese feminists in the early socialist state can inspire young Chinese feminists today to understand the achievements and the unexamined historical process of these movements. They can thereby discover new ways of organising and enacting feminist activism in contemporary China. In this sense, an insight into the history of and writings by feminists in socialist states can bring forth not only new pathways and understanding for feminists in contemporary China, but also illuminate the multidimensional relation between women and the state in recent history.

In this article, I respond to Wang Zheng's call for a re-examination of the legacy of socialist feminists from a comparative literary perspective. Scholars such as Wang have focused on state-feminist campaigns and attempts at implementing gender-equal policies in and through particular national state institutions. However, by examining the work of feminist writers in different socialist states, we can gain a sense of the diversity of socialist feminist thought and the multiple ways in which they envisaged the meaning of a gender-equal society under socialism. One of the important aspects to understand in this

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sphere have been further enforced (Song, 2012). Similarly, Wen Liu, Ana Huang and Jingchao Ma also highlight contemporary feminists' reluctance to examine the official narrative of women's liberation during the Communist revolutionary era due to an eagerness to break from it. This reluctance, in turn, leads to a lack of investigation of the impact of the history of Chinese feminism upon contemporary Chinese feminist activism (Liu, Huang & Ma, 2015).

history is the way different feminist thinkers in socialist states regarded their relationship with the state's vision of the building of a socialist society as tense yet constructive, rather than antagonistic, as has been assumed by observers from Western countries. In order to explore this relationship, I will compare literary works of the former East German female author Christa Wolf from the early 1960s with texts from the 1940s by the Chinese female author Ding Ling. These two decades are important in terms of the personal literary trajectories of each writer, since it was in these decades that Wolf and Ding Ling attempted to grapple with both socialist theory and ideas about women's equality. Moreover, these decades were formative periods in the building of socialist state institutions in each country, and they saw the development of official policies toward gender relations as well as attempts to regulate literature and arts. The comparison that I put forward here transcends national and temporal boundaries, thereby shedding light on women writers' attempts to articulate women's voices and struggles beyond the framework of the individual nation state.

Transnational feminism as understood by Chinese feminists since 1995 is heavily conditioned by Western discourse.[2] The comparison of women's writing in China and East Germany allows for a neglected history of transnational feminist movements in the "socialist East" to resurface, and, as a result, breaks away from the hegemonic discourse of transnational feminism operating in the "capitalist West". While I will not reconstruct a detailed genealogy of socialist feminism in China or Germany, and while Ding Ling and Christa Wolf may not have read each other's works per se, it is important to acknowledge how both

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[2] Some Chinese feminists have regarded the Fourth World Conference on Women and its accompanying Forum of Non-Governmental Organisations held in Beijing in 1995 as an opportunity to engage in dialogue with the international feminist community (Hsiung & Wong, 1999: 126). Since then, these feminists have increasingly sought help from Western feminist theory in order to account for and resolve the struggles that women face in contemporary China. The Fourth World Conference on Women enriches and adds to the complexity of Chinese feminism, which then interacts and creates tension with feminism in Western countries. However, prior to this international conference, Chinese feminists in the 1980s and 1990s also strove to re-conceptualise and account for new struggles and challenges that women faced in light of the rapid political and economic changes that emerged in a post-Maoist China (see Barlow, 2004: 253-354).

are situated within the context of a longer history, since at least the early twentieth century, of the transnational circulation of ideas, texts, and movements that articulated the bringing together of socialism and feminism from different perspectives.

The legacy of this sphere of transnational socialist feminist thought and action played out differently in the rise of socialist states in both Germany and China, and in the mainstream practice of each of the leading communist parties of the two countries.[3] Rather than recounting a broad history of socialist feminist thought and action in both contexts, I will focus on the particular socialist feminist engagement of these two prominent women writers in two early socialist regions. By focusing on the similarities and differences of the contexts of both authors, and their particular challenges in writing from a feminist perspective in these different contexts, this article offers an insight into how these two writers negotiated women's concerns in relation to the official narrative of life in socialist states and the extent to which their texts may illuminate alternative Chinese feminist approaches in the contemporary context. Both authors express their concerns about and criticism of failings and weaknesses in their own socialist societies through the lens of women's perspectives. The criticism made by these two female authors is not articulated from the perspective of rejecting the making of a socialist society, but from the perspective of understanding where it still needs to work for women. Both authors are committed to a socialist society, but, at the same time, they are critical of the approach that has so far been taken towards questions of gender equality and women's everyday lives. Such perspectives open up an important aspect of the diverse and contested history of feminist thought in socialist countries.

One of the questions that unites historical socialist feminist thought with contemporary feminism, including in China, is that of solidarity between women, and between men and women, in working toward a gender-equal

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[3] Scholars like Christina Gilmartin have shown that the CCP leadership in China took a more conservative Stalinist approach to the question of feminism from the 1920s (see Gilmartin, 1995; Stranahan, 1983). Similarly, scholars such as Georgina Paul, Birgit Mikus and Emily Spiers have also highlighted a "fractured legacy" of the socialist feminist movement in Germany (see Mikus & Spiers, 2016; Paul, 2009).

society. Given all the differences of class and culture, and the divided allegiances between women, how can these be both taken account of and brought together to create a society free of oppression and inequalities, including those based on gendered hierarchies? Writing in 2004, Dai Jinhua already posed the issue of class differences amongst women as a neglected aspect of contemporary Chinese academic and literary feminism in the post-1980s (Dai, 2004). It has also been brought to the fore in recent years by emerging poetry from the *dagongmei* 打工妹, or rural women migrant workers in China's factories (Dooling, 2017), whose expressions of the intersections of class, livelihood precarity and gender are an important reminder of the question of feminist solidarity for today's young university-based feminists who might turn more to their counterparts transnationally, rather than locally, for expressions of solidarity.

In this article, I will examine the ways in which both Ding Ling and Christa Wolf foreground the question of solidarity for women in their presentation of the building of a gender-equal socialist society that takes into account the experiences of women. While Christa Wolf envisages female friendship as an alternative human interrelationship that has the potential of overcoming the rigidity and dogmatism caused by male dominance in the GDR, Ding Ling imagines a collaborative work between men and women from different social and class backgrounds, through which a truly gender-equal society that is inhabitable for women can emerge. By reading the literary works of both authors, feminists today can learn from the ways in which both authors present hopeful expressions of female solidarity while maintaining a critical stance towards their respective socio-political circumstances. Literature supplements what reality lacks and helps us imagine and understand the multiplicity, complexity and diversity of women's struggles within human relations in a way which can transcend temporal and historical frameworks.

Communist Women, Feminism and Socialist Feminism

In the Western context, the term "feminism" connotes the political and social movements that seek to establish women's rights in various spheres in society and equality between men and women; by way of contrast, this term does not

have a straightforward equivalence in the Chinese context.[4] The two Chinese terms that have been used most commonly in recent years are *nüxing zhuyi* 女性主义 (feminine-ism) and *nüquan zhuyi* 女权主义 (the ism of women's rights) (Wang, 2000: 737). These two Chinese terms are used almost interchangeably nowadays, yet the subtle difference in translation should not be overlooked. While *nüxing zhuyi* accentuates the essence of gender (difference)—*xing*(*bie*), *nüquan zhuyi* emphasises the rights of women—*quanli* 权利.[5] The Chinese character *quan* 权 can also be expanded into *quanli* 权力, which indicates a sense of power. In this regard, *nüquan zhuyi* implies a more radical connotation than *nüxing zhuyi* in a contemporary context, as it indicates the process of empowering women through emphasising their rights and power.

The place of feminism and its naming in the nationalist and communist movements of the early and mid-twentieth century is also a complex one. Introduced in the early twentieth century from foreign, mostly Japanese, feminist texts, the Chinese term *nüquan* was popularised along with the New Culture Movement—a movement that strove to transform Confucian moral and cultural practices and thus modernise Chinese culture around the 1920s (Wang, 2017: 3). The young Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of the 1920s saw a *nüquan yundong* 女权运动 (movement for women's rights and power) as appealing because these feminists demanded an improvement of women's living conditions from a nationalist perspective, which aligned with the anti-imperial nationalism of the CCP (Gilmartin, 1995: 7). During the Party's formative phase Chinese communists collaborated with Chinese *nüquan* feminists in an attempt to bring about a social revolution (Barlow, 2004: 53-5). In the 1930s, however,

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[4] It should, however, be noted that the term "feminism" does not have an unequivocal definition in the West either. Disagreement still occurs within different branches of feminism with regards to the interpretation of struggles that women face under male dominance, as well as approaches to act against or resolve these forms of oppression (James, 1998: 576; Haslanger, Tuana & O'Connor, 2017).

[5] As Tani Barlow suggests, the term *nüxing,* which erupted into circulation during the 1920s, essentialises sexual difference and the male/female binary, and acts as a signifier of resistance towards the Confucian tradition (Barlow, 2004: 52-3). However, Liu, Karl and Ko demonstrate that the neologism *nüxing* appeared as early as the turn of the twentieth century, whereby *xing* was understood in the Confucian tradition as nature/humanity, rather than (female or male) sex (Liu, Karl & Ko, 2013: 16).

the CCP took a more conservative approach, echoing that of the Soviet Union under Stalin and other Western communist parties under the influence of the Comintern (Boxer, 2007). During this period, women communists in China and across the Comintern world continued to press for a deep-seated social revolution of gender relationships (Boxer, 2007; Riddell, 2011; Gilmartin, 1995), even as the male-dominated leaderships of communist parties took more conservative approaches. At the same time, the term "feminism" itself was often rejected by communist women, since it was associated with the movement of bourgeois women seeking the rights of bourgeois men in a capitalist society, with little regard for larger economic and political inequalities that affected women and that needed a more thorough social and political revolution (Barlow, 2004; Boxer, 2007; Wang, 2017).[6]

Both Ding Ling and Christa Wolf participated in, and were inheritors of, a tense relationship between women activists striving for a transformation of gender relationships within the socialist projects of different communist parties and socialist organisations from the 1930s onwards, and the often male-dominated leaderships that were committed to a gender-equality agenda but often downplayed the concerns of women. In this sense, we may see them as part of a longer history of "socialist feminism", a term that may well capture the particularity of feminist agendas within socialist projects, while also indicating the struggles that these feminists faced. Indeed, the term "socialist feminism" was not one that was widely used by feminist activists in communist parties themselves. Neither did they often call themselves "feminists", due to the term's association with "bourgeois feminism". The term "socialist feminism" gained currency instead in the 1960s and 1970s in the post-second-wave feminist movements of North America and Western Europe, though it was heavily influenced not only by what Western feminists perceived as the more radical gender equality projects occurring in socialist countries like China, but also by a similar set of core socialist texts on the question of women that had

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[6] For instance, Clara Zetkin and Alexandra Kollontai believed that the organised communist women's movement was able to bring about a socialist revolution that would overturn capitalism, while bourgeois feminist movements merely led to reform, which was not able to eliminate capitalist domination—the roots of women's oppression—in all social aspects (Zetkin, 1896; Kollontai, 1909). These Western female communists had a decisive impact on the Chinese female communists (Gilmartin, 1995).

also been the basis of communist and socialist women's movements since the late nineteenth century (Hathaway, 2018). "Socialist feminism" indicated an understanding of the roots of women's oppression in both capitalist domination and gender oppression (Ehrenreich, 1976; Buchanan, 2016). From the perspective of socialist feminists, mainstream feminism focuses too narrowly on the roots of women's oppression in social and cultural realms and through the universality of male supremacy (Ehrenreich, 1976). The term "socialist feminism", then, was coined in order to emphasise that "gender and class are mutually reinforcing systems of oppression" (Buchanan, 2016). Though neither Ding Ling nor Christa Wolf labelled themselves explicitly as "socialist feminists", this term is used here as an heuristic tool to describe their feminist writings, which presented a critique of the way the socialist projects in their particular countries had so far dealt with questions of gender inequality and women's experiences, but also attempted to do so from a perspective that saw the socialist project as a pathway for a feminist project. Through referring to both authors as socialist feminists, I regard them as the heirs of the aforementioned legacy of the communist women's movements of the early twentieth century and, at the same time, the forbearers of contemporary transnational socialist feminists.

Ding Ling and Christa Wolf: Controversial Feminists

Both Ding Ling and Christa Wolf engaged with women's experiences under socialism in their writings throughout their literary careers, be it implicitly or explicitly, and both gained considerable reputations. Ding Ling entered the Chinese literary scene in the 1920s, with stories exploring figures of "new womanhood", feminine psychology and sexuality. She was best known for her literary work *Miss Sophia's Diary* (1928), which explores a young urban woman's subjective feelings and sexual drives, pointing towards an emancipation of women on both physical and psychological levels. After joining the communist party in 1932, she brought her feminist literary perspective into productive tension and interaction with socialist narratives of class and collectivity. By contrast, Christa Wolf joined the Socialist Unity Party (SED) of the GDR in 1949 and established her literary reputation in the 1960s with her early socialist realist novel *The Divided Heaven* (1963), which examines the advantages and

challenges of living in the GDR in the 1960s, concluding with a broadly optimistic view of the future of the socialist state. Wolf later developed a mode of experimental semi-autobiographical narration, termed subjective authenticity, which enabled her to explore the gendered relationship between self and history. In spite of their differing personal, temporal, cultural, and political contexts and modes of writing, the works of both writers can be brought into fruitful conversation through their critical perspectives on the problems hampering the progress of women's liberation under socialism.

Although Ding Ling and Wolf regarded themselves as engaging in productive criticisms of socialism from the perspective of those committed to seeing its realisation, they were perceived by their respective contemporary peers as denigrating the socialist project. The late 1960s saw a turning point in the development of socialist literature in the GDR, especially after the Eleventh Plenum of the Socialist Unity Party in 1965, which tightened state regulation of arts and literature and demanded that all artistic production present a positive attitude toward the SED (Fulbrook, 2004). To a certain degree, these regulations, influenced by the official Soviet literary policy of socialist realism, limited the creativity of writers and artists through imposing a depiction of everyday life in the GDR in positive, and even glorified tones.[7] Dismayed by the strict control of the SED, Wolf gradually turned away from state-sanctioned socialist realism and accentuated the significance of imagination and the incorporation of the subjective perspective of the author in literature (Tate, 2007). Wolf's loss of faith in the status quo in the GDR, which can be seen in *The Quest for Christa T.* (1968a), led to criticism of her from across the political spectrum in both East and West Germany. While scholars in the GDR criticised Wolf's text as providing something for the West German critics to attack (Sachs, 1969; Adameck, 1969; Kähler, 1969; and Haase, 1969), scholars in the Federal Republic interpreted the novel as revealing symptoms of the failings of socialism (Reich-Ranicki, 1969; Mayer, 1970; Wiegenstein, 1969; and von Ankum, 1992).

Similarly, Ding Ling's *Zai yiyuan zhong* 在医院中 (*In the Hospital*) (1941a) was

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[7] Although the official state policies on socialist realism restrained writers and artists in many ways, it did not prevent writers and artists from experimenting with the idea of socialist realism in different ways from the 1930s to the 1960s in the German context (see Subiotto, 1994; Tate, 1998).

criticised soon after its publication in 1941. In this text and her critical essay "Thoughts on March 8" (1942a), Ding Ling articulated her concern with the unequal treatment of women in the Communist base area in Yan'an; at the same time, she took a critical perspective on women's own progress toward transforming gendered social relationships. This is demonstrated, on the one hand, in her criticism of the urban intellectual sentimentality of the female protagonist in *In the Hospital* and, on the other hand, in the emphasis in her essay on the need for women to develop their strengths. Ding Ling's critical stance towards unequal gender practices in Yan'an and women's need for self-improvement shares a similar intention to that of Wolf—both strove to reflect on aspects of their respective socialist societies that could still work better for women.

As in Wolf's case, Ding Ling's understanding of socialism and its need for improvement from the perspective of women was obscured, and thus misinterpreted and criticised, at a time when literature and arts were constrained to depicting positive aspects of the revolutionary base area. The novel was written in the Communist base area of Yan'an during the period of the War of Resistance against Japan and much political turbulence in China.[8] During this period, the CCP faced both external and internal exigencies: on the one hand, as the CCP was defeated by the Guomindang (GMD), or the Nationalist Party, in urban areas, it relocated its base to a remote rural area; on the other hand, the War of Resistance against Japan broke out in 1937, threatening the security of people and the sovereignty of China. In this context, the main task for the CCP was to strengthen its regime power and fight against Japanese fascism (Feuerwerker, 1982: 89-121). Literature at this time, as theorised by many nationalist leftist and communist writers, had a twofold function: literature should inspire soldiers to fight on the front and strengthen the solidarity of the people; it should also promulgate socialism, allowing more people, especially peasants in rural areas such as Yan'an, to understand the mechanisms and importance of socialism in China (Hong, 2007).

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[8] The Yan'an base (1935 to 1950) was not a state per se, but is often seen as a microcosm of what later became the state apparatus of the socialist PRC (Apter & Saich, 1994). Furthermore, it was in Yan'an that the literary and arts policy of the PRC was developed (see McDougall & Louie, 1999).

After arriving at the Yan'an revolutionary-base area in 1936, Ding Ling became one of the influential writers who helped institutionalise new ideas about revolutionary literature and culture promoted by the CCP and other leftist writers' associations. There were two writers groups in Yan'an during that time, leading the literary orientation in the revolutionary period. Ding Ling belonged to the All-China Writer's Resistance Association or *Wenkang* 文抗, while other prominent figures, such as Zhou Yang, spoke for writers at the Lu Xun Academy or *Luyi* 鲁艺. These two groups shared multiple similarities, as Tani E. Barlow maintains, although "the Luyi group appears to have eventually moved toward a principled emphasis on 'praising brightness', whereas Wenkang placed relatively more emphasis on 'exposing darkness'" (Barlow, 2004: 193). Barlow's statement accounts for Ding Ling's call for *zawen* 杂文—the critical essay—in depicting life in Yan'an, which was first supported by Mao Zedong until the outbreak of the "Wang Shiwei incident".[9]

For Ding Ling, the importance of *zawen* lies more in its critical attitude towards social problems than in its literary style (Ding Ling, 1941b). Her laudatory but critical view of socialism and women was thus in accord with this belief in a critical stance toward reality. Yet after the Wang Shiwei incident, intellectuals involved in criticising the Party's structure and exposing the negative aspects of life in Yan'an were under attack. While Ding Ling made a timely token self-criticism to avoid further punishment, Wang Shiwei refused to back down from his views on inequality in Yan'an, resulting in him being executed after five years of detention due to the charge of Trotskyism.[10] Although both Mao and the intellectuals working in Yan'an both aimed at

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[9] Wang Shiwei published his *zawen* "Ye Baihehua" 野百合花 in March 1942, which exposed the Party's hierarchical structure in Yan'an and was reprinted by the GMD in a Xi'an newspaper, using it to attack the CCP. After that, *zawen* were no longer supported by the CCP and writers involved with them were criticised (Rubin, 1981: 509).

[10] While both Ding Ling and Wang Shiwei articulated similar criticisms of certain structures in the Party, the reason for their different fates remains controversial. For instance, Yin Qi and Gao Hua interpret Mao's varying decisions on Ding Ling and Wang Shiwei as the result of his own political ambition (Gao, 2000; Yin, 2004). While this interpretation appears to overlook the broader context of historical contingency in Yan'an, Mao's paradoxical act seems to account for this type of reading—the purge of Trotskyists aligns with Stalin's policy, yet Mao's persecution of those accused of "Trotskyism" aims contradictorily at reducing the Comintern's influence on the CCP.

criticising and transforming the hierarchies that emerged in the leadership and institutional organisations, their divergent interpretations of the hierarchy in the CCP led to the repression in Yan'an.

Despite both authors facing criticism and, in Ding Ling's case, punishment, due to their outspoken views about the inadequate progress toward true gender equality and freedom for writers under socialist regimes, the different political contexts in which both authors were writing should not be overlooked. The GDR was a relatively stable state in the 1960s, where writers were able to experiment with various literary techniques and expose social and political problems under the SED regime (Fulbrook, 2004). Yan'an in the 1940s remained in a wartime situation, in which the space for writers to explore diverse themes and techniques in literature was restricted. The literary and arts policy set in place after Mao's Talks in 1942 continued into the 1950s as the PRC state established itself. There was a brief period of officially-sanctioned artistic experimentation where criticism of the problems of the new socialist society was openly called for during the Hundred Flowers Campaign of 1956, but this space was soon closed again—with many writers who took up the call for critical perspectives facing much persecution.[11]

It should be noted that both Ding Ling and Christa Wolf encountered criticism under specific historical contexts where the form and content of literature were restricted by Party guidelines. While Wolf had an ambivalent relationship with the SED due to its rigid, ideologically-oriented literary policies, Ding Ling was in a more precarious situation in wartime Yan'an, where nationalism and socialism could not be easily disentangled in literature. It may seem that the particularly restrictive situation Ding Ling faced in Yan'an precluded the possibility of literary experimentation which Wolf was able to explore in the German context, but Ding Ling's complex depiction of her fictional characters and her ability to capture the multiple aspects of the subjective and objective difficulties people experienced in the revolution actually reveal a literary creativity that is different from that of Wolf. A comparison of both writers can therefore help to understand an international field of socialist feminist writing in the socialist world. When examining the way in which they both elicited similar sets of

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[11] For the Hundred Flowers Campaign, see for instance MacFarquhar (1966). On the Anti-Hu Feng Campaign of 1955, in which Ding Ling, too, was particularly a target, see Denton (1998).

questions about the socialist project implemented in their different contexts and feminism, as well as the tensions between them, we can also understand that these two women were different types of writers with different individual circumstances, which engendered their particular creative styles. Faced with the praise of their literary talent and criticism of their outright social critique at the same time, these authors' experiences of writing in socialist states indicate that they each had the determination to overcome difficulties in order to make their critical voices heard.

Imagination and Female Solidarity in *The Quest for Christa T.*

Both Ding Ling and Christa Wolf aimed to cultivate a better future for socialism through their criticism of the inadequacies in their respective socialist states, especially in terms of social and personal relationships between people as well as between state officials and ordinary people. They exposed the various struggles that women faced in both the private and public spheres, revealing the flaws in existing policies that should ideally ensure gender equality. Nevertheless, the criticism expressed in their writings should be regarded as a call for an improvement of the existing social and political system, rather than a complete overturn, as both expressed their hopes for and alternatives to a socialist future. Both authors draw on their own experiences as women in socialist regimes, and their texts provide alternative narratives of life under socialism that are different from the official narratives put forward by the regimes. In fact, through exposing shortcomings regarding struggles faced by women in socialist states, both authors seem to have envisaged a revitalised version of socialism with a sense of female solidarity at its core.

The novel *The Quest for Christa T.* narrates a recollection of the life of, and the narrator's relationship with, the protagonist Christa T, who dies of leukaemia at the age of thirty-five. The narrator and Christa T. meet for the first time in school during the Second World War and again during their studies at the University of Leipzig in 1952. The structure of the novel is complex on both a narrative and a formal level. The text comprises three layers of narrative: the authentic manuscripts of Christa T.'s diaries, letters and other writings, the narrator's interpretation of these materials, and the narrator's imaginative

recreation of Christa T.'s life episodes. The interplay of the factual, the interpretive and the inventive accentuates the complexity of the content, as it supplements the narrative with the narrator's and the author's consciousness. Moreover, the shifting perspectives between the narrator and the protagonist, which blur the boundary between these two characters, also challenge the reader (Kuhn, 1988; Tate, 2007).

Criticism of gender inequality is not explicit in this novel; nevertheless, it is embedded in depictions of the various struggles encountered by the female protagonist (Kuhn, 1988). The significance of gender lies in the text's portrayal of women's experiences and struggles in the GDR. In her depiction of the friendship between the narrator and Christa T., Wolf develops an "alternative model of human interrelationship" (Kuhn, 1988)—that is, she depicts a female friendship, which can, to some degree, be interpreted as an alternative to the socialist system dominated by male technocrats in the GDR (Mohr, 1971; Huyssen, 1975).

In the novel, male characters are often depicted as pragmatists who do not think creatively. These men are, in Christa T.'s words, "Tatsachenmenschen"— the type of person who follows rules unequivocally and seeks truth in "Tatsachen" (facts). For Wolf, this type of person does not examine the so-called facts and believes that what is presented before him cannot be changed; he therefore believes that one should always adapt to given circumstances. For instance, a male medical student suggests to Christa T. that she should conform to social norms, because "the essence of health is [to] adapt or conform" (*The Quest for Christa T.*, hereafter *CT*, 111). And the school principal, an old man who went through the Second World War, after solving a quarrel between Christa T. and her pupils, advises her: "Learn to keep your own thoughts to yourself, it's what makes life liveable" (*CT*, 104). These responses from men imply a compliance with given rules and an inability or unwillingness to take into account other people's differing beliefs, which is precisely what Wolf opposes. Such inflexibility of thinking precludes the consideration of alternative possibilities in reality. Dogmatically following rules does not allow for voices articulated from various perspectives to be heard, nor does it allow creative thinking to take place. Conformity then becomes the main principle in society, which prevents further development or improvement of society.

Apart from dogmatism and rigid ways of thinking, male figures in the novel also represent violence. Wolf challenges the official narrative of the past put forward by the GDR regime, which, Wolf believes, does not address the past of National Socialism enough and hinders the development of East German society (Hell, 1997). The emphasis on two intertwined concepts in the GDR— "anti-fascism" and "socialism"—"affected a comprehensive cleansing of the GDR population's collective memory, unburdening many people of feelings of guilt" (Münkler, 1996: 124). In the novel, for instance, Christa T. witnesses her pupil Hammurabi biting off a toad's head for a bet, which triggers flashbacks of violence that happened in her childhood. Wolf's depiction of the past, represented predominantly by male violence in the novel, serves to give a better understanding of the present. From Christa T.'s memory of the male landlord who casts the tomcat at the wall, breaking its bones, to her recent encounter with Hammurabi, these men represent a repressed and unprocessed National Socialist past which threatens to re-emerge (Kuhn, 1988; Hell, 1997). The lack of overt discussion of this past transmutes itself into physical manifestations of violence, which, for Wolf, point to the stalled reflection on the National Socialist past in the GDR as a whole. In this sense, the depiction of men in the novel highlights the emerging failings in East Germany that prevent socialism from further development.

In contrast to the latent violence inherent in men's relationships with one another, the female friendship in the novel suggests a more positive mode of human interaction. Myra Love argues that *The Quest for Christa T.* exhibits a germinally feminist quality, found in the subversive potential of female subjectivity embodied by Christa T., and in the relationship between the narrator and the protagonist as a counter-patriarchal example of female friendship and solidarity (Love, 1979: 37). Although Wolf's depiction of men and women seems to fall into a static binary, it signals, nonetheless, her effort to establish a less dogmatic socialist society in the late 1960s. Love also relates Wolf's experimental writing mode to an act of counter-patriarchy and sees the relationship between the narrator and Christa T. as an alternative to men's experience in the GDR. From this perspective, the female friendship represented in Wolf's novel anticipates a budding feminist concern and envisages a less restrictive form of socialism, which is in turn linked to Wolf's appeal to the capacity of imagination.

Wolf regards literature as a way to cultivate and develop the human faculty of imagination. In *The Quest for Christa T.*, the importance of the ability to imagine is demonstrated through the narrator's imaginative reading of Christa T.'s diary and her life episodes. For instance, the narrator intends to interview Gertrud Born, one of Christa T.'s best friends, to know more about the protagonist. However, Wolf presents us with a counterfactual narrative, in which the entire interview with Gertrud Born is imagined by the narrator (*CT*, 50). Rather than being a false or inaccurate interpretation of Christa T.'s diary and life, this imaginative episode allows the narrator to explore her friend's life in supplement to what has already happened in reality. Similarly, Christa T. rewrites the incident where Hammurabi bites off a toad's head, changing the violent child into a repentant one in her literary imagination. The imaginative meeting, along with the toad story, can be seen as a means of endowing an individual's life with more open possibilities. In other words, literature supplements reality and presents what has not happened in reality as a potentiality. For Wolf, imagination through literary recreation helps move away from restrictions and stagnation in society (Wolf, 1968b: 202).

In *The Reader and The Writer*, Wolf writes: "We seem to need the help and approval of the imagination in our lives; it means playing with the possibilities open to us" (Wolf, 1968b: 190). Wolf believes the ability to imagine is a form of protection against "a furtive process hard to avoid, a hardening, petrifying, habituating, that attacks the memory in particular" (Wolf, 1968b: 190). Literature, according to Wolf, allows individuals to be creative, through which an apathetic, cynical and self-denying attitude towards life can be prevented. For Wolf, cynicism and dogmatism are similar to the troubling cynical late-bourgeois attitude that regards humanism as an anachronism to be relegated to primitive societies or the prehistoric epochs (Wolf, 1968b: 210). In Wolf's account, "humanism" refers to the way individuals maintain their individuality within the collective and the importance of living a full life as human beings; these concerns, she argues, can be resolved by writing and reading literature. Wolf refuses the mimetic depiction of reality, which, according to GDR cultural policy of the period, ought to be the main, if not the only, type of depiction of reality in socialism; instead, the appeal for an imaginative portrayal of reality and the focus on the subjective perspective of individuals, though criticised by her contemporaries as bourgeois subjectivism, show that Wolf calls for a diverse

and non-restrictive understanding of socialism, in which the individual and the collective reinforce each other mutually.

Wolf's call for a less restrictive socialist society cannot be achieved without narrating her novel from a female perspective. As Myra Love points out, the female friendship between the narrator and Christa T. plays a pivotal role in achieving this vision of socialism. For Love, the similar experiential worlds between the narrator and Christa T. facilitate the female solidarity between them. She argues that Christa T. is placed on the periphery of society due to her openness to subjective experience and her questioning of authority, presented in the novel as her inability to conform. In solidarity with Christa T., the narrator, through appropriating Christa T.'s mentality, seizes "the utopian potential of a historically female subjectivity" (Love, 1979: 42). After Christa T.'s death, the narrator rediscovers the value of certain qualities that Christa T. possessed, such as resistance to conformism and openness to different possibilities; through this discovery and through her reading of Christa T.'s process of self-actualisation, the narrator also begins to go through the same process herself.

Although Christa T. cannot be regarded as an idealised socialist heroine in the novel, she is, for the narrator, a role model of the way women experience reality differently than men. Furthermore, the narrator, to some degree, extends Christa T.'s existence by taking over her articulated voice. Christa T.'s voice is articulated less frequently as the novel develops; instead, the narrator's voice becomes more prominent and increasingly interferes with Christa T.'s voice. This shows that, on the one hand, Christa T.'s qualities and experience are transferred and appropriated in the narrator's extended account of her story; on the other, the extended voice by the narrator signifies a solidarity through female friendship. For Wolf, a better prospect for socialism lies in both the capacity to imagine and a resistance to dogmatic thinking, which can be achieved through positioning female bonding into the apparatus of the socialist state.

Gender Inequality and a Socialist Future in *In the Hospital*

Faced with increasingly strict policies on literature and the arts, Christa Wolf

explores female solidarity as a means of combating male dominance and rigidity in the GDR. By contrast, for Ding Ling, female solidarity is created through the collaborative work of both men and women of different classes, all of whom have much to overcome personally and relationally, before they can achieve a gender-equal socialist future. In her seminal essay "Thoughts on March 8", Ding Ling expresses her concern that the specific struggles that women, especially urban female intellectuals, faced were not properly addressed and recognised by political authorities—predominantly male—and by women themselves in Yan'an (Ding Ling, 1942a; Barlow, 2004). At the end of this essay, Ding Ling puts forward four suggestions for women so that they can strengthen themselves physically and mentally: stay healthy; search for happiness; think rationally; stay resolved in hardship and persevere to the end (Ding Ling, 1942a). Ding Ling's concerns as stated in her essay, as well as her suggestions to women, are fictionalised in her novel *In the Hospital*, which complicates the question of the representation of women, because the fiction, as Barlow suggests, keeps open "the problem of the difficulty in literature or policy writing of ever getting women properly represented in the final instance" (Barlow, 2004: 220). However, it is this openness to the complexity of women's struggles that allows Ding Ling to create a space in her literary writing, in which a solidarity for women in the cultural and political spheres can be imagined.

In the Hospital depicts the story of a twenty-year-old woman Lu Ping who stays for a short time in a hospital in a small village not far away from Yan'an. Lu Ping is from the coastal metropolis of Shanghai, where she trained as a midwife in the university. After joining the communist party, she resolutely commits herself to the revolution, even though she is assigned to a hospital in a dilapidated area. After arriving in the hospital, the inhospitable reception, the poorly equipped environment and the irresponsibility of the leaders towards the staff contrast starkly with Lu Ping's idealised vision of the revolution. In spite of all this, Lu Ping's determination and enthusiasm are not weakened; instead, she dedicates herself to her duties and assiduously takes care of the patients. After a stressful operation where tragedy nearly occurs due to the inadequacy of equipment, however, Lu Ping isolates herself from the others, as she becomes ill. Toward the end, before Lu Ping leaves the hospital for further studies, she feels both dismayed and discouraged; yet, a conversation with a patient rekindles her optimistic belief in the future and reinforces her

determination and commitment to the revolution.

The character Lu Ping summarises the problems that urban intellectual women faced in the revolutionary region—their "modernised" vision of the revolution clashes with the rudimentary hygiene, the poor quality of facilities, and the lack of gender-equal awareness and political consciousness in Yan'an. At the same time, the narrator takes a critical stance toward the female protagonist, through which Ding Ling also expresses her critique of the idealistic feminism embraced by urban intellectual women. For Ding Ling, urban intellectuals, both men and women, have a tendency to idealise and fantasise about reality in the revolutionary period (Ding Ling, 1942a). In the case of Lu Ping, her enthusiasm towards the revolution is driven by her rosy fantasy, rather than a rational evaluation of reality.

Lu Ping's difficulty in reconciling her political ambition with reality is further demonstrated through the narrative emphasis on her inner perspective: "[s]he was full of imagination and is able to open up possibilities in her life. But the iron hoop of 'the Party' and 'the need of the Party' is tied around her head, how could she disobey the demand of the Party? How can she ignore the hoop, which she has tied on herself?"[12] (*In the Hospital*, hereafter *Hospital*, 240). The free, indirect style here blurs the third-person voice of the narrator with the subjective viewpoint of the protagonist. The depiction of Lu Ping's inner perspective recalls that of Ding Ling's earlier female protagonist Shafei (Sophia) in *Miss Sophia's Diary*, as both seem to be caught up in their own consciousness. [13] Both female characters are dismayed by the actual circumstances that do not live up to their expectations: Shafei committed suicide when she realised her sexual desire was incompatible with the society she was in, whereas Lu Ping becomes ill when her rose-tinted vision of revolution is shattered by the reality she sees in Yan'an.

Though not as extreme as Shafei's choice to end her life, Lu Ping's illness—neurasthenia, or nervous weakness, and insomnia—reminds the readers of her

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[12] Translations of *In the Hospital* are my own.
[13] This similarity of the two female characters was also noticed by some of Ding Ling's contemporaries, such as Zhou Yang, but they used it to condemn Ding Ling as following the bourgeois literary tradition of subjectivism (see Zhang, 1958).

background as a progressive petit bourgeois woman, as these illnesses are often used to depict urban women's "hysteria" in literature, indicating modern women's struggle in society and their nascent female awareness (Dikötter, 1995). While Shafei demonstrates Ding Ling's earlier thoughts on the awakening of women's self-consciousness and sexuality, and the difficulty for women to become autonomous subjects, Ding Ling's understanding of women's struggle in the 1920s was limited to a focus on urban intellectual women. Lu Ping, by contrast, exemplifies Ding Ling's awareness of a trans-class feminism. For Ding Ling, Lu Ping should not be a perfect character, "she should possess the weakness of the petite bourgeoisie"; but when she exposed her own failings, she has the chance to overcome them and complete the process of transformation into a stronger character (Ding Ling, 1942b). Here, Lu Ping's neurasthenia represents Ding Ling's critical view of urban women's weakness— that is, their irrationality and sensitivity, which, nonetheless, can be overcome by following the four self-strengthening guidelines for women outlined by Ding Ling in her "Thoughts on March 8". For Ding Ling, the fourth piece of advice— "stay resolute in hardship, persevere to the end"—is perhaps the most significant one, which echoes with the novel's aphoristic ending: "people grow up in hardship" (*Hospital*, 253).

During her time in Yan'an, Ding Ling conceived women not through the lens of urban femininity, which excludes peasant and working-class women, but through the recognition of geographical, cultural and political differences. Ding Ling's shift prompts her to explore the complexity and difficulty of the literary representation of "woman", "in the context of cultural and social grids mediating direct historical experience", which, in turn, creates a space in which a solidarity in all areas for women can be imagined (Barlow, 2004: 220). Ding Ling's understanding of "woman" as a trans-class category is tied to her own experience of urban female intellectuals' inadequate understanding of women's liberation. In her first experience of performing *Xixiangji* 西厢记 (*Romance of the West Chamber*) on stage in Shanghai in 1922, Ding Ling recalled that everyone wanted to play the leading role while no one but her best friend Wang Jianhong and herself was willing to play the maids (Ding Ling, 1982a: 161). Since she originated from the gentry, Ding Ling's act of performing as a lower-class woman signifies "a transformation of her own given placement in the class hierarchy and ends the myth of the 'naturalness' of its existence" (Yan, 2006:

205).

This act of transcending class hierarchy allows Ding Ling to see the limited interpretation of gender emancipation by women with privileged backgrounds, exposing the way they re-inscribe a power structure based on class hierarchy rather than gender hierarchy. While the experience in Shanghai prompts Ding Ling to gain awareness of the relation between gender and class, her life in Yan'an deepens her understanding of both, bringing these struggles together. For Ding Ling, the actual agrarian "labour and hardship in Yan'an washes off a lot of her old sentiments, while bringing her new habits. This internal and subtle change that can only be perceived by herself affects her attitudes towards other things as well" (Ding Ling, 1950a; Li and Wang, 2015: 203).[14] Ding Ling implies that her labour and life in the early Yan'an years transform her limited and class-determined understanding of women's liberation into an awareness of the interrelationship between class and gender.

By exposing the limits of urban intellectual women's understanding of "woman", Ding Ling proposes a female solidarity in socialism that comprises a class awareness amongst women from different backgrounds that can potentially overcome women's own failings. As she writes in "Thoughts on March 8": "We must also hope for a little more from our women comrades, especially those in Yan'an. We must urge ourselves on and develop our comradely feeling" (Ding Ling, 1942a: 319). Here, Ding Ling calls for a female solidarity that has the potential to overcome the weakness women possess, as she further maintains that "if women want equality, they must first strengthen themselves" (Ding Ling, 1942a: 319). But for Ding Ling, equality for women cannot be achieved without collaboration with men, as she believes "it will not be fully effective and women's thorough emancipation cannot be achieved if the other half of the population—men—does not participate in the emancipation" (Ding Ling, 1942b).[15] In other words, Ding Ling regards the lack

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[14] This essay titled "Laodong yu wo" (Labour and I) written in the early 1950s was not published until Ding Ling's last secretaries included part of it in their work *Ding Ling zhuan* 丁玲传 (Ding Ling's biography*)* (2015).

[15] Ding Ling articulated this claim in her self-criticism in 1942, which makes it seem more like an act of survival than a genuine statement of her belief. However, she re-articulated and re-affirmed this view in the 1980s. See Yan (2006: 286).

of gender-equal consciousness amongst some of her male counterparts as one of the obstacles that prevents women from participating further in the revolution, which, in her view, consequently hinders the progression of social and political change.

The most prominent example in *In the Hospital* can be found in her depiction of male leaders' indifference toward female cadres:

> The director of the hospital is from Sichuan, originally a peasant who later joined the revolution. He has worked in the army for a long time, but is an amateur of medical studies. He greets Lu Ping with an attitude implying that greeting female comrades with respect and hospitality is unnecessary. He reads her recommendation letter as if he is reading a receipt of the purchase of animal feed. Then he casts a glance at her casually and said: "Well, very good! Stay here." He is very busy and cannot talk to her for longer (*Hospital*, 240).

Here, the depiction of the leader's apathetic attitude highlights Ding Ling's criticism of gender hierarchy in Yan'an, which is intertwined with an implicit critique of a romanticised view of peasants. It seems that the leader's peasant background accounts for his lack of any sense of gender equality and political consciousness, which also leads to his poor leadership and management, yet Ding Ling is not concerned with depicting male peasants as necessarily backward-thinking or revolutionary. Rather, she rejects a dichotomous depiction of characters in her literary writing, exploring instead the complexity and diversity of these figures. Furthermore, the negative view of the leader is depicted from Lu Ping's perspective, which complicates our understanding of Ding Ling's attitude towards peasants: this negative perception is at the same time a complaint about the peasants upholding such a negative view of women and a criticism of Lu Ping's bourgeois-mindedness.

However, towards the end of the novel, Ding Ling also articulates her respect for the peasants through the words of the patient, who is a student and, for Lu Ping, a like-minded person. It is also this patient who teaches Lu Ping the importance of "growing up in hardship" (*Hospital*, 253). While acknowledging

Lu Ping's dismay regarding the leader's peasant background, the patient states that although Lu Ping has more knowledge than the peasants, they are better at doing actual deeds in everyday life (*Hospital*, 253). He goes on and criticises Lu Ping, stating that "in a relentless self-struggle, it would not be easy to pull oneself together" (*Hospital*, 253)—this criticism enables Lu Ping to relinquish her self-consciousness, which reinforces Ding Ling's call for collaborative efforts to build a space for women that is liveable. Ding Ling's ambivalent view of the peasants here complicates the depiction of the characters—they are not portrayed as completely likeable nor unpleasant. Instead, each prototypical character has his or her own failings, but at the same time, these characters also exhibit features with which readers may sympathise. In this sense, Ding Ling conceptualises literature as a space in which complex characters with all their positive and negative aspects can be created; only in this imaginative literary space can true equality in socialist society emerge.

Ding Ling's exploration of the complexity of characters is part of the debates that took place in the 1930s and 1940s on how best to represent "the people" in literature and the arts. Writers like Ding Ling and Hu Feng believed that complexity within characters, including their inner struggles, should be depicted in literature, whereas others, such as Zhou Yang, contended that only the positive aspects of "the people"—the workers, peasants and soldiers—should be depicted and negative aspects should not be exposed, a view which was reinforced by Mao in his "Talks on the Yan'an Forum of Art and Literature" (1942) (Denton, 1998). In this context, Ding Ling's ambivalent depiction of the male peasants and cadres was problematic for Mao, as he believed that "true revolutionary knowledge and creativity ultimately emanates from the people [peasants] themselves" (Meisner, 1999: 44).

Ding Ling's negative depiction of "the people" and her emphasis on women's self-improvement attracted considerable criticism, though primarily from male critics (Ding Ling, 1982b: 279). Ironically, the reactions and criticism from Ding Ling's male contemporaries exemplify exactly what Ding Ling was criticising through her writings. While Feuerwerker suggests that the reason for these critiques of Ding Ling by others lies in the fact that Ding Ling in Yan'an "no longer wrote to dramatise the struggles of the individual woman within herself but to attack hardships and discrimination particular to women in society"

(Feuerwerker, 1977: 298), He Guimei, by contrast, interprets the criticism targeted at Ding Ling as a clash between Ding Ling's feminist perception of class and gender hierarchy in Yan'an and the CCP's male-oriented views on revolution (He, 2004). These scholars outline the incompatibility of Ding Ling's feminist outlook on the communist revolution with the CCP's gender policy that still discriminated against women, despite its egalitarian objectives. Nonetheless, Ding Ling's criticism of gender inequality should not only be examined through the lens of resistance to political pressure, but also through her own views on revolutionary transition and its relation to her self-scrutiny. In the early 1950s, Ding Ling recalled her Yan'an life retrospectively: "Some people are born revolutionaries, some people leap to become revolutionaries. […] But I am always willing to walk step by step with my own legs, walk till there is genuine usefulness, till I am beyond myself, […] till I have gained some knowledge and truth" (Ding Ling, 1950b: 50). This statement demonstrates Ding Ling's understanding of revolutionary transition as a difficult process that requires patience, perseverance and actual practice, which she, in turn, incorporated in the depiction and her own expectation of the female characters in her works.

When Zhou Yang condemned Ding Ling as possessing a "decadent bourgeois mentality", he overlooked Ding Ling's "own lifelong struggle to shape her relationship to the spirit of the Chinese revolution that aimed to put an end to such a [class] hierarchy" (Yan, 2006: 205). Ding Ling's writings are concerned with the way in which revolution can bring about an overturn of social hierarchy and, on a personal level, an overcoming of one's weakness, which is articulated through her "critical mapping and ethical evaluation of the conditions uninhabitable for her female figures" (Yan, 2006: 200). For Ding Ling, building an equal socialist society requires a deep transformation of attitudes toward fellow humans at all levels; the complex depiction of the literary figures, encompassing their positive and negative aspects, can, at least, lead to a recognition and understanding of the difficulty of this transformation. In this regard, Ding Ling, through her literature, creates an imaginative space, in which she explores not only the relationship between individuals and the revolution, but also the extent to which individuals, especially women, as embodiments of the revolution, can improve their own capacity as revolutionaries and, above all, as human beings. And this is the space of solidarity that Ding Ling hopes to create for women.

Conclusion

The terminologies and approaches that were used to represent Chinese women and women's liberation have shifted along with the changes in the political order since the early twentieth century. As Tani Barlow has illustrated, since the 1940s the Chinese Communist Party officially used the designation *funü* 妇女 to represent women as a socialist collectivity under the purview of the state (Barlow, 2004). *Funü* women were aligned with the priorities of the state's definition of women's liberation as resulting from women's productive social labour and participation in the building of the communist society. As Barlow notes, the use of *funü* was meant to contrast with ideas of women's liberation associated with other terms for the women's movement and women in general, such as *nüxing and nüquan*, circulating since the early twentieth century (Barlow, 2004). The term *funü*, while signifying an important aspect of the socialist view of women's oppression as being rooted in the unequal political-economic structures of feudalism and capitalism, often precluded other aspects of gender inequality and sexism, including in the intimate and psychological realms. In the post-Mao era, however, with the accelerating economic development and the rise of consumerism, *nüxing*—a term that was denounced in the revolutionary period—seems to possess the potential of female resistance, as its emphasis on the sexist binary challenges the previous statist representation of women as largely rooted in political economy (Barlow, 2004: 63). Recently, however, in contemporary China as well as in Western countries, the political and economic crises have gradually pushed feminists to reconsider socialism as an alternative mode of female resistance against the recuperation of male dominance (Fraser, 2013).

It is in this context that Wang Zheng's book *Finding Women in the State* calls for a reconsideration of the socialist feminist legacy that has been long forgotten, hoping to search for new resolutions that provide women with different avenues to approach issues of solidarity and empowerment. She highlights that the state feminists working in the All-China Women's Federation operated in "a politics of concealment", incorporating feminist agendas into the Party's agenda "in order to gain legitimacy and resources for actions that had a clear gender dimension" (Wang, 2017: 17). While her analysis resurfaces the legacy of feminists who were tied to the state and the approach they adopted

to resolve women's oppression within the Party's agenda, the feminist endeavour articulated by feminists that were not closely tied to state policy should also not be overlooked. The reading of Ding Ling and Christa Wolf thus provides an insight into the perspectives of feminists who upheld a socialist ideal of human relations while articulating their critical voices toward gender practices in socialism. They explore women's oppression in relation to its economic, political and cultural factors and strive to create a female solidarity that transcends all unequal social relationships.

Ding Ling's explicit criticism of gender inequality points towards a complex reality of gender issues in a socialist regime. By exposing the struggles women faced in the Communist base area in Yan'an in the 1940s, Ding Ling calls for collaborative work on gender equality not only through official policy-making, but also through the efforts of both men and women overcoming their own failings in affecting a transformation of gender and other social relationships in their daily lives. In doing so, Ding Ling's *zawen*-like novel functions as a "microscope", according to Lu Xun's term, that magnifies and scrutinises the messy parts of reality, rather than just focusing on unrealistic positive depictions, through which a more nuanced and realistic image of life can emerge in literature (Lu Xun, 1930). By contrast, Christa Wolf depicts a female protagonist who fails to conform to the expectations of the society around her, and, in turn, strives to counter masculine dogmatism in socialism with her own imagination and literary recreation. This literary imagination envisions a more diverse socialism, in which female bonding and solidarity seem to be an alternative form of human interrelationship in a socialist society that looks forward into the future.

Both authors expose the complex intertwining of social hierarchies in socialist states from women's perspectives, through which they demonstrate a future-oriented vision of socialism in their writings by incorporating their criticism of socialism with their engagement with the struggle of women to obtain their own rights. The protagonist Lu Ping in Ding Ling's *Hospital* appears to be what Barlow terms a good example of "Ding Ling's problem of futurity and normativity, or what women can expect to become if they commit themselves as a gender to the revolutionary future" (Barlow, 2004: 222). In this sense, the future-oriented focus of Ding Ling's novel is embedded in her criticism of the gap between the

ideal and the reality of gender inequality, implying a more urgent question of "what can still be done"?

Writing from a similar perspective to Ding Ling, Wolf relies on imagination to bring about the future of socialism. As Kuhn suggests, "it is precisely the imagination, by stretching the parameters of human thought, possibility, and potentiality, that can perpetuate the socialist utopian vision" (Kuhn, 1988: 74). In other words, Wolf's outlook on the future seems to be a vision of a less restrictive socialist system, in which female solidarity can lead to an actual equality between men and women.

Both Ding Ling and Christa Wolf suggest the idea of female solidarity as a hope and a means of bringing forth social changes through a feminist approach that strives to transform hierarchical human relationships. The reading of the history of this female solidarity within a Chinese and a transnational socialist context does not reiterate an understanding of gender that overlooks differences. Rather, it envisages a socialist outlook that adopts, in Nancy Fraser's term, the politics of redistribution as well as those of recognition (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). From a transnational socialist feminist perspective, this comparative analysis offers an insight into an understanding of the complexity and difficulty women face in their struggles to gain true equality. The reading of such endeavours, to make sense of the complex picture of the experience of women under socialist regimes, aspires to a possible future for feminism in China which in turn resonates with the female solidarity for which feminists in the past strove.

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Dressing Up, Dressing Down! Situating Identities and Negotiating Otherness Through the Bodies of British Chinese Women

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Abstract

This paper will examine the ways in which the practices of dressing and adornment are employed to manage the otherness experienced by second generation British Chinese women. In amongst the lack of social representation in the wider British imagination, the objects of dress and adornment chosen by the women enables them to negotiate their visibility. As such, the negotiation of power is not an abstracted struggle within the mind, rather I propose that the struggle of power manifests as a material strategy through dressing. Drawing on creative ethnographic fieldwork, the women narrate their experiences through materiality to create personal artworks, which offers an insight into the affective dimension of their personal embodiment. As a creative ethnographic methodology with a focus on material practices, this research demonstrates the enriched insights of such qualitative and experimental research methods to emphasise the significance of everyday actions and objects in the negotiation of power in the formation of ethnic women's identities.

Keywords: *British Chinese, women, dressing, embodiment, arts-based ethnography, materiality, creative methodologies, visibility, identity.*

The subjective experience of the self is a bodily matter, one that is materially felt. The negotiation of one's identity is rarely an internal monologue; rather, this struggle manifests in dialogue with one's external environment. The potential to integrate into social life, either in compliance or resistance, is a material condition; Chris Shilling reminds us of a basic yet fundamental condition, "We

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More information about the object-stories of British Chinese women can be found at the following online exhibition: www.objectstories.co.uk.

have bodies and we act with our bodies" (2003: 24). These notions can be actualised through interaction but first and foremost, they are materially embodied through practices of dressing. In this sense, dressing is not just a vessel of semiotic significance but rather, it is a *felt* condition as it reassures and armours the individual in various social encounters. Keenly understanding the potential of orientating one's identity through dress, the women in this study use dress in different ways to negotiate their otherness along racial, gendered and sexual identities. To elucidate these concepts, this paper will focus on experiences of second generation, British Chinese women living in London to examine the negotiation of their identities through dressing and adornment.

The sense of otherness raised by the women is indicative of the limited visibility of the British Chinese in the UK. This notion is observed by David Parker, who described the Chinese community as the "least noticed of all communities in Britain" (1998: 4). Compared to other ethnic groups in Britain, the Chinese have been perceived as "quiet" or "reserved" however the lack of social recognition has not insulated the Chinese from stereotypical notions. These stereotypes oscillate from the figure of the opium smoking Fu Manchu (Witchard, 2014), to subservient caterers, to the well-adjusted model minority; each one in turn distorts the complexities experienced by the British Chinese.

Debating the terms of the Chinese diaspora, Adam McKeown (1999) observes that the history of Chinese migration has been dominated by two competing nation-based narratives; the China-centred perspective has emphasised the preservation of a "Chinese soul", while the Western-centred perspective has emphasised the flexible adaptation of Chinese people. In 2008, Benton and Gomez produced a much needed historical account of the British Chinese through an employment lens, however the gendered considerations were minimal. The research on the British Chinese has broadly concentrated on the identifications and performativity of ethnic boundaries (Pang, 1999; Lin, 2014) while the intersectional considerations between race and gender have been less considered.

The limited research of diasporic Chinese women in the UK sits in great contrast to the scholarship relating to American Chinese women (Ling, 2013; Yang, 1999; and Bao, 2006). While there are instances of research on British Chinese

women as journal articles (Yuen, 2008; Lim, 2015), to date there are no published hardback accounts dedicated to the subjectivities and histories of British Chinese women. Due to the lack of research on British Chinese women, there is a tendency for women to be portrayed as "suffering" due to oppression, existing between Confucian and Western cultures (Yuen, 2008) or as "workers" in reproductive labour with the family takeaway business (Benton & Gomez, 2008). To counter these opposing stereotypes, this analysis will adopt a material culture perspective and Creative Research Methods (CRM) as a methodological approach to illuminate the subjectivities of British Chinese women through materiality and creative expression. To provide a wider view, this analysis takes its findings from a wider study on the materiality and creative expressions of first and second generation British Chinese women. However for this paper, I will focus on the material objects and dress practices relating to the second generation of British Chinese women.

Over the course of a generation, the burgeoning second generation are viewed as having made "rapid socio-economic advancement" (Pang & Lau, 1998). According to the 1988-1990 Labour Force Survey, British Chinese attained the "highest percentage for any ethnic group in Britain" (Parker, 1998: 97) as the survey reports that 44% of all Chinese aged 16 to 24 had at least one A-Level or equivalent qualification. By 2000, a quarter of young Chinese had degrees, as reported by Benton and Gomez (2008: 353). As the second generation, they do not contend with the language barriers that faced their predecessors. Their educational attainment suggests that the young British Chinese have a greater propensity to choose an occupation of their choice. The perception of these achievements of an ethnic minority group has led the Chinese in Britain to be labelled as a "model minority". Given these projections, an in-depth focus on the subjectivities of second generation British Chinese women is much needed to interrogate the assumptions of social mobility and cultural ease for this cohort. To sufficiently offer an in-depth analysis, this paper will draw on the accounts of two second generation British Chinese women.

Creative Research Methods in the Study of Identity

Under the umbrella of grounded theory, I used creative research methods as a two-tiered approach which comprised of (1) life-story interviews where they selected a personal object of significance to articulate their experience as British Chinese women; (2) art workshops where the women made artwork inspired by their object as the women embarked on experimental writing, collaging and printing. To build a more intricate picture of the experiences of British Chinese women, each stage cannot be understood as mutually exclusive. Rather, they function as part of a holistic, cyclical process in which each part inspires and informs the others.

Grounded theory conceptualises individuals as active agents rather than as passive bystanders of social structures. As an approach, grounded theory observes the agency of people to situate the ways in which they navigate the structural challenges they face. This people-centred approach becomes a strategy to challenge the theoretical grand narratives that might silence the individual on the ground. Norman K. Denzin reflects on the suitability of using grounded theory in people-centred research:

> There is no grand or middle or formal theory here, no formal propositions, no testable hypotheses. No wonder it is so popular. It is all grounded. It is two things at the same time, a verb, a method of inquiry, and a noun, a product of inquiry. It is intuitive. You let the obdurate empirical world speak to you […] No hierarchy, the social theorists are not privileged (Denzin, 2007:454).

The methodological principles of grounded theory align with creative research methods as they are both interested in locating the agency of the individual and how they negotiate their subjectivities in the social world. In the pursuit of situating individual experiences, David Gauntlett (2007) advocates the advantages of CRM as it seeks to situate the voice of the individual by encouraging self-reflection through creativity and experimentation. The construction of identity is a visual condition, one which is influenced by popular culture and advertising media. In noting this symbiotic relationship, Gauntlett suggests CRM

to be an insightful way of generating an understanding of the construction and experience of identity from people because it allows "participants to spend *time* applying their playful or creative attention to the act of *making* something symbolic or metaphorical, and then *reflecting* on it" (2007: 4).

For this study, each woman was asked to choose an object of personal significance; the item could be as everyday or as culturally-specific as they desired. Asking the participant to speak about an object offered the individual the opportunity to present a phenomenologically-driven account of their lived experience. This perspective acknowledges the material dynamic between people and things as the movement of objects mirror the journey of our lives. Using their objects as creative inspiration, the women attended a one-day art workshop. As the artist workshop facilitator, I led a series of experimental writing exercises, creative meditation, and techniques in mono-printing and collage to support the women in exploring the affective narratives of their object and their lives.

The value of the women's objects cannot be read as innate; rather, its significance exists in a conceptual tangle between the self and the social world in navigating their subjectivities. The significance of the object is further revealed by the artwork produced in the workshop. While the object may appear inconspicuous, the artwork reveals the active intention of the woman. In other words, the object and the artwork exist in symbiosis to reveal the affective and conceptual resonance between object, self and the social world. Subsequently, the artwork and objects of the women will be used to illuminate the ways in which British Chinese women negotiate otherness along the lines of gender, race and sexuality.

Existing accounts of British Chinese women largely derive from a sociological and social policy perspective which largely centres on the sites of the family and employment (Song, 1995; Lee et al., 2002; and Yuen, 2008), with the exception of Yun-Hun Hsiao (2008) who explored the creative literature of British Chinese women. Diana Yeh (2014) asserts "this does so […] by assigning to particular bodies a machine-like capacity for work but an inherent lack of creativity, which constructs them [the Chinese] as essentially 'Other', denies their status as fully human, and questions their very ability to participate in the social and cultural

realm" (2014: 1207). While some British Chinese creative professionals have received some academic attention, this literature has generally been concerned with the artistic expressions of artists (Yeh, 2014; Lok, 2004). In this study, the use of CRM focuses on everyday British Chinese women to offer an opportunity for them to situate their subjectivities through visual strategies. This methodology presented an alternative production of knowledge about the British Chinese to challenge the stereotypes that surround British Chinese women and the British Chinese at large.

Recruitment and Reflexivity

This research intends to situate the subjectivities of British Chinese women, and this understanding cannot be achieved through an "objectivist" approach which would undermine a feminist embodied perspective. Donna Haraway (1991) critiques the way that feminism and the social sciences have sought to map women's lives through a scientific sensibility. In doing so, Haraway argues that this objective lens generalises the intricacies and contradictions of women's lived experiences. As such, Haraway advocates a "view from below" and pursues a view of feminist objectivity which she defines as a "partial perspective":

> I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. These are claims on people's lives. I am arguing for the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity (1991: 195).

In the spirit of my positionality as a researcher, it is important to acknowledge how my presence as a female British Chinese researcher shaped the recruitment and engagement of the participants. Given the qualitative nature of the research, my disposition as an educated British Chinese woman invariably influenced the recruitment of second generation women. All of the women in this study have attained a full education. With the exception of one participant, all of the women hold university degrees and even doctorates. As such, the women

participants in this study can be understood as being well-educated and holding professional roles. From a selection perspective, the participants cannot be understood as being representative of all second generation British Chinese women; rather the focus of this study is concerned with situating an in-depth account of how British Chinese women negotiate challenges as individuals. By identifying the dispositions and commonalities within this cohort of second generation women, we can begin to understand how these dispositions frame their challenges as British Chinese women.

In total, I recruited 17 second generation British Chinese women and to provide a sense of the wider picture, 10-15 first generation women participated in the art workshop and interviews. 17 second generation women participated in the object-story interviews while 11 attended the one-day art workshop. Being the researcher, I assumed various roles as the art workshop facilitator, interviewer and research coordinator. As part of the recruitment process for the second generation, I distributed posters in the city of London, gave a radio interview on British Chinese radio, submitted a call for interest via a British Chinese website and advertised through social media. Despite these efforts, it proved difficult to recruit participants through public channels; it appeared that my presence was needed as the reference point of the project. The main channel of recruitment was done through snowballing, personal introductions and meeting other British Chinese women at cultural events in London.

Contrasts Between the Generations

On the whole, the objects selected by the second generation women were eclectic and included childhood clothing, traditional *mien lap* jackets, gold jewellery, headphones and framed slippers, to name a few. The selection of material suggested that materiality played a meaningful role in their lives. While they may not see themselves represented in British society, they were able to situate and unravel questions of belonging through objects. In this study, it appeared that physical objects played a greater role in the lives of second generation women compared to their first generation counterparts.

It is important to observe that the majority of the first generation women who participated in the project came from a vastly different demographic compared to the second generation. The participation of the first generation Chinese women derived from a Women's Group in Haringey Community Centre in London. As a group, they immigrated during the post-war period from Hong Kong and largely identified with the term "overseas brides". In arriving in Britain, migration was a means of economic betterment as they assumed catering and sewing occupations.

Migration is a challenging transition and many of the women recalled the challenge of being working mothers and the difficulty of having a limited acquisition of English. On the whole, it appeared that the women did not want to preserve the memory of migratory hardship through material possessions. Compared to the second generation, this cohort of first generation women did not usually tend to hold onto objects from their past. Rather, their intention was orientated to aspiring towards a prosperous future and settlement stability. In this sense, the process of art making proved more meaningful as it became their opportunity to create a future they desired. Using creative methodologies, the women were able to express their migratory ambitions and aspirations in a way that presenting an object from the past would be unable to achieve.

For the second generation, there was a diversity of objects, however a unifying commonality was their consistent relationship to their body and reference to the family. The object is almost always orientated to the self or towards the site of the family in affirming the self in a wider social ideology or migratory history. In this way, social ease and material bodily comfort cannot be disentangled. To feel comfortable in one's skin is to feel socially at ease in one's environment. This dynamic is most acutely played out in the daily practice of dressing. Seemingly a mundane act, dressing is one of the most significant ways that people manage feelings of otherness and orientate their identities in a social context. This notion of social orientation can be understood as especially significant for ethnic minority women where their otherness is a visible factor.

To varying levels, feelings of otherness and questions of belonging are notions that permeate all the accounts of second generation women in this study. The interrelated dynamics between the body, the social world and dressing informs

the selection of the two case studies. Practices of dressing highlight the ways in which individuals employ material strategies to manage structural inequalities. By presenting an in-depth analysis of two case studies, this paper intends to locate an embodied "view from below" to examine how practices of dressing and adornment are used to negotiate feelings of otherness. In doing so, it situates the textured voice of the women in a British Chinese context, which historically has been overlooked.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, this analysis builds on Shilling's emphasis of the body as an arena of expression and, moreover it takes the position that practices of body dressing and adornment are essential to the articulation of identities. Body dressing refers to social practices associated with the decision making of dressing and adornment which enables the individual to orientate themselves in the social world (Entwistle, 2001). From this perspective, dress theorist Joanne Entwistle (2001) asserts that, "Identity is managed through dress in rather more mundane and routine ways because social pressure encourages us to stay within the bounds of what is defined in a situation as a 'normal' body and 'appropriate dress'" (2001: 49).

   According to Entwistle, the site of the body and the act of dressing is bound in relations of power as the dressing of oneself is a constant orientation of the self to the social world. Entwistle states, "Dress lies at the margins of the body and marks the boundary between self and other, individual and society. This boundary is intimate and personal since our dress forms the visible envelope of the self" (2001: 37). Mary Douglas (1979) argues that social forces push upon the physical body which creates "two bodies": the physical body and the social body. Drawing on this notion, Entwistle describes this interaction between the body and the social as a *situated bodily practice* by which the body is embedded within the power relations of the social world. If the individual debunks the social order through dress, then the body risks retribution. As she explains, "Bodies which do not conform, bodies which flout conventions of their culture and go without the appropriate clothes are subversive of the most basic codes and risk exclusion, scorn or ridicule" (2001: 33).

To further the understanding between the body, dress and the social world, Bourdieu's theory of habitus (1992) is useful in elucidating these relations, particularly his emphasis on embodiment. The habitus is a social phenomenon that attempts to explain the exchange and reproduction of power relations within different fields in society through its individuals. This emphasis upon the individual is pertinent and as a concept, it does not over-emphasise subjective agency but neither does it view the individual as solely determined by social structures. Rather, it presents an opportunity to think through the entanglement between subjectivism and determinism.

Bourdieu describes the habitus as "an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures" (1992: 133). For Bourdieu, the point of "dispositions" refers to the individual's socialised "ways of being" or "propensity" which may alter the structure of the habitus or continue its presence. Therefore one's personal dispositions will structure their practice and inclination within the habitus. As social agents, we may participate in the reproduction of existing power or the untangling of such structures. The notion that the habitus is an "open structure" emphasises the possibility of a mutable habitus, however it may be slow to change and resistant.

Through the habitus, the reproduction of power is not conceptualised as a vertical structure, but rather, power is envisaged as a horizontal form. From this horizontal perspective, power is enacted through the behaviour and actions of all individuals. Sociologist Richard Jenkins describes the habitus as a mental state which exists "inside the heads" of everyday people, and that this internal monologue is expressed through forms of social interaction such as "ways of talking, ways of moving, ways of making things" (1992: 75). In this sense, the habitus is far from an abstraction but the reproduction of the habitus and its power is an intrinsically material expression of the body: "The body is a mnemonic device upon and in which the very basics of culture, the practical taxonomies of the habitus, are imprinted and encoded in a socialising or learning process which commences during early childhood" (1992: 76-7). This focus on embodiment and the materiality of the habitus offers a way to conceptualise the significance of dressing and adornment as integral practices that individuals employ to manage their identities in the world.

Applying the habitus to dress offers an amplified and physical insight into the power relations between individual and society. To speak about dressing is to speak about the body and the micro social order that the self exists amongst. The practice of dressing is far from being a superficial consideration as these daily decisions are entangled in a wider negotiation of making one's body socially acceptable. Furthermore, the dressing of one's body has a spatial element as "spaces impose different ways of being on gendered bodies" (Entwistle, 2001: 50). It is more likely that women have to think carefully about their appearance in various public spaces such as the workplace or quiet areas at night as these spaces expose a gendered vulnerability. As Douglas asserts, dress transforms the physical body into a social body and therefore the body will orientate itself accordingly to the space or *field* it will enter, for example a wedding, a boardroom, or a job interview. To negotiate the social world, women have actively used dressing techniques to manage the otherness of their bodies and the gaze of others.

From a Bourdieuan perspective, the institutional habitus of Britain does not fully acknowledge the British Chinese community as a visible part of the multicultural life in Britain. Subsequently, this is the habitus from which the British Chinese women negotiate their identities through practices of dressing. In this paper, I will present the case studies of two second generation British Chinese women to examine the ways in which they employ practices of dressing in situating their identities. As a British-born Chinese woman born in London, Rachel's object of significance is a collection of inconspicuous t-shirts that enable her survival within a male, white dominated tech industry.[1] Though they appear commonplace, these t-shirts become a self-imposed outfit to manage her otherness in the context of her workplace. In contrast, Robin, who is a mixed-race woman born in Hong Kong and who migrated to Wales at a young age, experienced racism within the habitus of her school which generated much cultural displacement. Despite enduring such raced oppression, in her adult years she wears her cultural and racial identity visibly upon her skin as a tattoo of a phoenix rising from the ashes.

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[1] All participants' names are pseudonyms.

Case Study A: Rachel (29)
Armoured Dress in the Workplace

The context of the art workshops created a space to bring together a group of second generation women. The function of the workshop was two-fold; it was an environment to learn new visual skills and it also created an opportunity to bring together a group of women who would otherwise remain dispersed and unknown to each other. In comparison, the second generation was more likely to be isolated from one another, since they have fewer meeting spaces and are less likely to attend community centres. This sense of isolation amongst the second generation was noted by other younger women in the workshop, as they remarked on the limited awareness they had of other British Chinese women like themselves.

The workshop became a supported and safe space for the women to share their experiences, ranging from questions of maintaining language, sexual discrimination, mothering across cultures and a lingering sense of division in living between cultures. As the women were invited to bring an object of significance, the material object became a stimulus to ignite speech and exchange experiences about social challenges and desires that would otherwise go unsaid. It is from this ethos that the British-born Chinese woman Rachel shared her experience of otherness in the tech industry.

As a woman in her mid-twenties and born in London, her parents migrated from Hong Kong to London in the 1960s. Showing academic potential, Rachel decided at the age of 14 that she wanted to become a technical coder at Google. After studying computer science at Cambridge at the age of 21, she secured her dream job at Google. Her academic and professional achievements were a far cry from her parents' initial work as waiters. Evidently naturally gifted, bolstered by self-determination and family support, these characteristics appear to be symptomatic of British social mobility and worthy of the label of "model minority". Having arrived at Google, Rachel quickly observed difficulties arising in her workplace. She explains:

> Even though I saw myself as an engineer first, the tech industry being very white and male dominated, they did not see me

> as a part of that...I was either left out of the decision-making
> or people would...er...you know, sometimes people were a lot
> more open about saying things like, "You don't look like an en-
> gineer or are you from sales?" I would say, "No, I'm an engi-
> neer" but it was difficult for people to see that.

On a regular basis, Rachel recounted a daily need to prove her worth and in
this homogenous environment, the accumulation of "distrust" over her identity
as a woman led to intense feelings of dismemberment. At the adult age of 22,
Rachel recalled the very moment that she witnessed her own racial otherness.
Influenced by workplace exchanges, Rachel started to see herself through the
gaze of others and as a raced body.

> I remember being about 22 or 23...and staring at myself in the
> mirror and being *absolutely astonished* that people would see
> me first as Chinese, and in fact that as I looked at myself in the
> mirror I saw a Chinese person first! People would not see "Ra-
> chel", they would not see me as British first, which is obviously
> how I saw myself. I grew up in London which is very diverse
> and I went to an all-girls' school until I was 16. I never really
> developed this realisation that people would see me in *that*
> way first. It took until working in this environment, and it's
> more than just Western-centric because it's very male domi-
> nated to realise that this would be the case you know!...As
> long as I chose to work in the tech industry.

On enduring workplace gendered and racial prejudice, Rachel's artwork (see
figure 1) distils all that she cannot say in the workplace but visually laid out be-
fore us. Through her artwork, she reverses the power of gender relations. In this
instance, it is not her own body that is made to feel vulnerable, rather it is the
male body. Her artwork is presented in the shape of a shield, as rows of un-
dressed males are lined side by side. We are not privy to their faces or the rest
of their bodies as they exist in complete anonymity. Acting like a strip club peep-
hole, the men are dismembered from the rest of their bodies; all that is available
is a framed portrait of their genitalia while their hands dangle in awkwardness.
Perhaps the most startling aspect of this artwork is not necessarily the exposed

male body, but the fact that the men are captured in a soft, un-erect state which challenges the ideology of phallic patriarchal power. Rachel's artwork explicitly captures her personal defiance of patriarchal authority and its dominance in the world of work.

Figure 1. Rachel's artwork.

To survive within this hostile environment, Rachel started to move into departments where the gender balance was more evenly weighted. Describing gender discrimination in the tech industry as a "touchy subject", Rachel recalled

that plenty of men would try to explain away the gender imbalance: "It's not a problem, it's just not a problem! If you want to study computer science, you just go and do it, or say things like, maybe women just aren't as good at programming and maybe their brains aren't as set up for it!" [Laughs.] This is supposed to be Google! This is supposed to be a really smart and liberal group of people." The power relations of the workplace habitus were not just expressed through verbal comments; they were materially reinforced as Rachel's memory with her own otherness was recalled through dress.

> I go to tech conferences and it is a *sea* of white, grey and blue. These are great colours to wear if you are white with blue eyes, pale skin and mousy brown hair but it looks god awful on most minorities, which sounds like a small thing. But I noticed that 95% of the time, I can't take these t-shirts they give out at conferences. I can't take them because of the colour, they are men's t-shirts so they are too big on me and even if they are women's t-shirts, a lot of the time they have blog slogans across the chest and that's not *comfortable* as a woman—you don't want people staring at your chest! So I don't take most of these t-shirts because they exclude me in three different ways.

The design of these conference t-shirts imagines the ideal wearer to be a "5 ft. 10 white guy with pale skin and mousy brown hair". In turn, these t-shirts reinforce the covert expectations of the ideal employee; to fit into the clothing means to fit into the job. Rachel's observation unveils the power of the habitus and its ability to penetrate into the most minute of interactions in distinguishing between those who are included and excluded. While the t-shaped garment began as an emancipatory dress for working men in freeing up the top half (Brunell, 2002), the emancipatory ethos of the t-shirt is contradicted upon Rachel's body. Rather than inciting unity amongst her and her male colleagues, they underlined her exclusion in emphasising her gendered otherness by eluding towards a sexualised interpretation of her body through bold slogans across the chest.

Writing about power dressing, John T. Molloy (1980) notes that the area of the female chest is one of the most problematic for the workplace and the inability to contain the potential eroticism of the female body can undermine their "professionalism" and "productivity" there. Susan Bordo (1990) argues that the workplace requirement to neutralise a woman's hips and breasts means to strip the female body of its "psychic resonances with maternal power", as she asserts:

> From the standpoint of male anxiety, the lean body of the professional businesswoman today may symbolise such a neutralisation. With her body and her dress, she declares symbolic allegiance to the professional, white, male world, along with her lack of intention to subvert that arena with alternative "female values". At the same time, insofar as she is clearly "dressing up," playing "male" (almost with a "softening" fashion touch to establish traditional female decorativeness), she represents no serious competition (symbolically, that is) to the "real men" of the workplace (1990: 104-5).

The covert masculinisation of the tech world habitus is reinforced by its attitudes to uniform. The tech world seemingly advocates a "relaxed" attitude to dress. It welcomes its employees to dress as they like but for Rachel, this was a false freedom and one that she could not afford. To wear the typical tech clothes of a plain t-shirt, jeans and trainers would read completely different on her gendered, Asian body. Rachel was clear to point out that for her stature, this type of relaxed clothing would read as "child" or "girl", rather than as a woman aiming towards senior management. On her body, this type of dress would be undermine her authority amongst her colleagues, she explains: "I am short, female and I'm Chinese...I don't have the same gravitas or base level of respect if I come in wearing what guys wear".

After five years, Rachel resigned. On her final day, she recalled a specific comment from a colleague-friend who said, "Thanks for making the team a nicer place to look at!" Having left Google, Rachel found another job in a new tech start-up as a Developer Advocate which she describes as being more "female-friendly". This transitional time between jobs signalled a phase of self-reflection

where Rachel turned to the site of the body to reconsider how to regain control over her othering. This period coincided with her discovery of K-Pop, Korean Pop Music, a phenomenon that has propelled itself into a global consciousness.

Though highly manufactured, this explosion of K-Pop presents a construction of Asian womanhood that contravenes stereotypical attributes assigned to traditional Asian femininity. Through the extravagant lens of K-Pop, the Asian female body becomes an experimental space that is subversive and bold. The synthetic sound and styling of the music videos challenges the construction of an innate Asian femininity which usually falls within the stereotypical qualities of gentleness, submission and restraint. Writing about Korean Pop Culture, Michael Fuhr comments that the visual pleasure of K-Pop has "opened a discursive space in which traditional rules of masculinity and femininity can be critically reflected, reoriented, and transformed" (2017: 1152). This sweeping wave of Korean Pop Music did not escape Rachel, which prompted her to reflect on the lack of media representation of Chinese and Asian women in a British and Western context. For Rachel, it was a pivotal moment to see Asian women as "aspirational", which started the unpicking of the stereotypical Western prejudice she had internalised about Asian women.

> When you grow up in a Western environment, you watch Western media and you assimilate their stereotypes. On the BBC for instance, Chinese women were generally portrayed in one way. When I started watching K-Pop, it really helped me push through my own stereotypes of Asian-looking women and I could start to see...to see...these as individuals. It's easier for me to visualise myself in multiple ways rather than thinking Asian American in Hollywood and you've got Lucy Liu and that's it! It sounds ridiculous but it was a really big moment to see these people held up as aspirational who I could relate to visually. Like K-Pop, I want my image to be something I construct with no real regard to my inner personality.

In recognising the potential of creatively reconstructing one's appearance, Rachel felt inspired to address her racial and gendered otherness in the workplace. Specifically, she turned to the site of the body and used dressing as a tool

to regain control. After much contemplation and in preparation for her next job, Rachel decided to invent a new work wardrobe. She declared, "I'm going to do the Steve Jobs thing and buy multiples of one outfit and it's going to be my perfect outfit". This new wardrobe accumulated in the purchasing of a dozen identical t-shirts (see figure 2). Purchased from the high street, these crew-necked t-shirts were strikingly unremarkable; identical in every way, each cotton garment was bottle green. Worn with a pencil skirt, this became a self-imposed work uniform. In discovering her ideal work uniform, her exhilaration is evident in her experimental workshop writing. Rachel writes from the perspective of her t-shirts and their initial encounter with herself:

> I remember being purchased by a Chinese woman in her mid-twenties.
> She seemed agitated but when she found me, she was delighted.
> She took me and a few of my siblings into the changing room where I was tried on over and over again in different permutations and with photos taken.
> It was quite exhausting!
> After she decided that we would be the t-shirt, I was taken back to the rack and every inch of us inspected.
> In particular the seams and hems were checked for straightness and evenness.
> Five of us were chosen from dozens as the neatest and most perfect looking, and we were all taken together on hangers to be paid for.

Figure 2. Rachel's t-shirts.

Rachel's writing captures a sense of her relief in finding the ideal t-shirt that would both enable her to visually integrate into the work environment while complimenting her racial colouring and body shape. However, finding the garment was not enough. The way in which the t-shirt was to be worn was just as important: she explained that each t-shirt was worn back to front. This decision was deliberate as the neck line would sit closer to the collarbone to further deter any attention to the neck and chest. The choice for a singular style and colour was not a creative oversight. This was a conscious consideration to minimise her affiliations with the traditional female identity and its associations with colourful and fashionable clothing. She explains, "If you dress up, keep changing your clothes, you are not technical, you are not an engineer, you are not one of us. In the tech industry, there is this feeling that clothing is functional and it's frivolous for you to care and that's distinctly female".

Being a woman in this male-dominated environment was a disadvantaged position; therefore, to further behave as a "woman" through dressing would emphasise her otherness. Instead, she seeks to unmark herself from the gendered associations of her body as she says, "I want to project this *blandness*, this professionalism, I just want my work to be visible and I don't want you to think of me as the 'purple-hair girl', I *absolutely* don't want to be seen as the *woman* in the office…even though I am".

In relationship to clothing, Rachel is clear that wearing a traditional Chinese cheongsam would further eroticise her body and undermine her professionalism. She explains, "They (cheongsam) are seen as sort of exotic and unprofessional. I like wearing them but I don't wear them very much and not around people I don't know". Rachel's intention to avoid colourful traditional Chinese clothing echoes the historical Western scepticism of colour which David Batchelor (2000) calls "chromophobia". Batchelor describes the cultural objectification of non-Western cultures through colour as he states, "Colour is made out to be the property of some 'foreign' body—usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological" (2000: 22). These visual ideologies are keenly picked up by Rachel as her personal observation is indicative of underlying cultural prejudices. Furthermore, Rachel reflects on the unequal judgment between her wearing a Chinese dress compared to a white woman:

> A white women can be in the same dress but she would look like she is dressing up or having fun, she can always take it off. But if I wear Chinese clothes, it's very Chinese and it's very hard for people to not immediately see me as an immigrant who has broken English, rather than someone who has grown up in this country.

Recognising the racial power relations between her and a Western woman, she is clear that for a Western woman a Chinese dress is expressive of her artful attitude, but upon her body, it fixes her racial identity. This notion is underlined by Sarah Cheang (2015) who states that the phenomenon of British Chinoiserie for white women was not to "turn Chinese but to adopt an aspect of Chinese culture on the path to modern European corporeality" (2015: 138). While she

cannot change her biological gender or racial identity, she can make external decisions through her dress which offer her a level of protection in surviving in the male dominated workplace. As a British Chinese woman, her skin is a racial dress and it is one garment that she cannot take off. Though her t-shirts appear inconspicuous, they function as an armour for the workplace, a concept which is reflected in her artwork.

Taking a magazine clipping of male genitalia, Rachel cut this imagery into the shape of a shield (see figure 3). The shield-like form is suggestive of the function of her t-shirts; Rachel's t-shirts offer a literal protection from the male gaze at work and by adopting the "Steve Jobs" dress, she affords her body a level of camouflage. The numerous rows of penises confront the viewer with a blunt starkness which is markedly different from the sexualised media images of women's bodies. A woman's body has historically been the site of male pleasure and to see the male body objectified switches gender relations; no longer is it the man surveying the objectified woman. Through the collage, the male gaze is turned inside out and reversed. Here, it is the woman who is doing the making, and hence the looking.

Figure 3. Close-up image of Rachel's artwork.

Rachel's portrayal of masculinity contradicts the concept of an ideal authoritarian, white male persona. Rather, the male body is shown with vulnerability in its un-erect state, as it is portrayed in a full frontal state of undress as their hands dangle with a stammer of self-consciousness. A closer inspection highlights the multiplicity of the male body; different sexual orientations and creeds. Male bodies in the workplace are often rendered invisible in contrast to the attention given to women (Entwistle, 2001) but through this artwork, it is no longer her body that is visible and self-conscious, rather it is the male.

Her conscious choice to present the imagery as upside down has a double significance; in one sense, it softens the confrontation with the male body but equally it can be read as a symbolic desire to overturn the existing status quo in gender power relations. Through this artwork, Rachel created a scenario that would be unspeakable in her workplace. On the one hand, pasting male genitalia in this overt way reverses the gaze. In addition, the shape of the shield is symbolic of the function of her t-shirts in protecting her from the same gaze she is simultaneously exposing. This concept of dress as armour is mirrored by Rachel's language as she describes the t-shirts as a form of protective wear:

> I just try to optimise everything that I have...I don't want a lot of clothes, partly because of the tech industry. I have to—I have to, protect myself in a way, you know. I have to project— I have to, as much as I can, control what people will think when they see me...because I don't have the luxury of wearing anything I want, despite what the tech industry saying—wear whatever you want, it's not true!

This notion of clothing as armour and imprisonment is echoed by Umberto Eco (1987) when he reflects on wearing a tight pair of new jeans. He refers to the "epidermic awareness" that he experienced when wearing jeans that clung too tightly and stated, "Well, with my new jeans my life was entirely exterior: I thought about the relationship between me and my pants, and the relationship between my pants and me and the society we lived in. I had achieved hetero-consciousness, that is to say, an epidermic self-awareness" (Eco, 1987: 194). In feeling the "edges" and limitations of his body, the sensation of wearing jeans acted as a physical reminder of his objectivity. Despite the egalitarian and unisex

appeal of denim, Eco states that jeans for women serve as another form of imprisonment which, "don't free the body, but subject it to another label and imprison it in other armours" (1987: 194-5).

For Rachel, it is precisely this "epidermic awareness" that she wants to avoid by wearing the t-shirt uniform. Moreover, Rachel's interpretation of armour contradicts the traditional notion of armour as a hardened material highlighting the covert nature of power within the contemporary workplace, as dress writer Jess Carter-Morley (2017) says, "It is power dressing obsessed with soft power". The contemporary definition of "armour" is now assigned to a pile of soft cotton t-shirts drawing a contradiction between its ideological function and literal form.

At first glance, Rachel's green t-shirts appear to be everyday clothing but when these garments are considered in relation to her artwork, the function of the t-shirts becomes far more lucid. These cotton t-shirts may assume an easygoing persona but they also possess a symbolic and literal function. Firstly, by adopting a "Steve Jobs" style, it gives her an element of camouflaging within the habitus of her workplace. The t-shaped, relaxed cotton garments mirror the style of her male colleagues which draws a visible commonality between herself and others. However, her deposition within the habitus as an ethnic minority woman means that she cannot simply mimic their mode of dressing directly (by wearing jeans and trainers). Instead, Rachel pairs her garments with a pencil skirt and develops her own practice of wearing these t-shirts back to front. In doing so, she attempts to contain any sexually eroticised interpretation of her body to prevent any narratives that might undermine her professionalism. Though these t-shirts appear to be commonplace, this self-imposed uniform is her workplace armour; the t-shirts enable her to camouflage into the workplace habitus while simultaneously managing the male gaze.

Case Study B: Robin (59)
Reclaiming Chineseness Through the Phoenix

As a mixed-race British Chinese woman, Robin contrasted to the strategy of camouflage as she adopted a distinctively different approach in negotiating the

power relations within her life. Rather than seeking survival through conceal-ment, Robin pursued the opposite direction by using visuality to assert herself into the world. This visual assertion manifests as a multi-coloured tattooed phoenix which spirals across the expanse of her back.

Born in Hong Kong to a Chinese mother and a Welsh father, Robin recalled a happy childhood until the age of 8 when she and her family relocated to Cardiff in 1966. Growing up bilingual in Hong Kong with little sense of her difference, Robin had never experienced any racism until arriving in Cardiff. The change of cultural environment also signalled a shift of habitus as she recalled the vicious racism she experienced at school. This racism was not only from other children, but was facilitated by her teachers:

> It was a very hard time for me, I was very unhappy for many years and you know, the racism wasn't just from kids in school, teachers would take the piss and whip the kids into a frenzy [CLICKS HER FINGERS]...Race had been such a...painful issue...I suppose I wanted to fit in, I wanted to be like everyone else. That was very, very difficult.

To integrate and survive into this new habitus, Robin felt it was necessary to distance herself from her Chinese heritage and this impacted on her relationship with her Chinese mother and her ability to speak her native tongue of Canton-ese. In experiencing such direct racial abuse, Robin explains, "In my little girl's head, it was all my mother's fault that I was getting all this shit. I wasn't very close to my mum when I was little because actually it was safer with my dad". In response, Robin aligned herself with her white, Welsh father and this align-ment had a profound effect on her bilingual ability. At the age of 13, she no longer had any command of Cantonese. Robin recalls a dinner with her Chinese relatives: "People were chatting away and I couldn't understand them...I was 13. I thought, shit, I couldn't...I can't, I can't understand this anymore...because I used to say to my mum, *speak in English, speak in English*!"

As protection from the daily racism, the loss of her Cantonese was driven by a burning desire to assimilate into the dominant white British society. Growing up as an adolescent, Robin became estranged from her Chinese identity as she

described her initial surprise at seeing "Chinese people for the first time" in 1975. Having suppressed her cultural identity for many years, her first trip to Hong Kong since leaving as a child was highly evocative.

> It was really emotional for me...God...flying...yeah...I was blubbering away in the toilets for ages. It's very difficult to put into words. It was such an emotional experience. It also made me think, what would my life had been had I stayed there. I probably would have been much more of the daughter my Mum would have wanted. I think I would have been more conventional, become a doctor or a lawyer!

The journey to Hong Kong was not just an experience in becoming reacquainted with her suppressed cultural identity but in returning, Robin wondered about the "conventional" life that she might have lived had she stayed. As a young woman in Britain, she identified herself through her sexuality as a lesbian woman and her socialist politics. The most significant event in healing her relationship with her racial identity was joining a Chinese lesbian group in South London in 1984. Accessing a wider network of like-minded women from diverse ethnic minority backgrounds gave her an opportunity to break the sense of isolation and shame that shrouded her early racial identity, as she explains:

> I hadn't really been around Chinese people that much or those that were around seemed really different to me in that they were, I suppose, more serious and weren't into partying and drinking [laughs]...It was a small group of 6, all of us were born outside of this country and suddenly that sort of...expanded my...my *comfort* with myself.

The Chinese Lesbian group travelled to the first international Asian and Lesbian conference in San Francisco. This experience firmly situated Robin's racial and sexual identity as a visible and legitimate position in the world. She recalled her exhilaration at the encounter: "There must have been five-hundred people at this conference. Well I've never seen so many like-minded women and women that *looked* the same as me, ever, in the same place!" It was important

to not only meet women who shared similar attitudes but also women who visually resembled herself. After years of internalising shame and embarrassment over her racial and sexual identity, Robin was able to see her identity and others like her as proudly visible in the world. This notion of visibility echoes Rachel's sentiment about K-Pop and the feeling of legitimacy in the world by seeing oneself externally mirrored in it.

Ruth Holliday (2001) asserts that visibility for queer identities is specifically crucial as sexual identity, unlike the gendered or racial identity, is not biologically marked onto the body. The expression of one's sexuality has to be consciously and visually inscribed onto the external body. She highlights that for queer identities, the techniques of dressing and adornment are entangled in the "politics of visibility" which refers to how everyday cues and ways of dress communicate group belonging. To combat the pathologisation and invisibility of queer identities, the site of the body becomes increasingly charged in asserting belonging of the self. As such, Holliday emphasises the importance of visual expression for queer individuals. In this way, dressing oneself can be a matter of survival as queer identities seek to create communities and connect with likeminded people.

Visually asserting her identity as a Chinese lesbian woman has been important for Robin as the site of both her body and home are crucial spaces of self-identification. As her father was a part of the Hong Kong police force, her family was able to import a lot of furniture from Hong Kong to Wales. After moving her mother into a care home, she has inherited many of her household items. These household objects are both ordinary and ornate: a 1960s Formica handmade table and chairs, a rice cooker (see figure 4), a chopsticks holder, paintings and wall hangings, a carved wooden drinks cabinet (see figure 5), her baby bath tub, an enormous jade plant and even a P&Q napkin kept from a ship journey to the UK.

Figure 4. Robin's rice-cooker.

Figure 5. Robin's drinks cabinet.

Stepping into Robin's home is a materially distinctive experience as many of these objects were a part of her Hong Kong childhood. She remarks: "Fundamentally they represent the best time of my life. My childhood in Hong Kong was a very happy one so yeah, it represents a time of safety and security which was taken away when I came here". Though she lives in London, her furniture from her Hong Kong childhood embodies a fleeting time of warmth and security. Robin expresses a desire to return to Hong Kong, but knows that this is impossible; the Hong Kong of her childhood has ebbed away and it has moved on without her. Through the wear and tear of her childhood furniture, she is able to situate herself amongst a history. Moreover, through the domestic space, Robin furnishes her own material intervention which sits in oppositional contrast to the wider social habitus which has excluded her cultural hybridity in the past.
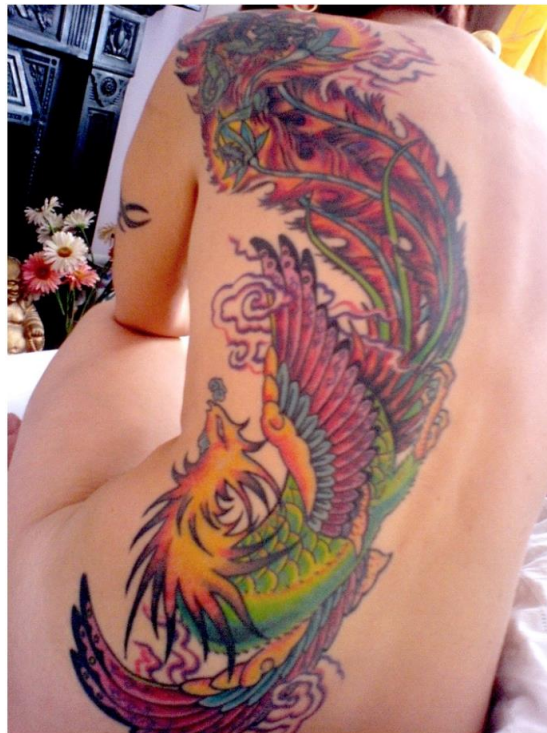

Figure 6. Robin's phoenix tattoo.

Both the domestic space and the site of her body are essential arenas of identity articulation. Her identity as a lesbian woman is physically marked on the body as a tattoo of two women in an embrace and over the years, she has accumulated tattoos including an anarchy symbol and various "peace" characters in Chinese, Thai and Tibetan. For Robin, tattooing is a physical and external reminder of an ever-changing body of personal, eternal truths; as she says, "It's to remind myself that inner peace is a very important thing and not to let things get in the way of that". One of the most significant and impressive tattoos on Robin's body is her multi-coloured phoenix that rises from the base of the spine and explodes into the expansiveness of her back (see figure 6). Having survived a difficult phase of her life, the tattoo celebrates her survival.

Victoria Pitts (2003) describes body modification and tattooing as an act of "reclaiming" the female body. The permanent inscription is a symbolic action of ownership, as she asserts: "Modifying the body promotes symbolic rebellion, resistance, and self-transformation—that making the transformation of the body can symbolically 'reclaim' the body from its victimisation and objectification in patriarchal culture" (2003: 49). Tattooing is a form of "body-biography" as the individual chooses to commemorate significant events on their flesh. Alfred Gell (1993) highlights the psychological effects of tattooing. Far from being a singular process of inserting ink into the skin to attain a surface decoration, Gell emphasises that tattooing creates a "double skin, folded over on itself" where the internal self is not only externalised through adornment but the body's renewed surface internalises its new exterior:

> What tattooing reveals [...] is an inside which comes from the outside, which has been applied externally prior to being absorbed into the interior. The basis schema of tattooing is thus definable as the exteriorization of the interior which is simultaneously the interiorization of the exterior (1993: 38-9).

For Robin, the phoenix is a form of body art that physically embodies her survival of a challenging life event and akin to the ideology associated with the phoenix, it announces her rebirth—a renewed strength and empowerment. A crucial point about the phoenix is its cultural affiliation with Asian culture. This visible and undeniable assertion of a racial identity is in complete contrast to

her early attempts to conceal her otherness. The tattoo not only celebrates her survival but also permanently inscribes her identity as a Chinese woman in the most lasting and direct way possible.

In some ways, her sexuality could be viewed as problematic as it contradicts traditional Confucian, familial expectations that associate the filial duty of a daughter with heterosexual marriage and reproduction. However, over time, her once difficult maternal relationship has healed and her mother not only accepts her sexuality but has joined her lesbian community in making good friendships with the parents of her friends. In recent years, her mother has developed dementia and as her condition worsens, Robin is dutifully filial and has become the sole carer. She states that her mother is integral to her changing relationship with herself: "For many years when I first came to this country, my race was such a nightmare, it caused me so much pain. But yes, I reclaimed all of that and in a positive way and my mother represented. It's been a total reversal".

Evidently her sense of Chineseness is deeply connected with her mother but equally she acknowledges the fragility of this hard-won position: "Race becomes more or less of an issue at different times, I think now race is an issue, my mother has got Alzheimer and she's dying. What will it mean for me when she goes? Do I feel less Chinese? I don't know". As a lesbian woman, Robin is acutely aware of the impact between reproduction, race and sexuality, specifically the decision of deciding the racial genetics of her child, which was a question she considered in her thirties, as she explains:

> In terms of race and my sexuality, I wouldn't want to have a child with a white man, I don't want a child that—that might look like a *white* child. That really struck me. If you're heterosexual with a white man, that wouldn't have entered my consciousness. This is such a significant part of me...I didn't want that *diluted*, which is quite interesting because my race has been such a source of *pain* for many years. But I guess, that pain I associated with that period in my life...that must have gone.

Robin's desire to reproduce a "genuine" Chinese baby reinforces her journey of self-acceptance and racial ownership. As a woman, she admits a feeling of responsibility to continue the racial lineage and to preserve it as "authentically" as possible. Without children of her own and the mother in ill-health, her connections to her Chinese identity begin and end with herself. Now in her fifties, Robin has not had children but her sense of cultural and racial preservation is reproduced and visualised through the domestic and upon the body; it is inscribed through tattoos and reinforced through the Chinese furnishings in her house. Her actions and physical possessions become points of material stability as they orient the self in a world of change. This desire for stability is reflected through adornment, as the tattoo becomes an additional way to counter uncertainty as it "works to 'glue' identities in a world where they are uncertain" (Entwistle, 2001: 47).

Following Gell's schema about the externalisation of an interior identity, the phoenix unleashes a formerly repressed racial identity. The active construction of a "double skin" intervenes into the social habitus which has historically marginalised her identity. Her tattooed skin becomes a permanent form of racial dress, a dress that will self-generate, change and crease with the body's rhythm. Striking a distinction with Rachel's desire to minimise the reading of her racial body, Robin's tattooed skin is a garment that she does not want to take off. The intersections between her race and sexuality cannot be overlooked; outwardly claiming her sexuality as a lesbian woman created a positive impact on her racial identity. Like the rising phoenix, she is no longer willing to repress any part of herself.

A View From Below, Dress as Resistance

The use of creative methodologies in this study highlights the need to utilise a greater range of innovative methodologies in the study of the British Chinese. To date, the experiences of British Chinese people have privileged linguistic knowledges and adopted interviewing as a general consensus (Parker, 1998; Pang, 1999; Yuen, 2008; and Lin, 2014). As a group of people dispersed across Britain, the use of innovative methodologies becomes ever more pertinent. It

offers a creative and expressive capacity for British Chinese individuals to present surprising and unexpected insights on their terms to challenge the stereotypes which have framed their identity. The use of creative methodologies combined with a materially-driven perspective presents a "view from below" to understand how a dispersed community, and in this case second generation women, have developed personal strategies to manage the otherness they face in everyday situations.

The function of art workshops allowed second generation British Chinese women to break the sense of a shared isolation through the sharing of their experiences. As remarked by Rachel and Robin, many of the women in this study expressed a sense of growing up in isolation from other British Chinese female counterparts. In this way, the exchange of experiences derived from the women's object-stories is an opportunity for women to situate their points of commonalities and divergences in a creative and productive context. As such, the object-stories workshops provide a physical space to encourage a collective sharing and articulation; such a context is not readily apparent in the wider British society.

As a population, a British Chinese political voice is in emergence as demonstrated by the London Chinatown protest against discriminatory business raids in 2018. In lieu of an overt discourse surrounding British Chinese identities and discrimination, women's dressing practices can be read as a tactics of resistance and assertion employed on an individual level while wider discourses are in fruition. Furthermore, future research on the British Chinese requires a stronger gendered consideration to understand how notions of femininity and masculinity are forged by British Chinese individuals. A continual need is required to consider the intersectional dynamic between ethnicity and gender to understand how these categories interact with one another in the negotiation of otherness.

It is evident that the two women of this study have experienced forms of institutional impingement and oppression in different scenarios. Along the lines of race, gender and sexuality, the women's identities have been in opposition to their habitus, be it the school or the workplace. As highly educated women, possessing fluent English and professional jobs, they are knitted into the fabric

of British life however, their racial visuality marks them as separate to the imagined British society. Their otherness is visually experienced on the body and simultaneously this is the site where relations of power are negotiated and resisted. Practices of bodily presentation highlight how overt and discreet ways of dressing are employed by ethnic minority women to negotiate everyday structural inequalities.

In seeking to manage the workplace gaze, Rachel chooses plain and inconspicuous clothing to neutralise the gendered and racial interpretations of her body. The desire for refuge creates an impression of compliance, however this interpretation is contradicted by her artwork which reveals a combative perspective on gender relations. In this way, her t-shirts cannot be understood within the binary terms of "domination" or "resistance", but rather, her negotiation of power is one of political hybridity (McNay, 1992). Equally, Rachel's interpretation of K-Pop as an emancipatory force in her own life needs to read against the capitalist endeavour of K-Pop that spreads "soft power" on a global level (Manticore-Griffin, 2011). There are certainly questionable ethical practices associated with the industry as K-Pop cannot be seen as an unburdened vehicle of emancipation. However as McNay reminds us, if we view structural forces as being strictly "emancipatory" or "repressive" then this perspective strips away the propensity of the individual to draw agency from a variety of expected and unassuming sources. This point has been keenly observed by Rachel. For her, seeing K-Pop females as "aspirational" ignited a racial re-evaluation of her workplace habitus where she recognised this racial prejudice as an institutional force.[2]

As a woman, she is equipped with the hallmarks of being self-determined and well-educated and therefore the presence of these t-shirts underline the illusionary label of the Chinese as a "model minority". It may appear that the second generation are excelling in terms of education and occupations. However a

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[2] Rachel notes her discovery of K-Pop and subsequently she embarked on a Korean Culture course and observes that it was a way of building comfort with herself: "I have been watching with interest at the rise of K-Pop. I find it so fascinating because I never saw Asian women, particularly girl groups being held up as aspirational. Last year, I took a brief course, mostly girls and a few boys from 18-20 years old. It was a Korean culture course about food, language and K-Pop. It was the first time in a long time that I felt, truly comfortable".

deeper examination reveals that despite these achievements, structural discrimination is still very much present. This highlights the existing challenges facing British Chinese women and other ethnic minority women in the workplace. Despite possessing the ability and social resources to excel, prejudice and discrimination still permeate British institutions and undermine their professional progression.

While Rachel views her clothing as an "armour" for the workplace gaze; Robin reverses the years of internalised racial shame by permanently inscribing her body as distinctively Chinese through the act of tattooing. Absorbed into the skin, the tattooed phoenix forms a racial "double skin". Her body becomes her artwork as she transforms the raw materials of oppression into a sensual and creative sight upon her body. As a lesbian woman, the intersections of sexuality and race collide and having to negotiate her sexuality has equipped her to assert all aspects of herself, including her race.

The British Chinese are a dispersed population, and second generation women have fewer points of occupational commonality and meeting spaces, which means that experiences of isolation are prevalent. In a Britain where they do not readily see themselves, material objects have the potential to equip and situate a sense of belonging. In this context, materiality assumes a heightened significance for the second generation as objects are used to negotiate their identities and otherness as exemplified by these case studies. The subjectivities of Rachel and Robin explored through materiality are indicative of the ways that objects anchor and negotiate belonging for second generation British Chinese women in the wider study.

Both the women referred to a sense of isolation and an inability to see themselves represented in culture. The existence of their objects are driven by a desire to feel comfortable and at ease in one's skin. Though the tattoo and t-shirts seem to contrast in their cultural appearance, the women use these practices of dressing to counter otherness. In other words, the tattoo and the t-shirts are the women's personal responses to the same problem. Invested with tensions and contradictions, their objects are more than their physicality. Rather, the presence of these objects are informed by lines of inquiry based on questions of gender, race and sexuality.

Whether spurred on by the discovery of K-Pop or a Chinese lesbian group, the objects are material precipitates resulting from their journeys with themselves as British Chinese women. Therefore, a vantage point situated upon objects and practices of dressing emphasises the significant role of materiality in social life. These actions cannot be viewed as mundane or peripheral; rather, it is through these embodied everyday practices that relations of power are negotiated. As such, these practices and objects can be viewed as strategies to manage the wider structural inequalities and otherness that ethnic minority women face in their everyday lives.

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