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# FINDING FREEDOM IN THE POST-UTOPIAN RUINS: LI XIAOJIANG's 40 YEARS OF WOMEN'S THOUGHT

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

POLITICS

by

**Yudi Feng**

August 2026

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Interim Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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# Contents

**CHAPTER ONE**
Introduction /1

**CHAPTER TWO**
The Beginning of the Journey: The Dialectic of Self and Society in Li's 1980s Writings /34

**CHAPTER THREE**
Breaking a Way Out: the 1990s Debates on "Women Return to the Home" /71

**CHAPTER FOUR**
Philosophy *versus* Politics: Finding Freedom in Post-Utopian Ruins beyond the 1990s /114

**BIBLIOPGRAPHY**
/171

# Abstract


**FINDING FREEDOM IN THE POST-UTOPIAN RUINS: LI XIAOJIANG's 40 YEARS OF WOMEN'S THOUGHT**

**Yudi Feng**

This dissertation investigates works of Li Xiaojiang (1951-2025), a foundational figure in the development of women's studies in post-socialist China who received comparatively little attention in international scholarship. Li has been criticized for essentialist understanding of sex and gender and for advocating women's self-improvement in ways that appeared complicit with China's state-led modernization and emerging market economy. Without dismissing these criticism, this dissertation argues that they capture only part of Li's theoretical and political significance. Reading her work across four decades, I recover a sustained concern with a fundamental political question: how might women cultivate subjective capacity and political agency under conditions that seem to leave little for either?

The dissertation traces Li thought roughly chronologically. I first examine her writings of the 1980s for which she received the most criticism for. Drawing on the body of texts that her critics did not pay much attention to, I argue that despite her explicit language of gender essentialism, her account of subjectivation as synthesis of the Self and the society contains the conceptual resource for a theory of transformative agency embedded in social construction. I then turn to the 1990s debates over women's return to the home, showing how Li distinguished herself from many of her contemporary feminist scholars by shifting attention from constatations over formal

rights to the preservation of a public space in which women could continue to participate in public discussions and thus cultivate their subjective capacities. Finally, I examine her later writings and argue that even her retreat from conventional politics and turn towards the pursuit of Truth constituted an attempt to preserve spaces for intellectual and political freedom under increasingly restrictive conditions.

Drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading, this dissertation argues that critical scholarship can attend simultaneously to the limitations of a thinker and to the possibilities contained within her thought. Li's work, I argue, offers not a finished theory but a sustained effort of locate political agency where politics appears impossible, and to preserve the possibility of freedom and hope under conditions that offer little reason for either.

# Chapter One

## Introduction

Li Xiaojiang 李小江 passed away on February 25, 2025, at the age of 74. In summer 2023, doctor found her breast cancer recurred when she fell ill while conducting fieldwork with Buddhist nuns in Jiangxi province. Since then, she had been working even harder than she had always been, as she knew that her over four decades of work on theoretical and practical issues of women was nearing its final ending. Only a few months before her passing, she again emphasized to an interviewer her life-long rejection of being referred to as "feminist person (*nüxing zhuyi zhe* 女性主义者)." "If future generations would still read my work," she said, "I would like to be remembered as a person who writes [and] a person who never stops learning. I see feminism as a perspective and an approach to understand the world, not something that defines me – please allow me to retain this little bit of freedom and let me reserve with my disidentification [with feminism] this little bit of trace in our shared history [as Chinese women]."[1]

These stances became the point of amplification on the handful of reports on her passing on state-sponsored medias, as if the fact that she distanced herself from "Western feminism" would affirm her position as a native, indigenous Chinese scholar

[1] See Zhang, Yue. "The person who leads the way for women's studies in China does not want to be a feminist." Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20240917164822/https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/IRyKAxMD3FrB8cE-Bff1WA. 09/04/2024

– a persona that the state apparently wanted to celebrate.[2] What was brushed aside, however, was the fact that despite her forty-year long dedicated career of research and writing, and her fame as the most important figure in the founding of women's studies in post-socialist China, Li was considered almost obsolete in international scholarship of feminism; and because of that, her work post 1990s received only scarce scholarly attention.

International feminist scholars were taken aback by Li mainly on two issues. First was her apparent characterization of gender differences as binary, undeniable, immutable, and natural. Second, she seemed to suggest that Chinese women should commit to self-improvement in order to adapt to the new challenges and opportunities generated in China's economic and social reforms had assigned them. For the former position, she was criticized for "essentializing women," and for the later, she was labeled a "market feminism" in complicity with the Chinese state's modernization agenda which, inevitable, prey on women's reproductive labor. These criticisms have largely structured how later readers would approach Li; most of them, without much surprise, ended up agreeing that Li's work lost its radical edge as the collusion between capitalism and patriarchy became the dominant force shaping women's lives in both China and beyond.

[2] For examples, "Li Xiaojiang: I want to do more foundational work in my limited life." *Xin Jing B*ao (New Beijing News). 02/16/2025. Retrieved from: https://m.bjnews.com.cn/detail/1739711113168951.html; "Li Xiaojiang: Towards women, in Reflection of Equality" Tencent.com. retrieved from https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20250215A070BD00. 02/15/2025

## 1. Reparative reading: making room for hope and surprise

This dissertation acknowledges that these criticisms are valid but argues that they capture only part of what Li's work has to offer. For me, Li's women's theories is a story of a theorist who sincerely dedicated her thinking to the most urgent, and puzzling, issues that Chinese women confronted in China's post-socialist years. It is also a story of theorizing where a theorist wanted to find politics where politics looks impossible but is mostly needed, a story of forging hope when circumstances offered little reason for hope.

A story of hope is particularly timely for Chinese feminism in the recent decade. Since the arrest of the "Feminist Five" in 2015, the state's suspicion and hostility toward feminism have become increasingly evident in its tightening censorship and suppression of rights-based feminist activism.[3] Participating in activism on the ground is becoming more costly than many are willing to bear. In the digital space, discussions surrounding women's issues remains possible, though under tight surveillance, thanks to the rise of social media since the 2010s. Controversies over some issues even grew into nation-wide debates, bring greater visibility to the Women Question to the general public. These discussions have popularized vocabularies like feminism, patriarchy, misogyny, and etc., but also met with antifeminist backlashes aside from state suppression: China's decades-long one-child policy and son preference under the conventional patrilineal system had together contributed to an extremely unbalanced

[3] For details of the detention of the "Feminist Five", see Leta Hong Fincher. *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China*. London and New York: Verso. 2018.

sex ratio, disproportionately constraining marriage prospects of men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds;[4] capitalism in China has fused with the state bureaucracy through a regime of governmentality, preying on women's labor and their purchasing power, but simultaneously cultivating anti-feminist sentiments among women.[5]

It is not Chinese feminism alone, however, that is experiencing a bad weather and in need a tale of hope. Political and social theorists in the North Atlantic seemed to also have reached to a broad consensus that we are living through a crisis of some sorts. Apparently, we are living in "dark times" that things we value – democracy, freedom, humanity, etc. – are under attack and we are "running out of steam" in our resistance.[6] Neoliberalism is a "never-ending nightmare" waging a "stealth revolution" on democracy and now we're living in its "ruins."[7] Can one ever live an "(ethically) good life" in a "bad life" – one conditioned by historical and systemic oppression and violence that render some lives valuable and grievable whereas others so much less so?[8] On the other hand, the ways we are used to read the cannon of Western political

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[4] From 1990s onward, China's sex ratio at birth ranged from 110 to120 males for every 100 females. See Zhang, Yanzhe, et al. "Empirical Research on Male Preference in China: A Result of Gender Imbalance in the Seventh Population Census." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* [Switzerland], vol. 19, no. 11, June 2022, 6482.

[5] For a recent summary of anti-feminism in China and discussion of future prospective of China's feminist activism, see Tang, Ling and Zhang, Yihuan. "Questions Facing Chinese Feminism: Anti-Feminism and anti-LGBTQ+ politics in China since the 2010s". in *European Journal of Women's Studies*. 2026. 1-8. The point on sex ratio is also from this article.

[6] See Kalinka, Irina. "Reading in Dark Times: Toward a Queer Politics of Repair." In *Media Theory*. vol.7, no. 1. 2023. 126-146.

[7] See Dardot, Pierre, and Christian Laval. *Never Ending Nightmare: The Neoliberal Assault on Democracy*. Translated by Gregory Elliott, Verso, 2019. Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. First Edition. Princeton University Press, 2015. And Brown, Wendy. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. Columbia University Press, 2019.

[8] See Butler, Judith. "Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life? Adorno Prize Lecture." *Radical Philosophy*, no. 176, November 2012, pp. 9–18.

theory seem to have only produced perspectives little more than tales of "impasse," of deadlocks, stagnation, and seemingly no way forward.[9]

In 1997, the aftermath of the AIDS epidemic, Eve Kosoksky Sedgwick cautioned her fellow scholars that social criticism is not merely an intellectually endeavor but also a politically consequential practice. "Whatever we know," she wrote bluntly, "we know there isn't time to bullshit."[10] Drawing from Melanie Klein's theories of psychoanalysis, Sedgwick argued that for critical reading to achieve its commitment in social transformation, its then-dominant practice of exposing systemic violence and oppression was insufficient on its own. Rather, such approach – which Sedgwick called "paranoid reading" – needs to be complimented by "reparative reading." In psychoanalysis, Paranoia emerges when a perceived threat is projected outward, causing one to experience the surrounding world generally as a source of danger. The reparative process – the "depressive position," in Klein's language – when one draws on one's own resources to "repair" these threatening parts, assembling them into a coherent whole to one's specifications and thereby offering oneself comfort and nourishment.[11]

Social criticism, Sedgwick then suggested, likewise needed a paranoid-reparative dynamic as such. The paranoid exposure, she acknowledged, is valuable for its capacity

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[9] See Shulman, George. "Fred Moten's Refusals and Consents: The Politics of Fugitivity." *Political Theory*, vol. 49, no. 2, April 2021, pp. 272–31.

[10] Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You", in *Touching Feelings: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.149. First published in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*. Duke University Press. 1997. 1-38. Pages numbers here are from the 2003 version.

[11] Sedgwick, 2003, 128.

to demystify and denaturalize oppressive regimes of discourse. Yet as the paranoid method became so dominant that it came to prescribe how critical readings ought to be conducted, she cautioned, it may end up having a stultifying effect on the very social transformation critics hoped to achieve. The problem, Sedgwick argued, lies in the paranoid critics' assumption of a homogenous affective relationship between knowledge and the knower, presuming that being informed of systemic oppressions and how they operate necessarily generates sentiments and initiatives required for social transformation.[12] Paranoid critical practice, in Sedgwick's analysis, is a strong theory of negative effect. Like paranoia in psychoanalysis that projects threat perceived in one particular object onto one's surrounding world, paranoid reading tends to theorize systemic oppression with an explanatory reach that is so expansive that experiences of oppression became predictable and inevitable.[13] Hence, just like the paranoid position in Klein's theory that is complemented by the "depressive position," whose reparative work restores a sense of safety, paranoid reading may likewise need a reparative process to make the bad news tolerable to the knower before it can become a source of transformative agency.

As Irina Kalinka recently lamented, Sedgwick's essay provided very few examples of what reparative reading/knowing might look like in practice.[14] I would agree with Irina Kalinka, however, that regardless of its particular format, what most clearly differentiates reparative critical practice from paranoid critique is that the former

[12] Sedgwick, 2003, 124.
[13] Sedgwick, 2003, 133-5.
[14] Kalinka. 2023. 127.

prioritizes "the subjective and affective needs of readers vis-à-vis an inhospitable world."[15] For me, this commitment is already vividly showcased in Sedgwick's example of the queer-identified practice of camp. For Sedgwick, in addition to the familiar interpretation of camp as parody and mockery of heterosexism – a paranoid reading – a reparative lens enables us to better understand the defining elements of camp performance. The excess and surplus in both bodily adornments and in the expression of passion, Sedgwick suggested, are expressions of the camp performers' impulse and capacity to assemble bits and pieces from the oppressive culture and transform them into resources for their nurturance.[16] From a reparative perspective, the theorist shifts attention away from the presumption that resistance must be the primary aim of engagement with the oppressive culture and toward the subjective needs of the camp practitioner that, aside from resistance, also include pleasure, sustenance, and hope.

Especially in our contemporary moment of forever crisis, as Kalinka suggests, what the readers need subjectively – not what we as theorists think that they need – might be positive affets such as forgiveness, solidarity, or love. Readers, theorists included, might be inspired more by hope and less by fear and humiliation to commit to resistance.[17] Both paranoid and reparative reader are future-oriented, to be sure; but it is the reparative readers who is more likely to cultivate hope and hold space for hope. Unlike the paranoid approach that projects the bad news it uncovers in the past or

[15] Kalinka. 2023. 132.
[16] Sedgwick, 2003, 149.
[17] Kalinka. 2023. 129.

present into the future so as to forestall bad surprises, reparative reading does not presume that all surprises are bad.[18] As Kalinka suggests, reparative practices preserve the possibility that a text, even a "sinister" one, may still positively surprise us, and hence contain a radical potential that some other scholars did not recognize in their readings of Sedgwick. As Kalinka wrote, reparative reading is a "prefigurative politics of imagination."[19] Its political efficacy lies precisely in its moving beyond merely revelation and prediction pain, thereby making possible the courage and hope needed to build – though on the debris of violence and oppression – new selves and a new world.

This dissertation revisits the work for which Li attracted the most criticism; it also brings to light another substantial body of her work that had received little scholarly attention. For materials both old and new, I invite the reader to explore with me what a reparative reading might look like. Li was a prolific and tireless writer. Working with the substantial body of work she produced over the course of her forty-year career is like piecing together a jigsaw puzzle: not only is the sheer volume of her writings considerable, but she also wrote for a diverse range of types of audience, including fellow feminist scholars, ordinary Chinese women, younger scholars, and male scholars with whom she disagreed with. Moreover, writing in the nascent phase of the reconstruction of Chinese academia in the aftermath of Cultural Revolution, Li developed her thinking through engagement diverse intellectual traditions and currents,

[18] Sedgwick, 2003, 130-1.
[19] Kalinka. 2023. 127, 128.

including Marxism inherited from China's revolutionary legacy; second-wave Western feminism, wo which she was exposed through her original major in West European Literature; and Enlightenment thinking from the May Fourth Period (c. 1915-1927) revived by new humanist thinkers in the 1980s, among others.

Yet as Sedgwick wrote, reparative reading assembles bits and pieces together not necessarily like any preexisting whole; rather, the reparative work aims for a "more satisfying object" in response to the readers' particular, subjective needs.[20] Li's original work is by no means anything satisfying. As I stated at the opening of the dissertation, her explicit language suggesting gender essentialism and neoliberal self-responsibility had invited her much criticism; I do not, of course, endorse these essentialist and neoliberal positions. My work, however, seeks to complement this paranoid critique, which is admittedly on solid ground, with a reparative reading. The readers are already well-informed that Li's work revealed her lack of sensitivity to heteronormativity and neoliberal self-entrepreneurship. Yet can her work also surprise us with potentials to be reformulated into a tale of hope where the theorist was able assemble the pieces available to her under conditions not optimal to imagine freedom and action? I ask the reader to join me in holding space for surprises as such as we revisit Li's writings, especially given our shared sense that consensus that we live, after all, in dark times and our desire for a tale about hope. Let us return, then, to the beginning of her work – to the seemingly the ominous origins of essentialism and market feminism.

[20] Sedgwick, 2003, 129.

## 2. Essentialism and the "double role": Li's main arguments in the 1980s.

### *The essentialized woman*

If gender essentialism means to see sex/gender as a non-negotiable binary system where a person's gender identity as in man or woman – as part of his/her innate characteristics – is predetermined by his/her assigned sex at birth, then Li had indeed committed a mistake as such. Her 1989 book *Sex Gap* starts from a statement that would for sure be denounced as anti-trans from today's standards. "No one can deny that human beings are consist of men and women as two sexes;" she wrote, "for natural species to sustain and evolve, there are intrinsic differences between physiological mechanisms of the two sexes."[21] Differences between the two sexes, she then pronounced, are "objective existences" that are based on nature and not subject to human consciousness.[22] Statements as such are everywhere to see in her works in the 1980s; and specifically given her heavy and explicit usage of a language of physiology when describing the differences between men and women, no wonder she would immediately trigger the sensitive nerves of her feminist peers in the West: when they later first encountered Li's work in the early 1990s, global feminism was just taking a poststructuralist turn, challenging gender/sex binarism.

One can reasonably read this position as a trauma response of Li to the Maoist suppression of femininity using state force, a "masculinization" of women as many had characterized, or just Maoist totalitarianism generally. Li herself gave us ample

[21] Li, Xiaojiang. *Xing Gou* [*Sex Gap*]. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing (*Sanlian Shudian*).1989. 1.
[22] *Sex Gap*. 4.

materials to fabricate such a connection, and as one of her critics Tani Barlow argues, Li had an extraordinary ability to dramatize her scarring experience under Maoism with vivid writing.[23] At various places, Li attributed her academic commitment to women's studies to her personal spiritual journey "towards women," i.e., her coming of recognition of her identity as a woman which she used to deny and resent growing up in Maoist China. For example, with emotionally charged language, she recounted that her first menstruation happened precisely as she witnessed her father being humiliated in a struggle session during the Cultural Revolution when Red Guards poured a big bottle of ink over his father's head. "I wanted to lunge forward [to protect my father]," she wrote, "but right at the time, sharp pain cut through my lower stomach, and a warm flow came down on my thighs… immediately I came to understand what this meant …all of a sudden, black ink, scarlet blood, and clear tears all mixed together, inundating me in humiliation and mortification of being a daughter and being a woman. At that moment, I hated myself for being born a woman."[24]

This incident, Li wrote, symbolized the start of her teenage resolve to "defy [her] destiny and defy [her] sex." She followed the example of the fictional character Rakhmetov in Nickolay Chernyshevsky's fiction *What Is to Be Done* to exercise self-torture. "I baked under the midsummer sun and swam in the bitter cold in the coldest winter," she wrote, "to learn to hone my willpower like a man." During her years as a

[23] Barlow, Tani. *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2004. 295.
[24] Li, Xiaojiang. "Towards Women" in *Zouxiang Nüren* [*Towards Women*]. Zhengzhou: Henan People's Press. 1995. 3

sent-down youth (*zhiqing* 知青) in the rural areas, she wrote, it was from Irving Stone's biography of Jack London *Sailer on Horseback* that she drew the strength to persevere in her self-education during those hard years.[25] A Chinese young woman seeing role models in a fictional 19th century Russian man and a White American male writer would sound bizarre or almost incomprehensible to today's readers who have acquired cultural sensitivities to gender and ethnicity due to the rise of identity politics. But that is why these autobiographical writings would powerfully show the reader the extreme form of desire to deny one's femininity and gender identity that were common to Li's generation of Chinese women. However, as Li and her peers realized later, the state's exhortation of the "iron girl" not only had mistaken sameness as equality but also caused immense suffering to Chinese women both mentally and physically. In this light, Li's insistence on a restoration of difference between men and women is a reasonable response to her personal experience and collective trauma of her generation.

Historian Chris Gilmartin read Li's position as a "strategic essentialism" that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak used to advocate but later distanced herself from, that is, a group temporarily and self-consciously present itself as unified for political purposes.[26] This reading is particularly convincing if we look at the larger theoretical context Li needed to work with in the 1980s. As she recounted later, the main goal of women's studies in the Chinese 1980s was "separation," and she and her associates had successfully done

[25] "Towards Women." 4.
[26] Li, Xiaojiang. *Nüxing?zhuyi* [*Femin?ism*]. Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Press. 2000. 242. For Spivak's strategic essentialism, see Chakraborty, Mridula Nath. "Everybody's Afraid of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Reading Interviews with the Public Intellectual and Postcolonial Critic." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* [Chicago], vol. 35, no. 3, March 2010, pp. 621–45.

so. That is, i) as theoretical constructions, women's studies separated itself from orthodox women's liberation theory, ii) as an academic discipline, it separated from conventional humanities and social sciences, and iii) as a social movement, it separated from the state's monopoly in constructing women.[27] These three "separations" very well summarized the theoretical and political hurdles Li needed to overcome in her women's studies at the time.

First, the only permissible theory of women since the founding of the People's Republic was the what is called Marxist Women's Theories (*makesi zhuyi funü guan* 马克思主义妇女观), the core notion of which was that women's liberation ultimately predicates on diminishing private property, and hence women's liberation is part of, and is subordinate to, proletariats' revolution.[28] For Li, to argue that women and men are ontologically different was to challenge this view and to establish sex as an analytical category independent from, and equal to – if not higher than – the category of class.

Li's first article on women's issue "The Progress of Humanity and Women's Liberation" (1983) published in *Studies on Marxism* was a clear attempt to challenge the Marxist Women's Theories. As she later noted, the publication of this article was possible only because the journal editors – one of them Su Shaozhi who we will meet again in Chapter Four – took the risk to give it greenlight without securing endorsement

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[27] Li, Xiaojiang. *Gaobie Zuotian* [*A farewell to Yesterday*]. Zhengzhou: Henan People's Press. 1995. 16 The third "separation" also includes "maintained a distance from Western feminist movement centered on rights" in the third point. I took it out for the coherence of the argument here.

[28] See Wang Zheng. "Maoism, Feminism, and the UN Conference of Women: Women's Studies Research in Contemporary China." in *Journal of Women's History.* Vol 8, no.4. Winter 1997.129.

from the some "authority figures" on women's issues.[29] In fact, this article did receive much denunciation for "anti-Marxism" later in the aftermath of 1989.[30] The article made a "heretical" statement: the "five-stage" model of historical development, i.e., a successive development from primitive communal society, slave society, feudal society, capitalist society, and then communist society, Li argued, was only appropriate to describe the experience of men. Women, on the other hand, "experienced [instead] three historical period: the age of matriarchy, the age of slavery, and the age of liberation."[31]

From hindsight, Li's argument is a mundane one based on reproductive theories. Citing mainly *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* of Friedrich Engels, she argued, women, did not experience too much change in their lives since the end of matriarchal period of primitive society because they had been constrained in reproductive labor in the household until early stage of capitalism. So, unlike men who continued to experience later four stages of human development based the extend that they liberated themselves from natural necessities, women had stayed in their "age of slavery," enslaved by men at home for the continuance of human species. It was not only after the development of capitalism started to require women's productive labor,

[29] Li, Xiaojiang. "*gonggong kongjian de chuangzao: Zhongguo Funü Yanjiu Yundong* [Creating a Public Space: China's Women's Studies Research Movement]" In *Funü Yanjiu Yundong: Zhongguo Ge'an* [*Women's Studies Movement: the China Case*]. Ed. Li, Xiaojiang. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press. 1997. 147-8.
[30] "Creating a Public Space". 147.
[31] Li, Xiaojiang. "*Renlei jinbu yu funü jiefang* [The progress of humanity and women's liberation]" *Makesi Zhuyi Yanjiu* . [*Studies in Marxism*]. no.2. 1983. 143. An English translation by Edward M. Gunn is available at *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2013, pp. 22–50. This quote is at p.23.

in addition to those of men, that women started to be liberated from the family and entered the "age of liberation." Based on such historical arguments, Li was then able to conclude that "the disparity between males and females is a disparity similar to class disparities, in some sense as a social nature that is more universal," and hence women's liberation is not subordinate to proletarian liberation, but an autonomous movement of its own.[32]

Second, both the Chinese society and Chinese academia at the time were not ready to accept women's studies as a relevant discipline, not even to mention an independent one. "Equality between men and women (*nannü pingdeng* 男女平等)" had been written in the Chinese Constitution since 1950s and had been touted by the state as one of most important evidence of socialism's superiority. Slogans like "women can hold up half of the sky" and "whatever men comrades can do; women comrades can also do" had become part of the discursive reality that people lived with via propaganda and education. But this had only made gender equality an irrelevant issue for many Chinese people, especially men, because they believed it had already been achieved. Relatedly, women's studies were also denied its status as an academia discipline on its own. As Li later recalled, when she proposed notions of "women's literature" and "women's aesthetic consciousness" at an academic meeting, she was openly pushed back by a male colleague with "literature is literature; how could it be separated like men's room and ladies' room?"[33]

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[32] "The Progress of Humanity." 161. English translation by Gunn at 44.
[33] *Sex Gap*. 2.

The society's confusion over the relevance of the Woman Question is salient in an exchange between Li and an anonymous male writer that she included in In *Eve's Exploration* (1988). These exchanges were originally published in 1986 on *Women of China* (*Zhongguo Funü*), a general-interest periodical.[34] The male writer's article was titled "Adam's confusion (*yadang de kunhuo* 亚当的困惑), Li's response "Eve's exploration (*xiawa de tansuo* 夏娃的探索)."[35] Adam's letter, regardless of its content, was undeniably sincere in spirit: he was genuinely confused by why Chinese women of his time would still hold on to the relevance of women's liberation. Chinese Constitution had already confirmed gender equality, Chinese laws had criminalized domestic violence, commodification of sex, human trafficking, bigamy, and concubinage, Chinese women already walked out of the household, participated in social production, and took political office: for Adam, these meant that women's liberation had already succeeded. Beyond this, he saw no benefit of women desiring more "liberation," especially when it involves competition with men in professional lives.[36]

Women were, Adam wrote, simply more easily overwhelmed by the expectations of professional lives because they are emotional and sensitive – which he glanced over with one brief explanation of "physiological differences between men and women." So,

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[34] As part of the periodical's "Women's ideals and the ideal women" colloquium.
[35] *Yadang* and *Xiawa* were Chinese translation of Adam and Eve in the *Old Testaments*. It was the authors' choices to use these biblical characters to refer to Chinese men and women. They did not seem to think they needed a justification, nor that Adam and Eve needed to mean anything more than men and women.
[36] Li, Xiaojiang. *Xiawa de Tansuo*. [*Eve's Exploration*], Zhengzhou: Henan People's Press. 1988. 227-8.

the old slogan "whatever male comrades can do, female comrades can do also" would only bring unpleasant tensions between men and women especially between spouses. He even mentioned that burden at work would decrease women's sexual desires and henceforth negatively affect marital relationships. Thanks to women's liberation, Adam lamented, "women's faces have become bleaker and bleaker these days." Hence, he suggested, women's liberation may "no longer necessarily the progressive thing to do" and should be replaced by "women finding more suitable places in society" which he found more advantageous to women.[37]

Adam's suggestion might be immediately ridiculed and dismissed today; yet in 1986 Li wrote Adam a serious response because she found his confusion representative of Chinese men.[38] Adam's grievances and misgivings were heartfelt words, she wrote, which nevertheless betrayed his incapability to empathize with women who "share sweetness and bitterness (*tonggan gongku* 同甘共苦)" with him as comrades.[39] Adam's blind spot, Li analyzed, was that he failed to distinguish "women's problems (*funü wenti* 妇女问题)" and "problems of women's liberation (*funü jiefang wenti* 妇女解放问题)." For former, she defined, were criminal justice issues where women were the victims, like those raised by Adam. The latter, however, were social issues emerged after women started to participate in the social production thanks to women's liberation movements. Adam's complaint about worsening marital relationships and increasing divorce rate, Li suggested, was precisely a result of the liberated, working woman

[37] *Eve's Exploration*, 227-8.
[38] *Eve's Exploration*, 222.
[39] *Eve's Exploration*, 229.

however being burdened by expectations of her both at work and at home. It is reasonable for people to wonder, Li then wrote, whether problems like this would never have arisen had it not for women's liberation. Yet such doubts, she argued, only demonstrated that the Woman Question was far from settled in China and remained an unfinished task for both men and women. [40]

At the opening of *Sex Gap*, Li wrote: "'Sex gap' is a figurative metaphor, reflecting the phenomenon that men and women are not able to understand nor to reason with each other…the phenomenon of 'sex gap' is becoming more and more salient today, pressing us to retrospectively look at history and reflect on the [different] characteristics of evolution of men and women in each of their social development."[41] In this sense, Gilmartin is right that Li's essentialism was indeed "strategic," that is, it was for a phenomenological "sex gap" that she diagnosed of the Chinese society that she established a (de)ontological, essentialist "sex gap" between men and women as a solution.

***The "double role"***

This theory that women collectively have a history that is radically different from men then led to Li's other key thesis to defend the relevance and significance of research of women despite their formal rights secured by law. As women started to participate in social productions, she argued, they would inevitably come to be burdened with a

[40] *Eve's Exploration*, 231-2
[41] *Sex Gap*. 1

"double role." That is, their "traditional role" in the household as wife and mother to fulfill their natural imperative to procreate for human species and their "new role" to fulfil their "self-realization" in social production.[42] Li did not refer to any other theorists for her concept of "double role." But again we can easily find precursors for it. That women occupy both a familial role as wives and mothers and a social role as outside the home was no novelty in feminist theories from Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* to later socialist feminist analyses of unpaid reproductive labor.

However, instead of emphasizing women's "double role" as a systematic injustice that calls for social change like the socialist feminists, Li seemed to have adopted Friedan's more conservative approach to suggest that Chinese women should work on improving their personal capacities to better navigate both roles as China pivoted to a market economy, that is, to do well in both their roles. Under socialism, Li argue, Chinese women had unfortunately adopted a "mentality of dependence" to the state and the society, which contributed a prevailing low "quality (*suzhi* 素质 – *suzhi* means a person's general educational, professional, and cultural development; it also carries ideological connotations in the Chinese state's modernization agenda)" of women in comparison to men.[43] And now as China transforms away from a planned economy, Chinese women's most important task is to improve their *suzhi* and adapt to challenges that the new market economy brings to them.

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[42] *Eve's Exploration*. 126. also see Li Xiaojiang, Liang Jun, and Wang Hong, *Nüzi yu Jiazheng* [*Women and Domestic Science*], Henan: Henan People's Press. 1986. 41.
[43] *Eve's Exploration*. 170-5, 209-12, also see Li Xiaojing. *Nüren de Chulu.* [*Women's Way Out*]. Shenyang: Liaoning People's Press. 1989. 114-7.

As part of the project to ameliorate the burden from their double roles, Li and her colleagues organized a two-month "women's domestic sciences training program (*nüzi jiazhengban* 女子家政班)" in 1985 at Henan Women Cadres' School. The program was later published into a handbook for general audience providing practical skills, with some theorical resources, to navigate their double role so they can have both self-realization in the society and fulfilling relationships in the family. In plain, everyday language, Li wrote in the introductory chapter:

> "Three meals a day, the elderly and the children, and other endless domestic work big or small – all of these fell largely on women's shoulders. If not addressed well, 'family wars' erupt any moment and hold women back in their advancement in their careers. Facing such reality, we should not 'punch our own faces to pretend that we are fat,'[44] singing lofty slogans of "women's liberation from the family," while struggling with crushing burden of out dual roles and "pleading" for a way to live…why don't we confront such reality, organize our women and teach them some knowledge about domestic sciences, give them some practical, concrete help, and make their lives easier and happier under current circumstances?"[45]

The book discusses practical issues including how to cooperate with the husband on housework, how to navigate relationships with in-laws and parents, child education, how to manage marital conflicts, and basic sex education; it also provides advice on meal planning, interior decoration, fashion choices, and hosting etiquette. In the conclusion, Li even speaks through the course instructor's voice to suggest that the

[44] *Dazhong lian chong pangzi* 打肿脸充胖子. It is a Chinese folk-saying referring to a person pretending to be better off than he really is so as to save face.
[45] *Women and Domestic Science*, 4.

significance of women doing well in their double role is ultimately for the society's health and robustness:

> "Fellow sisters, now our classes come to an end…In our time together in the past two months, I have been deeply impressed by your strong drive for self-improvement. You aspire not only to succeed in your careers, but also to be gentle wives and competent mothers…We live at a time calling for a large number of career-oriented families…the function the family is no longer merely to ensure social stability through its own stability, but rather to serve as a positive and progressive force that would contribute to the society's development. Careers realize the value of our lives; families enrich our lives with joy. Let us end our class with the popular British song *Home, Sweet Home*…"[46]

### 3. Criticism of Li's: essentialism, statism, and market feminism

An essentialist understanding of sex and gender, plus a gesture encouraging women to be more skillful in balancing family and career, for sure would not make Li look good in her international readers, if not effrontery to us today from hindsight.[47] As Wang Lingzhen well summarized, Li's 1980s writings worked in distinct, if not fundamentally opposite directions to how feminism developed to address events in many other parts of the world.[48] Since the 1980s, poststructuralist feminism moved beyond a challenge of gender-based standards and stereotypes and argued that the way we understand biological sex as a binary system of men and women is also a historical

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[46] *Women and Domestic Science*, 270-1.
[47] She received much criticism at home at well. For example, she immediately triggered fierce accusations of her for "turning back the wheel of history and asking women to return to the household." See "Creating a Public Space." 145. Also see *Towards Women*. 22.
[48] Wang, Lingzhen. "Gender and Sexual Differences in 1980s China: Introducing Li Xiaojiang". In *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. vol.24, no.2. 2013. 8.

construction and subject to critique. Since the 1990s, black feminism (e.g., Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlié Crenshaw) and third world/women of color feminism (e.g., Chandra Talpade Mohanty) began to problematize "women" as a universal category predicated on a homogenous "women's" experience and identity. Specifically, they suggested, the mainstream western feminism erred in that it produces knowledge and identity predicated on experiences of White, middleclass, Western women while claiming they are true to all women. Li's emphasis of sexual and gender differences and her sweeping definition of a Women's experience with a capital W, of course looked like an obsolete move, if not a reactionary one.

***Essentialism***

The first ones to point out Li's untimeliness were Chinese diaspora women scholars in the earliest Chinese cohort to pursue graduate studies in the First World in China's Reform and Opening Up (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放). Only a few of them had openly wrote on this, but Li's account of her personal interactions with these scholars gave us good taste of the quarrels between them. In early 1990s, Li started to travel oversea to present her work. The most famous event among these was what today's scholars called the "Harvard Conference." [49] As Li recounted, a group of seven to eight Chinese diasporic feminist scholars "ambushed" her at the conference. The situation became so

[49] The conference was entitled "Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State," and was held at Harvard University, Wellesley College, and MIT February 7-10, 1992. Papers presented at this conference later became an edited volume. *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State*. Ed. Christina K. Gilmartin, Gail Hershatter, Lisa Rofel, and Tyrene White. Harvard University Press. 1994.

unpleasant to her that she had to storm out of a meeting where these scholars who, from her perspective, tried to educate her that her theories of women were incorrect because they lacked a "gender perspective." "I have been way too terrified by all those occasions I experienced [under Maoist totalitarianism] of having to be 'unified'," Li wrote, "so this gesture of wanting to 'unify' me to their side made me very uncomfortable."[50]

Wang Zheng, now professor emerita of history and women's studies at the University of Michigan, is one of the few Chinese diaspora scholars who wrote to criticize Li in English. She was also singled out by Li several times, with apparent disapproval, for summarily "throwing an 'essentialism' hat" on her.[51] Wang commended Li's effort to establish sex as an analytical category separate from that of class as an efficient theoretical move. She lamented, however, that Li's focus on socialism's disregarding and suppressing women's femaleness was misplaced; a more appropriate target of criticism, Wang argued, should be its failure in changing patriarchal culture and institutions.[52] More important to Wang, Li's essentialist notion of women fell short of conceptual power to address an emerging "discourse of femininity" in China's economic reform where the capitalist market found women's sexuality, labor, and purchasing power lucrative commodities.[53] She cited Gail Hershatter and Emily Honig's observation that while Chinse women newly interest in self-adornment and

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[50] *Femin?ism*. 3-5.
[51] See for example, Li, Xiaojiang, "A Dialogue with Barlow: Feminist Research Movement in the 1980s". *Journal of Shanxi Normal University (Social Science Edition)*. Vol. 39 No. 6. 2012, and *Femin?ism*. 242-3.
[52] Wang. 1997. 138.
[53] Wang. 1997. 137

femininity in the 1980s did show an increased space and courage for self-expression and individuality, it was nevertheless a different kind of conformity and female subordination.[54]

Wang also attributed Li's insensitivity to essentialism to Chinese scholars' general limited knowledge of global feminist theoretical development at the time. By the time Li wrote *Eve's Exploration* (1988), Wang pointed out, she thought the latest feminist works in the West were *The Second Sex* (1949) and *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).[55] We have already seen an obvious resonance of Friedan in her notion of "double role." It is also confirmed by Li herself that it was not until 1985 that she got hold of these two texts as gifts from friends overseas, whereas before that, she only had access to Marxist literature on women for example those of Engels, Alexandra Kollontai, and August Bebel.[56] The only way for her to follow development of global feminism in the 1980s was to travel to Beijing from Henan a few times a year to sit at Beijing Library reading and transcribing articles from *Signs* and *Women's Studies International Forums*, the only two international journals on women's studies available in China.[57] I do not know her English level, but it probably was not too proficient with all those formative years lost in the Cultural Revolution to learn. So, if her grasp of the developments in global feminism was more than two decades behind in the 1980s, it made sense that she did not see a problem in defining women as a unifying category. On a side note, I

[54] Honig, Emily, and Gail Hershatter. *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980's*. Stanford University Press, 1988. 51
[55] Wang. 1997. 136. note 19.
[56] "Creating a Public Space"
[57] Li, Xiaojiang. "Where are you from? [Ni Cong Nali Lai?]" in *Towards Women*. 12.

always felt in deep awe that Chinese scholars in the 1980s had so much dedication and diligence to their work when there were so little resources available. We will see this again in Chapter Three.

***"Market feminism" and statism***

Li's limited knowledge of global feminism, for Wang, led to her failure to criticize capitalism and its inherent patriarchy but instead to suggest that Chinese women needed to make good use of the opportunities that market economic reform had provided them with.[58] This point was later more elaborately presented in Barlow's diagnoses of a "market feminism" in Li's thesis.[59] For Barlow, Li's imperative for Chinese women to improve their *suzhi* and navigate better in their double role at home and at work, is no difference from promoting a model of liberated Chinese womanhood of "a repatriated, modern housewife" which was precisely in complete coherent with the state's economic reform project.[60] As I will discuss more substantively in Chapter Three, China's transition from a planned economy to a market economy brought about large-scale layoffs in urban areas, particularly in state-owned enterprises. As early as 1983, calls for women to withdraw from the workforce started to emerge from the society, which later grew into a prominent public debate attracting policy makers as well as intellectuals to argue that women should return to the home in the interest of economic

[58] Wang. 1997. 136, Note 21.
[59] Barlow. 2004. 268.
[60] Barlow, Tani. "Woman at the Close of the Maoist Era in the Polemics of Li Xiaojiang and Her Associates." *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*. Ed. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd. Duke University Press. 1997. 531.

efficiency, market freedom, or social stability. In this context, Li's teaching for women to be "gentle wives" and "competent mothers" seemed only to exacerbate the pressures that women were already facing.

No wonder Barlow would conclude that Li's work "appear as nothing less than ideological justification for a form of national womanhood that is handmaiden to economic boom and frontier capitalism."[61] For Barlow, Li's seemingly pro-market gestures is a shared inclination with China's humanist intellectuals coming to their prominence in the 1980s.[62] The humanist intellectuals, generally, held that the Cultural Revolution had interrupted China's modernization trajectory starting from the May Fourth Movement in 1919; so now that the Cultural Revolution ended, China should return to its per-Maoist years and carry on with its unfinished mission of modernization. One important conceptual reorientation to achieve this goal, for the humanist scholars, is to abandon the Maoist voluntarist mass subject which for is "dehumanizing" and "alienating," and hence a betrayal of Marxism. In its place, they sought to recover the Enlightenment subject, the self-reflexive, self-determining, and rational individual subject, that their May Fourth Movement predecessors used to champion. Such teleological understanding of history and modernization driven by rational, self-reliant individuals, Barlow observed, soon came to be welcomed by the Reformists in Beijing for the ideological justification it was able to provide for their new economic policies, including those that undermined women's opportunities in the labor market.

[61] Barlow. 1997. 536.
[62] Barlow. 2004. 270.

For Barlow, Li's thesis on women also betrayed Chinese elite intellectuals' inclination to commit their theoretical work to impact state policy formulation. Especially under the rapid social change and loosened state repression, Barlow suggested, Li like more other "well-positioned, party educated intellectuals" believed that they will govern the country eventually.[63] Barlow's criticism of statism is further supported by her observation that Li's woman theory is a "rewriting" of Li Zehou 李泽厚 (1930-2021), a male humanist scholar widely regarded as the prominent advocate the disseminator of the Enlightenment ideal of the autonomous subject in the 1980.[64] Little wonder that Barlow would make a genealogical connection between Li and her eugenic feminist predecessors of the May Fourth Era who justified attention to women's wellbeing on the survival and health of the Chinese nation.[65]

I do not argue with Barlow's point that Li's theory of women falls into somewhat disappointing nationalist argument and end up justifying neoliberal economic policies. Such critique, as I have showed, had solid support from Li's texts, even if one read her generally. Li may be indeed nationalistic, though as Barlow rightly points out, her historical horizon of "the Revolution" in the sense of the proletarian and Marxist traditions in China, as well as the Enlightenment discourse she and her fellow Chinese intellectuals adopted, are by their definition trans- or internationalist.[66] I would only

[63] Barlow. 1997. 509-10, 517. Xu Feng, a Canadian scholar, also cites fact that most intellectuals are employed in state-run research institutes and universities and indicated that Li's work is part of the 1980s Chinese intellectuals revive their historical roles of scholar-official developed in imperial China. See Xu, Feng, "Chinese Feminisms Encounter International Feminism: Identity, Power and Knowledge Production." *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 11:2 June 2009, 198.
[64] Barlow. 1997. 510.
[65] Barlow. 2004. 300.
[66] Barlow. 2004. 277.

raise three brief points on Barlow before I turn to develop an alternative reading that I would like to advance.

First, part of Barlow's evidence to associate Li to market feminism is her claim that Li's women's theory is a "rewriting" of Li Zehou's Marxist humanism. Barlow herself admitted, however, that her account of Li Zehou was from an English article by Liu Kang connecting Li Zehou's Marxist humanism and May Fourth Movement's Enlightenment legacy.[67] Li Zehou's work in Chinese are dense and difficult to follow, at least for me, especially his *Critique of the Critical Philosophy: A commentary on Kant* that Liu heavily drew on.[68] However, as I will show in Chapter Two, had Barlow read the Chinese original – even just its brief appendix – she would likely to reconsider her identification of Li with market feminism. It is fair to say that Li did rewrote Li Zehou's Marxist humanism, but such rewriting did not follow Liu's reading of Li Zehou where the Kantian subjectivity was unambiguously aligned to China's modernization project.

Second, as I will show in Chapter Three, Li was a firm defender of women's right to remain in the work force in the 1990s as public calls for women to return to the home started to gain support among some intellectuals. In her 1980s writings, she had also clearly stated that for the "already liberated" Chinese women, to return to the household

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[67] See Barlow. 1997, note 11, 14-5. 511-2. And Barlow. 2004, note. 37. 428. Liu Kang's article is "Subjectivity, Marxism and Cultural Theory in China." in *Politics, Ideology and Literary Discourse in China: Theoretical Interventions and Cultural Critique*, ed. Kang Liu and Xiaobo Tang. Durham: Duke University Press. 1993.

[68] Li Zehou's book *Critique of the Critical Philosophy (pipan zhexue de pipan*) was first published in 1979 by People's Press. Its English translation was published in 2018 by Springer Singapore entitled *A New Approach to Kant: A Confusion- Marxist's Viewpoint*.

was not an option.[69] So Barlow's reading of Li as urging Chinese women to cultivate themselves into modern housewives at least overlooked this obvious tension within Li's theory of woman which could otherwise have been generative, as I will show in the next chapter, to both our reading of Li and for our concern of feminism in contemporary China.

Third, as I will also show in later chapters, Li's central diagnosis of women's liberation in socialist China was that it used the new state authority to replace the old patriarchal authority; this, for Li, was the main reason that Chinese women did not develop a feminist consciousness which women in many other countries did via spontaneous, independent feminist movements. So, Barlow's criticism of statism, again, did not address an obvious critique of the state from Li herself. Also, on a side note – but I do find it worthwhile to point out – it may be fair to speculate some connections between a scholar's academic views with her institutional affiliation and education background; however, we should be careful when making such speculations and avoid sliding into social determinist arguments and pronouncing moral agency dead. We should be specifically carefully for a case like China where all school education and higher education are government-funded and -regulated/controlled so we do not make sweeping judgments on an entire population. It would not be unfair to say that Chinese people are mostly "party educated" until today because that is how they access affordable education. Especially when we are positioned in North Atlantic academia, "the center," we do not want to risk suggesting homogeneity among those on "the

[69] See *Women's Way Out*. 63-4

periphery" and reproducing a colonial legacy that we have been wholeheartedly criticizing for decades.

### 4. Structure of the rest of the dissertation

The following chapters analyze Li's work roughly chronologically, with some overlaps. Chapter Two treats Li's early writing in the 1980s that invited the most criticism as I discussed above. I submit that her critics were based on strong textual evidence and reasonable reading. There were occasional omissions and errors in these critiques, but I do not intend my arguments to be based on a small-minded competition of who have read the texts more thoroughly. Drawing on a body of texts that Li's critics did not pay much attention to, I aim to advance an alternative reading of Li's essentialism and market feminism from the lens of her notion of "the awakening of women's subjective consciousness," – her central advice for Chinese women in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. Tracing influences of Marx's theory of human essence and from Nietzsche's Dionysian – Apollonian duality on her work, I show that her theory of women, from its nascent formulation, was structured by a necessity *versus* freedom dialectic. Comparing her discussion of women's literature and that of Elaine Showalter, from whom she drew extensively, I argue that Li's account of subjectivation moved beyond Showalter's account of internalization and contained the conceptual resource for a theory of transformative agency embedded in social construction. This would require her to abandon her essentialist concept of sex – a step that she had refused to take – I admit; yet I argue that her formulation of subjectivation as a synthesis of the Self and the society remained useful for Chinese women in their navigation of a way

out of the impediments inherited from the Maoist era. This also suggests, I argue, her call for Chinese women's self-improvement and independence need not be associated with market feminism and statism, as her critics argued.

Chapter Three then takes Li's formulation of a women's subjective consciousness into a different historical moment. This Chapter focuses on Li's work in the 1990s in debates over whether women should return home as the state decided that tenured employment, which used to be a promise of socialism under planned economy, was no longer fitting for economic development as its new priority. Also, in the 1990s, the aftermath of June 4th, liberalism's discourse of rights ironically became handy to depoliticize gendered layoffs in state-owned enterprises reforms. Scholars in favor of women returning to the home argued that given that the Chinese Constitution had already written that men and women have equal rights in employment, any additional state-sponsored assistance to women at work would be either a violation of either freedom of exchange of the market or efficiency of economic growth. Via reading "women to return home" debates from both sides, I argue that Li distinguished herself from other feminist scholars in that she rose above unproductive theoretical impasses of whether gender equality should take priority over freedom of exchange or efficiency of the market. She encouraged Chinese women to have the mental lucidity that contestations over whether gender equality should give way to other social values would be an ongoing struggle for them; so more important than winning these debates was to focus on building and maintaining a living public space for Chinese women to actively participate in these debates with various voices and perspectives. For her, the

latter was political action more meaningful than winning more formal rights in the Chinese law – which could be overturned arbitrarily under authoritarianism – whereas women's subjective capacity built in these debates would be handed down generation to generation.

Chapter Four finally treats Li's later writing from the mid-1990s onwards as the Chinese state tightened its surveillance of her after her open criticism of its handling of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. I first present a reading of Li estranging herself from Chinese academia due to political oppression and from Western academia which she found unwelcoming, and retreating to a pursuit of Truth, the scholar's vocation which she maintained must be strictly separated from politics. I then suggest an alternative reading of her apparent self-exile, that is, despite her strict identification of academia with Truth, which is anti-political from Western political theory's perspective, she nevertheless characterized Truth as unattainable and permanently open for contestations so, again, like in the 1980s and 1990s, an open space for public discussion was her central concern; and in this sense, she was looking for politics in China's worsening climate for freedom of speech and civil society. The chapter ends with a "post-utopian criticism" that she formulated in her literary criticism work of *Wolf Totem*, a contemporary Chinese fiction which Li found an illuminating site to explore how freedom and dominance intertwine with each other: the protagonist sought freedom by volunteering to be a sent-down youth on the Inner Mongolian grassland, his pursuit of freedom via negative withdrawal from politics failed but freedom unexpectedly emerged through positive struggle, manifested both in his

imprisonment of a wolf-cub by violent slaughtering of its family, and in the wolf-cub's unbending resistance eventually leading to ending its own life. I then reformulate Li's opaque concept of "post-utopian criticism" as a reminder for today's Chinese people living in the ruins of China's socialist experiments to be cautious of politicized freedom turning into tyranny and violence, whereas at the same time not to give up their aspiration of freedom as a perpetual, ineradicable human potential.

# Chapter Two

## The Beginning of the Journey:

## The Dialectic of Self and Society in Li's 1980s Writings

### 1. Sex in *the 1844 Manuscripts*: connecting necessity and freedom

I would first like to draw attention to Li's intellectual root in Marxism, the most salient theoretical resource in her 1980s work. In this sense, Barlow was right in Li's affinity to the Chinese Marxist humanists, in that they both drew much from Marx's early writings especially those discussing human essence in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. The male Marxist humanists found the notion of alienation the most useful for their de-Maoization project: if the ill of capitalism lies eventually in it alienating human beings from their human essence – the traits that make them truly human, or their "species being" in Marx's language – then Maoism is also flawed. That is, it is a distortion of Marxism because it made people political zealots and ideologues which alienated them from creative activities in accordance with their free will and consciousness – genuine, unique human activities in Marx's view.[1]

Li used similar sources from Marx on human essence, but instead of the concept of alienation itself, she found useful Marx's larger account of human essence being simultaneously natural and social. After all, her aim was not as much to criticize

[1] See Wang, Zheng. 1997. 136.

Maoism per se but to defend women's studies as a legitimate discipline and women's liberation as relevant social issue. In her earlier works "Human Progress and Women's Liberation" and *Eve's Exploration*, Li used Marx's statement "everyone who knows anything of history knows that great social changes are impossible without feminine ferment. Socials progress can be measured exactly by the social position of the fair sex (the ugly ones included)" largely as an authoritative slogan.[2] By the time she wrote *Sex Gap*, however, she started to explore the theoretical implication of Marx's discussion of human essence on her thesis of women. She repeatedly came back to the following obscure quote from the *1844 Manuscripts*:

> "In the approach to *woman* as the spoil and handmaid of communal lust is expressed the infinite degradation in which man exists for himself, for the secret of this approach has its *unambiguous*, decisive, *plain* and undisguised expression in the relation of *man* to *woman* and in the manner in which the *direct* and *natural* procreative relationship is conceived. The direct, natural, and necessary relation of person to person is *the relation of man and woman*. In the *natural* relationship of the sexes man's relation to nature is immediately his relation to man, just as his relation to man is immediately his relation to nature – his own *natural* function.…
>
> From this relationship one can therefore judge man's whole level of development. It follows from the character of this relationship how much *man* as a species being, as *man*, has come to be himself and to comprehend himself; the relation of man to woman is *the most natural* relation of human being to human being. It therefore reveals the extent to which man's *natural* behavior has become *human*, or the extent to which the *human* essence in him has become a *natural* essence – the extent to which this *human nature* has become a *nature to him*."[3]

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[2] *Eve's Exploration*. 64.
[3] Marx, Karl (with Engles, Friedrich) *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and The Communist Manifesto*. Trans Martin Milligan. New York: Prometheus Books. "Private property and Communism". 101-2. Emphasis original. Li's quoted this passage in *Sex Gap* at 8-9, 51,56.

For Li, these discussion of Marx were helpful to her case that human beings are, in their essence, organic beings of "three defining characteristics: i) humans are relatively independent biological beings, ii) humans are sexed beings, and iii) humans are products of their social relations."[4] Chinese scholars were dismissing the relevance of women's studies, she argued, because they failed to recognize sex as a defining characteristic of human beings. But this is a crucial omission, because, as she understood what Marx, sex is the link between the biological and the social dimensions of human existence. She wrote:

> "The social expression human sex and sexuality have long been discussed primarily with the categories of marriage and family. This, in effect, had excluded the natural determinations of human beings from the inquiries of social sciences. *However, human sex and sexuality neither entirely belong nature, nor are they purely social phenomena.* Rather, they are at an intermediate position between nature and society, connecting and encompassing human existence in its natural and social dimensions …Sexual characteristics of humans are grounded in nature. [But] they impact the society whereas at the same time are transformed in the course of social progress of humans…as relatively autonomous biological individual beings, human beings [nevertheless] always exist within the society as persons with particular sexed identities."[5]

Li's argument based on Marx was not particularly well executed, especially for her lack of contextualization of Marx's rather obscure words. She is, however, on the right direction citing Marx's discussion of human essence with reference to human race's

[4] *Sex Gap*. 51.
[5] *Sex Gap*. 53. Emphasis mine.

relation to nature. The *1844 Manuscripts* quote she used was part of Marx's discussion of communism. Simply to replace private ownership of property by universal ownership of property, like those in Fourier and Saint-Simon social experiments, Marx argued, would not solve capitalism's problem of alienated labor. As long as we work solely for the sake of ownership, Marx reasoned, work remains merely a means of physical survival, and we are in that sense still alienated from our human essence and differ little from animals. Humans are essentially different from animals because we relate to nature differently, Marx argued. Animals, because they are "immediately identical to their life-activity" to work for their physical survival, are themselves are nature. We human beings, though we also draw means of life from nature, so nature is our "organic body," we are ourselves not nature; instead, we express and realize our consciousness via our life-activity to change nature, so nature became part of our human-made world, a "humanized" nature, in which we contemplate ourselves.[6]

It is under such definition of human essence in terms of their relation to nature that Marx argued that how human beings treat women reveals their level of development *as human beings*. The procreative capacity of the female bodies, in Li's understanding of Marx, is the point where the biological (animal) and the social (human) aspects of human beings intersect.[7] If a society treats women merely as the mother lode to procreate future generations, then this society differ little from a flock of sheep; that is, this society are still alienated from their human essence. It is only, Marx wrote, when

[6] *Manuscripts of 1844*. 76-7.
[7] *Sex Gap*. 51

woman, "as a person [rather than an object in nature] become for [the man] a need – to the extent of which he in his individual existence is at the same time a social being" that his human essence comes to be present his existence being. This, as Li continued to cite Marx, is what a true communism –as opposed to a crude communism – would be able to realize. That is, "this communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution of… the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity."[8]

So, from the beginning of Li's theoretical reflection on the woman question, she framed women's issue in terms of a puzzle of necessity *versus* freedom inspired by the young Marx as a fundamental human condition. If we are to be true heirs of Marx – as the Chinese intellectuals of her time often invoked his authority to legitimize their arguments – then we must take sex seriously, because without properly addressing it we would remain trapped in estrangement from our human essence; then on what ground can we argue that our ultimate goal as a socialist country is to achieve communism? So, from a Marxist point of view, quite to the opposite to some of the make scholars who thought that a differentiation between men and women is only applicable to restrooms, sex and sexuality, which mediate between the biological and social dimensions of human existence, are not only relevant, but quintessential perspectives to consider for humanities and social sciences research.

[8] *Manuscripts* of 1844. 102-3. Li's citation at *Sex Gap*, 51-2.

Maybe Li's critics were carried away too soon from her focus on what women, rather than the society, should do to find a way-out from women's current predicaments in China's economic reform. Li's central advice to Chinese women was to awake their "women's subjective consciousness." It is a concept that she never gave an unequivocal definition. Given her otherwise explicit language preaching self-betterment of women in both their roles, it is reasonably for critics to quickly conclude that her feminism simply touted women to cultivate themselves into a womanhood compatible to capitalism – entrepreneurial and self-reliant, but at the same time good wives and mothers.

However, as I will now turn to show, instead of a concept of self-betterment into capitalist subjects, Li characterized her "awakening of women's subjective consciousness" as a navigation between biological and social constraints and inherent human desire for and capacity of agency, consistent with her earlier original formulation of the problem of sex as a tension between of necessity *versus* human emancipation. Probably to Li's own surprise, I will also show throughout this dissertation, this classic theoretical puzzle in political theory would continue to lurk in the background of her work shaping her theoretical moves in both feminism and in Chinese politics. This, for me, is the most important thread characterizing her thinking; and it is the one that continued to hold its value for feminism in China even when the issues Li addressed became oblivious in China's rapid social changes. For this purpose, I will now turn to Li's aesthetic theory that had rarely been considered in scholarly discussion of her.

## 2. Aesthetic pleasure in Zhu Guangqian: freedom emerged within necessity.

Of all six book-length works of Li in the 1980s, Barlow admitted that her analysis of Li did not address issues raised in *Inquiry into Women's Aesthetic Consciousness*.[9] It was indeed a peculiar work in comparison to the other five: it is did not show explicit intellectual lineage to Marxism, nor did it give clear positions regarding women's liberation or women's studies. From its surface, it is a series of inquiries in aesthetics and from perspectives of women's literature and has nothing to do with politics. I would argue, however, that *Aesthetics* is an important work to understand Li. From the perspective of Li's intellectual development, she did her graduate degree in West European literature and wrote a dissertation on *Wuthering Heights*. It was literary theories, rather than feminist theories nor Marxist theories that had first structured her thinking as she grew into a scholar and later a scholar of women's studies.[10] More important, on a more substantive level, *Aesthetics* was Li's most systematic formulation of women's subjective consciousness as a puzzle of social construction *versus* human agency.

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[9] Barlow. 1997. 540. Note.31. Also, Barlow. 2004. 269. Note. 34

[10] As Li recounted later, her plan was to continue her research in women's aesthetics because of her interest in philosophy, history, and literature after her 1983 debut essay which she thought would have ended the debates over the relevance of women's liberation. It only got delayed and took seven years to finish in a rush because, as we have already seen, such debate continued into the 1990s. See "Creating a Public Space." 145-50 and *Femin?ism*. 248.

It will take us some patience to see this, however. Li went to graduate school in 1979 at the age of 28; before that she only had eight years of school education due to interruptions of the Cultural Revolution.[11] When she was writing *Aesthetics*, she was young in her academic career in a Chinese academia recently standing back on its feet from a more than a decade long of self-destruction. It was a preliminary work both in its arguments and in its style, much like how she engaged Marx as we have just seen. It is, indeed, taxing on the reader's patience. No wonder that Barlow ignored this work and Gilmartin said she simply could not understand it.[12]

Maybe an easier entry point for us is to remember, again, that one of Li's central concerns in the 1980s was to argue that gender/sex is a legitimate analytical category like class. The book set out to pursue this argument at the beginning establishing that men and women experience differently in aesthetic activities. Li wrote:

> "We liked to refer to aesthetic activities as 'disinterested (*wuxie* 无邪)' and 'contemplative (*jingguan* 静观),' as if they are purely personal appreciations of beauty; yet in fact they have always already been permeated by aesthetic judgments that are far from purely personal but ladened with…a collective and relatively stable aesthetic consciousness [of a particular community] that diminishes differences in individual tastes… hence causing similar results in aesthetic contemplations in men and women. If we are to look beyond such apparent similarities so as to identify the differences in aesthetic experiences of men and women, we must probe into the deeper structure that have shaped aesthetics as a consciousness."[13]

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[11] See *Towards Woman*. 4
[12] *Femin?ism*. 248.
[13] Li, Xiaojiang. *Nüxing Shenmei Yishi Tanwei*. [*Inquiry into Women's Aesthetic Consciousness*]. Zhengzhou: Henan People's Press. 1989. 5.

Such "deeper structure," as she characterized it, is a struggle between two human needs: to survive we need to subject ourselves to rules of nature and of society, but that means to live a human life we inevitably need to actively resist these rules because we transcend our animal need for physical survival and pursue freedom and meaning. She cited the notion of beauty as Form – unchanging, uniform, and universal – in Plato's *Symposium*, and a similar understanding of beauty in *Mencius* as an absolute idea independent of opinions of particular persons; both moves to conceptualize beauty as universal rather than particular, she then analyzed, took place around the same historical period at the "mature period of slave societies" when laws and institutions gradually replaced kinship as society's main regulative mechanism. From this time onwards, she wrote, the "relatively autonomous, individual person" became a "social person," and "a conflict between the individual and the society came to be an enduring condition of human existence for each of us." Against this background, human aesthetic activities became "the most direct, profound, and comprehensive expression of the essence of human beings," which she defined as "a commitment to both necessity for survival (*shengcun zhi biran* 生存之必然) and freedom of life (*shengming zhi ziyou* 生命之自由)." The former was a "subjugation to the principle of physical survival," whereas the latter "a pursuits of life pleasure (*shengming kuaigan* 生命快感)."[14]

These arguments sound rather compressed. But like Barlow observed in how Li deployed Li Zehou, Li in her early writings did not always make proper citations for

[14] *Aesthetic*. 15-7.

notions she invoked from other theorists. In this case, she left out a clear reference to Zhu Guangqian 朱光潜 (1897-1986), an older generation Chinese scholar of aesthetics and art theories: without taking the notions of "*Wuxie* (disinterested)," "*jingguan* (contemplative)," and "*shengming kuaigan* (life pleasure)" back into their contexts in Zhu's aesthetic theories, Li made it hard for us – and to herself – to see her inquiry in women's questions in China coherent with a collective intellectual endeavor beyond the Chinese context on the enduring postmodern puzzle of social construction *versus* human agency.[15] If she had explored this line of thinking, she probably also would have reconsidered her essentialist arguments about sex and gender.

Now we need to make a brief detour to Zhu's aesthetic thought. Zhu already made his fame in China in the 1930s when studying his doctorate at University of Strasburg in France writing for Chinese audience to compensate for his living expenses. His success was partly due to the rigorous education in classical Chinese literature and philosophy that his father took great care to transmit to him which he was able to incorporate with ease and elegance to his Western education in developing his own aesthetic theory. *Wuxie* and *jingguan* – which Li used with quotation marks but without references – were key concepts Zhu evoked from Chinese classics in his *Psychology of Art and Literature* first published in 1936 in Republic of China.

As Zhu himself said, his literary critical studies started from Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce whose work then led him to other Western thinkers including Kant,

[15] Li also recounted that her original intention for her graduate studies was to study aesthetics with Zhu but only turned to literature because Zhu no longer accepted graduate students. So, it's safe to assume that she was somewhat familiar with Zhu's work. See Zhang, Yue. 2024.

Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche.[16] *Jingguan*, "to observe calmly and quietly," is part of Zhu's retelling of Kant's account of the aesthetic experience as an "disinterested contemplation" independent of practical necessities and its later expression in Croce's theory of art as "the intuition of pure form," a mental activity prior to, and independent of logical and conceptual thinking.[17] *Jingguan*, originally from Song Dynasty philosopher Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032-1085)'s poem, for Zhu, would portray this notion of appreciating the beauty of object itself for its own sake to his Chinese audience. The poem reads: "all [in nature] would be content when I look at them with a calm spirit; the joy of the four seasons will then be like that of me."[18] A moment of mental concentration on the object itself, an intuition not mediated by conceptualization, Zhu then wrote, is when an aesthetic experience is the most rewarding.[19]

*Wuxie*, "[thought] without distortions or perversions," came up in Zhu's criticism of traditions both in China and the West to evaluate art in terms their moral impact.[20] These positions were misguided, Zhu argued, if we look at Confucius' praise of *the*

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[16] For Italian Sinologist Mario Sabattini, Zhu's "aesthetic experience (*meigan jingyan*)" is not entirely the same as Croce's "intuition of form" because of some influence Zhu took form Taoism, but we don't need to go into that here. Sbattini's work on Zhu I consulted include "'Crocianism' in Chu Kuang-Ch'ien's Wen-i Hsin-Li-Hsüeh." *East and West*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1970, pp. 179–98. "Introduction: Zhu Guangqian and Croce." in *Zhu Guangqian and Benedetto Croce on Aesthetic Though: with a translation of Wenyi Xinli Xue (The Psychology of art and Literature)*. Edited by Elisa Levi Sabittini. London and Boston: BRILL. 1-17, 2021

[17] Zhu, Guangqian. *Beiju Xinlixue*. [*Psychology of tragedy*]. Chung Hwa Book Co. (*Zhonghua Shuju*) 2021. 238

[18] Zhu, Guangqian. *Wenyi Xinli Xue*. [*Psychology of Literature and Arts*]. Shanghai: Kaiming bookstore. 1936. 3. Sabittini 2021. 127

[19] *Psychology*. chapter one.

[20] For example, Zhu lamented, Plato's banishment of the poets from his ideal city, was the first case in the West to subject art under state control. Similarly, "regarding literature as the vehicle of the Way (*wenyi zaidao* 文以载道)" coined by Han Yu 韩愈 (768-824) of Tang Dynasty had taken many Chinese writers' work to be so superficial and vulgar that "passers-by would cover their noses." See *Psychology*, 117, 100-1. Sabattini. 2021. 120

*Book of Poetry*. "The three hundred poems from *Poetry*," Confucius said, "could be summed up in a single phrase: 'They never swerve from the path (*wuxie*).'" Poems in *Poetry* range from folksongs about love, courtship, homesickness, to worship songs to gods and ancestors for good harvest, and to ritual and sacrificial songs praising the rulers, most of which had little to do with moral teachings. Confucius, however, found the poets praiseworthy because they always expressed their emotions without excessiveness and pretentiousness.[21] Whether an art have negative moral impact, Zhu then suggested, depends not on the art itself but on the disposition of the person creating or appreciating the art; when a person's heart is not honest and sincere, he wrote, he can be temped by anything.[22]

*Wuxie*, in this sense, resembles the Kant-Crocian view on the autonomy of art independent of moral teachings, yet also criticizes it for its radical separation of aesthetics from other elements in human cognitive activities. "'Aesthetic man'," Zhu wrote, "is, in fact, at one and the same time, also 'scientific man' and 'moral man.'"[23] In other words, Zhu found himself aligning with the Germen Romanticism tradition that saw the highest human fulfillment in their expressive activities from a unity of human life; he rejected, on the other hand, the mainstream Enlightenment analytic science that saw human beings as mechanic combination of different elements, for example, those of mind and body, or of reason and feeling.[24] "Art, like language," he

[21] Confucius. *Analects*. Trans. Chin, Annping. New York: Penguin. 2014. Book 2. 12-3.
[22] *Psychology*. 116-7. Sabattini. 2021. 134-5
[23] *Psychology*. Sabattini. 2021. 138
[24] I learned this discussion from Taylor, *Charles. Hegel and Modern Society*. Cambridge University Press. 2015/1979. 1-6

wrote, "is a tool of communication. Language communicates thoughts, art communicates emotions."[25] The moral impact of art, Zhu then suggested, because it's where human beings practice freedom of emotion which, just like freedom of thought, "must not be stifled, and neither could be." The power of emotion in art is even stronger in its influence on human beings than the power of intellect, for unlike practical activities that are "interested" and hence limited by the demands of the ambience, artistic activities are "disinterested." That is, we pursue art not because of any demands from our environments, but for our own satisfactions. "When a man is 'interested,'" Zhu wrote, "he is a slave to environmental demands; when he is "disinterested", he is master of his soul."[26]

We can see this view of art as an expression and realization of human agency take root in Zhu's 1933 doctoral dissertation entitled *Psychology of Tragedy: A Critical Study of Various Theories of Tragic Pleasure*.[27] It is here that Li's notion of ***kuaigan*** (pleasure) finds its intellectual origin. The dissertation asks the question: why do people enjoy the dramatic art of Tragedy? For Zhu, the answer lies in an appropriate "physical distance" between the audience and the art made possible by certain dispositions in the audience and the characteristics in the dramatic art itself.[28] One example Zhu used in his dissertation was Nietzsche's analysis of the Greek Tragedy in terms of a struggle

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[25] *Psychology*, 109
[26] *Psychology*, 117, 129. Sabattini. 2021. 135, 145-6
[27] Translation in Chinese by Zhang Longxi (张隆溪) was first published by People's Literature Press (*Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe*) in China in 1983, the same time period when Li was writing *Aesthetics*. I read both the English version and the Chinese version from a reprint by Chung Hwa Book Co. (*Zhonghua Shuju*) in 2021. All page numbers I cite here are from this English version in this edition.
[28] Zhu referred to an English Psychologist Edward Bullough for this "Theory of Physical Distance." See *Psychology of tragedy*. 296-8.

between the Dionysian and the Apollonian spirit in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). The Dionysian spirit, the primordial drunkenness nature of humans, is the source of life and vitality but also chaos and suffering. The Apollonian spirit, the inclination to rational knowledge, brings back order to the Dionysian excess and formless flux but is an unattainable dream world. The tragic heroes and lyrical poetry of Greek Tragedy, for Nietzsche, steeped the necessity of Dionysian suffering in the Apollonian light, bringing consolation to the ancient Greeks. In this sense, Zhu wrote, tragic pleasure is an aesthetic experience where the painful reality is put at a distance by the format of the art. The mystical Olympian Gods, the legends from antiquity, the chorus reminding the audience that they are spectators, etc., Zhu suggested, create an objectification of irreconcilable subjective emotions of humans – the Dionysian drive for life but also destruction and the unattainable Apollonian dream for order. The painful world, as such, is put at a contemplative distance from the audience, and hence came to be tolerable in an aesthetic interpretation. The Greeks also were rescued from a negation of will that they may have longed for and were able to keep alive their vigorous, instinctual Dionysian energy that Nietzsche saw as vital to human life and excellence.[29]

In a later reflection in 1982, Zhu wrote that after rereading his *Psychology of Tragedy*, he realized that though he had been taken by his Chinese readers as a disciple of Croce, what had rooted in his heart was the Dionysian spirit and the Apollonian spirit described in *The Birth of Tragedy*.[30] Some argued Nietzsche faded out in Zhu's work after his

[29] *Psychology of tragedy*. 438-449.
[30] See Sabattini, Mario. *Zhu Guangqian's Life and Philosophy: An Introduction*. Edited by Elisa Levi Sabittini. London and Boston: BRILL. 2021. 33.

dissertation because he did not want to propagate pessimism in China especially in face of The War of Resistance against Japan (1931-1945). But I would agree with Mario Sabattini that this is difficult to believe given that Zhu read Nietzsche's theory of Tragedy as not merely a consolation but also reservoir of vitality in the face of painful realities.[31] Perhaps it was precisely when China was faced with military defeat and humiliation that Nietzsche's teaching came to be useful: freedom does not require the destruction or transcendence of life, even when we are trampled and enslaved by the Japanese military might; rather, the source of freedom is always already within life itself, and ready to emerge even in enduring suffering.

Now we are ready to overcome the hurdles in Li's dense and often elliptical writing. When she wrote that "we like to refer to aesthetic activities as '*wuxie*' and '*Jingguan*' as if they are purely personal appreciations of beauty…but they are always already shaped by the collective consciousness of the community one is embedded," she was arguing particularly with the Kant-Crocian side of Zhu that emphasized the aesthetics' autonomy from conceptual thinking. Our aesthetic experience is never disinterested or purely intuitive, Li wanted to argue, because our aesthetic consciousness is historically and socially constructed; men and women, for example, experience beauty differently because of they are differently constructed in history. However, when Li characterized how one's aesthetic consciousness is constructed by her social circumstances, she took the Nietzsche side of Zhu and suggested that aesthetic activity can be a liberating experience where a pleasure could emerge from life's painful realities. Li differentiated

[31] *Zhu Guangqian's Life and Philosophy: An Introduction*. 34. Note. 23.

herself from Zhu, however, in that she translated Nietzsche's conflicting psychological impulses into a tension between social and natural necessities and human agency:

> "The conflict between the individual and society as it is experienced within each person's life is an enduring condition of human existence…In order to survive, human beings must conform their actions to objective (the True) and social (the Good) principles. Yet, in order to experience the joy of being alive, they never relinquish their pursuit of freedom. The pleasure (*kuaigan*) of freedom is a spiritual experience transcending objective reality and social constraints imposed on life itself; it is an experience that becomes a concrete aesthetic experience via various modes [of art]. Hence, the essence of beauty is revealed in the essence of human life, expressing the [dual] inherent needs of human beings as subjects: survival and freedom. "[32]

Women, however, Li then argued, had long been deprived of the opportunity to experience aesthetic pleasure as human beings; Women had always been treated as "beauty" – the object of aesthetic experiences where men found freedom – but it was not until recent history that they came to be subjects capable of aesthetic experience themselves.[33] The rest of the book therefore set out to explore how women sought to reclaim this subjectivity through literary writing. As I will now turn to show, Li would then bring the necessity *versus* freedom to her formulation of an "awakening of women's subjective consciousness" as the central advice she gave to Chinese women. Reading her advice from this perspective will allow us to move beyond the familiar criticism that associates her work with market feminism and statism and pave the way

[32] *Aesthetic*. 17.
[33] *Aesthetic*. 39, 53-4.

to a more productive reading of her work in light of the challenges facing Chinese feminism today.

### 3. Beyond internalizing patriarchy: Li's self-contemplation

But first we need to make a detour again to another scholar whose work Li also owned a substantial debt that her critics did not pay enough attention. It may not surprise the reader that Li's discussion of women's literature drew heavily on American feminist literary critic Elaine Showalter (1941-). Dedicating her works on a women's literature with its own tradition and identity, Showalter belongs to a generation before feminism turned to challenge "women" as a unifying identity defined by a homogeneous experience. Unlike that of Zhu, Showalter's influence is more than obvious in *Aesthetic.* Li cited Showalter's major theoretical framework;[34] she praised her devotion to "rebuild a women's culture" amid a still misogynist academia via both her scholarly work and activism.[35] Showalter's influence on Li is also evident in the former's tendency to interpret literary texts through the lens of women's bodily experiences.[36]

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[34] Showalter argues that British women writers from the Brontë sisters to Virginia Woolf went through three major phases: first, the *feminine* phase where an internalization of male-centric standards and stereotypes that morphed into a tacit self-hatred in female writers' works; second, the *feminist* phase where a more assertive and organized confrontation with the male society in the Suffrage movement had led to a self-withdrawal from the realism into oversimplified glorification of female values or into sexual separatism of Amazon utopias; and third, a *female* phase a self-discovery of a woman's identity regretfully turned in a self-retreat to the private space and a self-annulment of the female narrative. See Showalter, Elaine. *A literature of Their Own: British Women and Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Expanded edition. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1999/1977. 13. Li cited this at *Aesthetic*. 112.

[35] *Aesthetic*. 246

[36] For example, the imagery of the red room in *Jane Eyre*, for Showalter, symbolizes the female body; she also read Bertha Mason's monthly attack as allusion to the menstrual cycle. Another example is when she linked Virginia Woolf's declining mental health to her not being able to give birth and entering menopause. See *A literature of Their Own*. 114-6, 120, 267.

One may simply see these as additional evidence for Li's essentialism and hence obsolescence in feminism's development.

Showalter's influence on Li, however, comes on a more substantial level, on an account of women writers' subject formation emerging from a tension between their desire for a creative Self in their vocation as writers and their consciousness of their status as women under a patriarchal society. For Showalter, despite their extraordinary achievements, the British women writers she analyzed never realized their full potential because they never resolved such a tension; rather, they had stuck in it, which had only led to death, literally or figuratively, of the female characters they created and the women writers themselves.

Such conflict between the Self and the society most directly reveals in women writers' usage of male pseudonyms – George Eliot, for example – but more compellingly in their works.[37] Take *Jane Eyre* (1847) as an example that is not exclusively well-known to literature scholars. For Jane to fully grow into her central consciousness, Showalter analyzed, Charlotte Brontë found it necessary to destroy the stereotypical Victorian feminine spirit of piety, self-denial, and obedience by the death of Jane's beloved friend Helen Burns at charity school. Brontë also purged the passionate, sexual, and angry side of Jane by putting to death Bertha Mason, the mad woman locked in the attic, before Jane could marry Rochester who nevertheless lost his hand and his sight and became helpless. They became each other's equal, Showalter added, not by allowing

[37] *A literature of Their Own*. 21.

each other mutual growth, but by having part of both of their selves destroyed.[38] The possibility that Jane and Bertha could run off together and leave Rochester, Showalter wrote, was yet to materialize until later generations of women writers like Doris Lessing.[39]

Another example where the woman writer opted for self-repression and self-limitation rather than self-growth is Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1928). For Showalter, Woolf's insistence that a woman must have a room of her own to write novels and that her mind must be androgynous is not as liberatory as it appears to be.[40] The private room does protect the female writer from the daily chores expected of her as woman and from the society's hostility towards her profession as writer. Yet, it is also a symbol of psychic withdrawal from her grievance over gender injustice, and an escape from her connection and responsibility to her fellow human beings.[41] Similarly, as Woolf preached an androgynous mind to protect the woman's integrity as a writer from her anger, fear, and bitterness associated to the oppression she may have experienced as a woman, she also performed – as Showalter vividly put – a psychological equivalent of lobotomy on the woman writer, denying rather than addressing her feelings.[42] The cautionary tale of the mad woman in the attic was still whispering in the background that she must die so the woman writer can live.

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[38] *A literature of Their Own*. 21, 118, 122, 124.
[39] *A literature of Their Own*. 224.
[40] Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. 1928/2004. Penguin Books. 61, 112-4, 120. *A literature of Their Own*. 284-5.
[41] *A literature of Their Own*. 286.
[42] *A literature of Their Own*. 285, 287.

Probably the most literal case is Showalter's comment on American novelist Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* (1899). The protagonist Edna Pontellier thinks "it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life;" but when her lover abandons her, she drowns herself. When the woman is "awakened to an unbearable reality," Showalter wrote, "Even death is preferable to the pain of growth."[43] It looks like that these women writer's works, as an aesthetic experience, though inspired by an inherent human thriving for pleasure (*kuaigan*), did not come to be as life-affirming as Tragedy to the Greeks but turned out to be fatally destructive.

Li's *Aesthetic* roughly follows Showalter's formulation of a female consciousness developed from a struggle between the Self's aspiration for individuality and inevitable social constraints. Her choices of cases of literature largely overlapped with those discussed in *A Literature of Their Own*, though she added in Chinese women writer ranging from those of antiquity, the May Fourth period (c.1915-1927), and her contemporaries. [44] She probably took inspiration from *The Awakening* when formulating her notion of "an awakening (*juëxing* 觉醒) of women's subjective consciousness," given that the novel title was translated as *juëxing* despite other options available. She also shared Showalter's analysis that once Edna realized the fact her individuality could find no place in the roles of a wife and a mother that the society

[43] *A literature of Their Own*. 131.
[44] Euro-American writers include Jane Austen, George Eliot, George Sand, the Brontë sisters, Katherine Mansfield, and Virginia Woolf, and etc. Chinese writers include Li Qingzhao (李清照), Ding Ling (丁玲), Zhang Jie (张洁), Tie Ning (铁凝), Liu Suola (刘索拉), Zhang Xinxin (张辛欣), Zhang Manling (张曼菱) and others.

expected of her, she chose death as an ultimate retreat to the Self rather than to externalize her drive for self-fulfillment in making meaningful connections in the real society. Such resemblance is apparent in her treatment of other Western women writers as well.

However, Li did not intend a mere rewriting of Showalter or just sprinkling a few Chinese writers in it at best. Her ambition to add philosophical depth to her literary criticism is obvious, though her execution was not always optimal. But let us again allow her some patience not only because she wrote this work a relatively young age, but more importantly for the sake of our commitment for a reparative reading from the beginning. Take her analysis of Edna's choice of death, for example. She wrote:

> "If the call [for self-discovery of Edna] cannot find voice, it will never hear an echo – the initial desire is smothered; yet if it is voiced, it would lose its authenticity, because now it inevitably carries the voice of another person. The spiritual world can be as vast and infinite as the ocean, the sky, or even the universe; but it can also be so narrow that it cannot even hold space for anyone, including the Self. Hence, Edna chose death, scoffing at women's efforts to find their true selves with an eternal silence"[45]

This comment is rudimentary and opaque, but her ambition to give Showalter's Self *versus* society tension an additional layer is clear. For Showalter, Edna's yearning for emotional independence and sexual autonomy beyond marriage is simply at odds with social norms and hence led to her final retreat from reality. Yet for Li, such yearning is shaped by how it lands with the society but is not necessarily bound to be defeated. A

[45] *Aesthetic*. 86-7.

woman's desire for individuality beyond her assigned gender roles, as Li suggested above, once voiced to the world, immediately lost its autonomy and is subject to how it resonates with others in the society. But without making connections with the external world and to other human beings, such desire would never make an impact, not even to the woman herself. In this sense, Edna's pursuit of independence eventually became deadly not only because the society would not tolerate it, but because she could not tolerate that the "true" self that she wanted to pursue would inevitably lose its purity once it left her spiritual world. After all, she chose death not because the society wanted to persecute her infidelity, but because her lover – in whom she invested her pursuit of her "true" self – abandoned her.

That a woman's confrontation with patriarchal gender norms is not simply an antagonistic conflict but rather a generative process of subject formation became more salient in Li's later engaging with Hegel and her formulation of a "dilemma of the subject (*zhuti liangnan* 主体两难)" unique to women.[46] Her citations of Hegel were from Zhu's translation of *Lectures on Aesthetics Volume I* available since 1958; but the Hegelian idea she deployed is consistent with Hegel's notion that one becomes a subject only via recognition another person of in *Phenomenology*. In Hegel's theory, Li wrote, aesthetics is liberating to both its subject and its object: one becomes self-conscious via contemplating on an object; and because an aesthetic contemplation is an appreciation of the object itself, the object also achieved its independence in the

[46] *Aesthetic*. 127.

sense that it is no longer a mere means for a subject's use or consumption.[47] However, Li then argued, this posed a dilemma for women because their aesthetic activities happen in a world already made by men where women are seen as "beauty" but never those who appreciate and create beauty. So unlike men who come to their self-consciousness by objectifying aesthetic objects, women included, women's self-consciousness must first start from a transition from "being contemplated" to "contemplating."[48]

For most women writers, Li observed, this transition starts from a self-contemplation (*ziwo guanzhao* 自我观照), an objectification of the Self.[49] To use a Foucauldian language that only became popular later, both Li and Showalter were suggesting that when women enter the profession of writing, they also enter a discursive regime where women are subject to the male gaze; so, very likely they will put themselves under the male gaze too in their creative work. For Showalter, women writers internalized a patriarchal discourse and hence developed a deprecation of and a withdrawal from emotionality (vis-à-vis rationality) that was conventionally associated to femaleness. Li's Hegelian twist, however, would enable to her to transform Showalter's relatively passive notion of internalization into an active process of subjectivation. I do not think Li had fully developed the reading I am to give, but it is a reasonable reparative work filling in the gap in her arguments based on the materials she left us.

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[47] I cannot claim that I had grasped Hegel's arguments that Li cited from *Lectures on Aesthetics*, so my discussion here only represents the best I can speculate about Hegel from Li's characterization of him. Li's discussions of Hegel are at *Aesthetic*, 128-30.
[48] *Aesthetic*. 135.
[49] *Aesthetic*. 135. *Guanzhao* is how Zhu translated "contemplation."

Women's self-contemplation, Li could be suggesting, is itself a site of a lord-bonman dialectic. [50] That is, the woman struggles with herself for recognition, seeking dominance and superiority over the Self that she sees via the lens she inherited from a male-centric world. If she entirely adopts the patriarchal culture to look at herself, then she does achieve the status of the lord – this is how self-deprecation comes into being in Showalter's description. "I want to be better than a woman, so I want to be more rational, whereas the Self I see now is impeded by emotions." However, as Hegel wrote, the lord's dominance comes with a price, that is, the lord's independence sustains only on the bondsman's subordination. So, in this case, the woman's subjectivity depends on her permanently degrading (enslaving) the aspects of herself that the society stigmatizes on the basis of her gender. The mad woman needs to be permanently locked up in the attic or put to a slow death in a room of her own.

But as we all know, the mad woman eventually came out, burned the house down and annihilated herself. Permanently suppressing the aspect of the Self that the society would not tolerate is not the way to achieve subjectivity, or liberation. Li knew this very well due to her own experience of suppressing her femininity under Maoism. So, when she describes how a woman could avoid a denial or degradation of their social construction as women in her self-contemplation and come to "an awakening of her subjective consciousness", we almost hear an echo of Judith Butler's gender performativity. For Li, women's "lack of autonomy, (*fei zilüxing* 非自律性)" in

[50] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. B. IV. A.

aesthetic, i.e., their vulnerability to patriarchal culture's influence, can be a strength. She wrote:

> "[When the woman contemplates on herself], "she slowly ruminates and digests historical patriarchal culture and physiological sexual differences [that had shaped her], and then she creates. In aesthetic activities, indeed more broadly in social activities as well, we rarely see that the feminist consciousness directly transforms or subverts patriarchal traditions. More often, the feminist consciousness enters the existing order through 'participation (*canyu* 参与)' or 'joining in (*canjia* 参加),' positioning itself at the threshold between 'construction (*jianshe* 建设)' and 'reconstruction (*chongjian* 重建).'…From the standpoint of the individual woman, every act of 'participation' is an act of 'transformation (*gaizao* 改造).' Through lived, embodied practice (*shenti lixing* 身体力行), women reshape themselves; and in reconstructing their self-image, women also subvert (*dianfu* 颠覆) women's conventional aesthetic consciousness and men's aesthetic attitudes towards women. In this sense, women's collective participation in society becomes a subversive form itself: by appropriating power of the 'father,' they subvert the myth of feminine beauty in patriarchal culture."[51]

I provided the original words Li used to show that my translation is honest and that I did not force the Butler parallel by using her language in my translation; these were the language Li used herself. Such parallel should not be surprising, however, given the influence of Marxist and Hegelian dialectics on her thinking. For Butler, the language of internalization makes it impossible for us to envision that we do have transformative agency despite the social and discursive conditions that we are inevitably subjected to. Gender norm, she argues, would not be manufactured nor sustained without us repeatedly and actively performing the connections that heteronormative and

[51] *Aesthetic*. 144.

patriarchal gender norms stipulate between bodily acts and gestures and the gender identities they are supposed to express.[52] We are, indeed, hailed into being by the law, but it is also the scene of interpellation that had enabled us to make a different kind of turn to the law, or to turn to a different law.[53] In other words, we do not always *internalize* the law's punishment so it becomes part of our essence; we *perform* the law, and by so doing, there is always room that we can transform the law.

In this view, a woman's self-contemplation could result in a self-hatred through the internalization of patriarchal culture; it could also, however, initiate a transformation of that culture through the formation of women's subjective consciousness. It could thus suggest that women's path to emancipation need not be as agonizing as how Showalter implied. Woolf's androgyny, i.e., the ideal model of an artist who is unimpeded by emotional injuries inflicted by gender injustice, Showalter cautioned, "comes from timidity rather than strength" and discourages feminist engagement.[54] This, for her, is no way to live, as "[t]he ultimate room of one's own is the grave."[55] Androgyny, she then wrote, could be imagined in a different approach. That is, rather than "escaping from the confrontation with femaleness or maleness," it could mean "a total immersion in the individual experience with all its restrictions of sex and anger and fear and chaos…daring to face and express what is unique, even if unpleasant, or

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[52] Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge. 1990/1999, 183-6.
[53] Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1997. 130.
[54] *A literature of Their Own*. 288-90. After Woolf established that "[i]t is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly," she immediately proposed a separation of politics and art: "[i]t is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman." See *A Room of One's Own*. 120.
[55] *A literature of Their Own*. 297.

taboo, or destructive, in one's own experience." In this way, she wrote, the women artist comes to gain "an understanding of what it means to be man" as she achieves "a thorough understanding of what it means to be a woman."[56]

Li's advice for women is also one about integrating the Self with the society. The awakening of women's subjective consciousness, she wrote, is an exploration of the Self. "The Self, in its essence…is an awareness of one's own existence," she wrote, "yet, to be aware of one's existence does not mean that one has discovered the self, [because] human existence is never purely self-contained, but the ensembles of its biological existence, social existence, the individual will. [To discover] "the Self" then, is a grasp of the interrelation of these three dimensions."[57] But a woman's synthesizing of her will for individuality and her biological and social conditions may not demand as much agony and sacrifice in a painful confrontation with these conditions as Showalter suggested. What if neither maleness nor femaleness is something to be feared about, nor is femininity or masculinity something that need to be confronted or escaped? What if emotionality, domesticity, and dependence are fearful not in themselves but because they are culturally attached to femaleness, and that assertiveness, aggression, and independence are intimidating not in themselves but because they are related maleness? What if the alien in the movie series *Alien* is fearful only because we see its resemblance to a penis? What would be liberating to women is to understand that the patterned connections between human characteristics and

[56] *A literature of Their Own*. 289.
[57] *Aesthetic*. 200.

experiences to genders are social fabrications that are humanly made in the first place; and we can, if we want, stop making those connections. One is not an angry woman; one is just angry, because all get angry when injustice happens. One is not a despicable, backward housewife; one just opts to prioritize their familial relationship, and it is reasonable and legitimate for all spouses to do so.

As a woman experiences life in its various aspects – personal and social, private and public – what she will gain is not the understanding of what it means to be a man or what it means to be a woman, but what it means to be a person. Femaleness and maleness, femininity and masculinity, are as real and as fabricated as the material world we have created as human beings, like the Great Wall or the Pyramid of Khufu; they do not need to be confronted if we stop feeding them with meanings that we fear. Or, as Butler put it, "gender can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity."[58] A detachment of gender and sex from their cultural meanings, hence, would make a woman's experience of coming out a room of one's own less scary. It could also make her self-contemplation more of a self-critique orienting on self-growth rather than a self-beratement suppressing vitality and life.

But as the reader may have already realized, for Li to come to these conclusions, she would need to abandon her essentialist conceptualization of women defined by biological sex. At the same time that she was writing *Aesthetic* and other works in the 1980s to explore how Chinese women could awaken their subjective consciousness,

[58] *Gender Trouble*. 186.

feminist theories elsewhere were beginning to scrutinize the conventional conceptual interrelations among the female body, the category of woman, and femininity. Thanks to them, gender/sex essentialism could no longer enjoy a status as Truth as its once had, at least not without significant qualifications. Li refused to abandon her essentialism, however, until the end of her life. She clearly wrote so.[59] So despite the potentials we have explored her work to come to a deconstruction the category of women grounded on the female body, this was not the route that she took herself.[60]

### 4. The matriarchal tyranny, responsibility, and "Growing up"

What remained useful, however, was Li's account of women's formation of subjectivity as a synthesis of the Self and the society. On this point, the criticism associating her to "market feminism" and statism, I would argue, did not have to be the only valid reading. Despite her language that women should better themselves and seize the opportunities provided by the market, Li's central advice to women is not as anti-feminist as it seems. Instead, as I now turn to show, her advice to women was one of growing up and responsibility, an advice that, in fact, democratic theorists also give for good practices of citizenship.

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[59] See Li, Xiaojiang. *The Gender of Historiography* [*Shixue de Xingbie*]. Xi'an: Shaanxi Normal University Press. 2024. 182

[60] Wang Lingzhen suggested that critics of Li's essentialism overlooked that Li's natural essentialism contains a profound understanding that natural differences can lead to radically different imaginings of society and ethics. So, while it is not unreasonable describe Li as an essentialist, such criticism fails to recognize how her natural essentialism interrogates of social determinism that perpetuates male dominance. I would agree with Wang, but I would say Li is still an essentialist given her biological definition of women. See Wang. 2013. 17-8.

On a rare occasion where Li gave a definition of "women's subjective consciousness," she was pressed by a woman colleague to differentiate it from "women's self-consciousness" so she could teach it to students. "Women's self-consciousness," she defined, "is directed primarily to those closest to women in their everyday life; it rejects the traditional injunction to 'follow one's father, then one's husband, then one's son.' Women's subjective consciousness, in contrast, is directed to society as a whole. Dependence on either the state or the society is no solution; we must rely on ourselves; whether it is earning a living or accomplishing what we set out to do, we must make our own decisions and depend on our own strength."[61] Her definition here, again, would easily confirm the label "market feminism" attached to her by scholars overseas. However, her call on women t learn to not depend on society or the state also drew criticism in China, if not even harsher one. Related to this prescription for independence is Li's diagnosis of the limitation of China's women's liberation. China's socialist revolution, Li argued, did establish "equality between men and women" legally and culturally since 1949; but because most Chinese women were "endowed (*enci* 恩赐)" with such liberation and its related privileges by the state, they never formed a subjective consciousness in spontaneously and actively struggling for their own liberation.[62]

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[61] Li, Xiaojiang. *Guanyu Nüren de Dawen [Answers and Questions on Women]*. Jiangsu People's Press. 1998. 99.

[62] *Eve*. 161-4, 185-6, *Women's Way Out*. 59-63. Women cadres from All China Women's Federation (ACWF) cadres were severely provoked by Li's endowment argument because it denied women's agency and contribution in China's socialist revolution. Invoking CPC's official historiography on women's leadership and participation in China's revolutionary legacy, they charged that Li's thesis of women was not only incorrect but also reactionary. For example, see Luo Qiong. "Let the History of

For Li, the fact that Chinese women acquired rights and equality as handouts from the state, is a constitutive part of their social construction that is no less important than the historical formation of gender through the division of productive and reproductive labor. For Chinese women to reclaim their subjectivity, she repeatedly emphasized, they must acknowledge and reflect on, rather than deny, how China's socialist legacy had shaped them as such.[63] Society should understand that "equality between men and women" does not mean completion of women's liberation. For women themselves, they must recognize that the "equality with men" enshrined in the Constitution guarantees no self-realization, nor freedom, nor happiness. Achieving these, Li told Chinese women with a stern face, is ultimately their own responsibility.

We have already read that the prescription Li issued for Chinese women to fulfill such responsibility was to better themselves, especially in managing their double roles made increasingly burdensome under market economy. However, the advice on responsibility itself remains compelling especially given China's history of totalitarianism where the state sought to regulate nearly every aspect of a person's life. Totalitarianism is commonly perceived as a masculine/paternal power of ruthless domination and exploitation, threatening violence as punishment for disobedience, for

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the Women's Movement in the New Democratic Period Speak to the present." in Luo, Qiong. *Funü Yanjiu Luncong*. [*Theses on Women's Liberation*]. Women's Press of China. 1990. 216-7.

Li's "domestic sciences classes" for women's self-betterment had also triggered immediate accusation that she was "turning back the wheel of history," a political charge have proved fatal in CPC's political movements over the years. See "Creating a Public Space." 145. Also see *Towards Women*. 22.

[63] For examples, see "A Marxist 'hat,' (*makesi zhuyi de 'maozi'* 马克思的'帽子'),"" and "Embarrassment over rootlessness (*wugen de nankan* 无根的难堪)," and "Searching for a spiritual home (*xunzhao jingshen jiayuan* 寻找精神家园)," in *Towards Women.*

example, the "Big Brother." However, we also imagine it as feminine/maternal power smothering her children in the name of care, for a lack of a better example, the "nanny state." Both a dictatorial father and a manipulative mother compromise the child's opportunity to grow into independent adults.

The matriarchal tyranny, as Hanna Pitkin pointed out, was the idea animating Hannah Arendt's imagining of "the social" in *The Human Condition*.[64] Arendt depicted "the social" as a Blob, Pitkin wrote, an evil monster from the outer space aggressively devouring and eventually destroying human beings; such an imaginary, Pitkin argued, however, was ironically counterproductive to Arendt's central teaching of action and freedom. Using gendered language, Pitkin argued, Arendt described the social as if it is a "bad mother," "an evil, destructive matriarch constantly seeking to expand her power, to control and infantilize her children, to render them docile and make them behave, until she finally extinguishes their independence altogether, destroying all boundaries and merging the 'children' back into the single mass – herself."[65] By describing "the social" as Blob-like power in front of whom human beings are simply hopeless – leaving it means a threat to their physical life like leaving a mother's breasts – Pitkin argued, Arendt ended pronouncing action dead when it is the most needed.[66] After all, "the social" – its institutional manifestation of markets and bureaucracies, its characterological expression in our conformism and resentful victimhood, and the

[64] Pitkin, Hanna. *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. 1998. 168-75.
[65] *Attack of the Blob*. 271.
[66] *Attack of the Blob*. 3-5.

ideational support it drew from our cynicism and hopelessness – is really our own doing.[67]

Our way out for Pitkin, however, is not to denigrate femininity and turn to machoism as some critics took Arendt to imply. The kind of courage we need to penetrate the thicket of the social, she suggested, is not reckless boldness, but a sense of responsibility towards other people and the world that is part of "growing up" as human beings.[68] To grow up in this sense, Pitkin suggested in an earlier writing, is a synthesis of both femininity and masculinity. In "Food and Freedom in *the Flounder*," Pitkin suggested a reading of the novel by German writer Günter Grass beyond its common interpretation as a critique of masculinity. Idealism and history-making that the fictional flounder persuaded men into pursuing, according to this prevalent reading, turned out to be destructive or even murderous in human history despite the ideals like freedom, justice, and self-determination it held out as lures. What is truly life-sustaining, this reading goes, is the making of food – rather than the making of history – that is, the ethos of care and nurture associated to women and femininity. Pitkin, however, suggested an alternative reading: women taking over of power is not the antidote for patriarchal domination and violence, for the manipulative, infantilizing matriarchal dominance is just as dangerous.[69]

The antidote to the murderous history animated the warrior virtue of conquest and subjugation, Pitkin then suggested, was "a third alternative," not as in a "third" sex in

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[67] *Attack of the Blob.* 279-80.
[68] *Attack of the Blob.* 263-7.
[69] Pitkin, Hanna. "Food and Freedom in *the Flounder*." In *Political Theory*. vol. 12, no.4. 1984. 480-1.

addition men and women, but a new way of treating gender. That is; to be a mature human being, one must reconcile femininity and masculinity, or to put it differently, to integrate the capacities and dispositions conventionally associated with both. Taking masculinity to its extreme turns into destructive megalomania and cruelness; but one does need the drive for excellence and self-realization, and to do that would require to let go of one's dependence on the ever-caring mother. Life cannot be sustained without practical, everyday activities, for example, making food; but one would not want to spend her entire life in the household as the selfless mother forever nurturing her children and husband, like the three-breasted Awa in the novel suckled by men eternally. Doing so would eventually turn her into a manipulative maternal tyrant who wields victimhood as a means of control.[70]

This "third alternative," Pitkin also suggests, also shed light on how we can think about our ethical responsibility for the society and others in a world where situations of things and of ourselves could never be entirely determined by our choice and creation. We all have no choice but grow up being shaped by gender norms and stereotypes; from such experience we come to develop the forbidden aspects of ourselves, which if we do not address them, we later project them onto "the Other," or we turn the aggression toward to self.[71] This explains why some men have difficulty with showing vulnerability and asking for help. This explains transphobia and homophobia sentiments. This also explains why Showalter's women writers had to kill

[70] "Food and Freedom". 481-2.
[71] "Food and Freedom". 481.

the mad woman in attic, the passionate, sexual, and dark aspect of themselves that they could not accept nor tolerate. Our way out, as she also wrote elsewhere, is to come to understand our social construction in terms of the human experience of growing up. That is, to become an adult, one must forgive her parents for having exercised arbitrary authority over her when she was a vulnerable and helpless child, for without the parents she would not be who she is; it is then up to the adult that she has become to decide what to make of the legacy of her upbringing. When we come to terms with the past, we can then live in the now where action and agency can occur, including those to transform the fearful, rigid gender norms that had scarred us in the past.[72]

Now we come all the way back to Li's early Hegelian inspired concept of self-contemplation, that is, a self-critique of one's past social construction of the male-centered society without turning its inherent misogyny into a self-beratement. For Li, this also holds true to Chinese women's historical construction from China's Maoist past. Urban women of her generation growing up after the founding of the People's Republic were born into a discourse of equality of between men and women that is also underwritten by the law. They were also born into a state socialism that promised them benefits like tenured employment and affordable childcare (on the condition that they do not end up on the wrong side politically of course), but at the same time also controlled almost every aspect of their lives. For Li, this state, while it did have punitive and violent side of a patriarchal authoritarianism, it is also like the matriarchal tyrant

[72] Pitkin, Hanna. *Fortune is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli*. University of California Press. 1984. 296-7. Also see *Attack of the Blob*. 268, for the notion of living entirely in the present.

that Pitkin and Arendt described; it destroyed all boundaries merging the people into a single mass – the Maoist class subject – and it stifled their opportunities to grow into independent, competent adults so they forever stayed overgrown infants, never dare to or capable to defy their motherland. And I would say that this was not an unfair critique of how China's past socialist experiments had shaped its people.

Would the Chinese state in the 1980s prefer its people to become less like infants forever suckling at its breasts, as its own body became depleted and, with the ideological failure of Maoism, its legitimacy now depended on how much it could materially provide? Would the state also prefer its people to cultivate themselves into self-reliant, competitive market subjects as it decided to transform into a market economy so as to save its legitimacy? I think the answer is Yes. But I also do not think this makes Li's thesis on woman straightforwardly an accomplice to the state and the market. As I will show in next chapter, Li's calling for Chinese women to improve their subjective capacities would acquire its particular insightfulness in the. This would be the time when a new group of pro-market male intellectuals, using liberalism's language of rights that they newly acquired, to argue that Chinese women should be satisfied for the formal equality between genders enshrined in the Chinese law and should not ask for additional social assistance based on their gender. Remember the letter from the Chinese Adam we read in Chapter one where Adam also indicated an uncomfortable question. "Look," he was saying, "now you women already have the same right as men to work, but you are having a hard time meeting the expectation of men at the workplace, why don't you do something that you are good at instead, for

example, housework and taking care of children? Wouldn't you be better off that way?" Adam sounded ridiculous and offensive from the surface, but it would be hard to respond if we put aside ideals like egalitarianism and feminism that we on the radical/liberal Left today take as undisputable. Ultimately, why being a feminist person if it does not do you any good? Gender equality for equality's sake would only end up an abstract, empty idea when it is not related to other values, just like the making of history is impoverished and lifeless if not sustained by the making of food. Then what do women really want out of their equal rights? As we will see in the chapter that follows, these are the questions that Chinese feminist scholars struggled to answer in their debates with the pro-market, efficiency prioritizing male intellectuals. We will also see that Li, with the concept of women's subjective consciousness she began developing in the 1980s, came to be better equipped to intervene in these debates that would carry profound consequences to Chinese women in the 1990s.

# Chapter Three

## Breaking a Way Out:

## the 1990s Debates on "Women Return to the Home"

### 1. From iron girl to women returning home: a changing social landscape

Existing scholarship of Li has focused almost exclusively on the first decade of her intellectual development despite her long career of writing and research spanning over forty years. But this was probably due to the fact that the interpretations associating her to market feminism and statism would acquire particular plausibility in the 1990s as China's entered a deeper and more consequential phase of economic reform. After Deng Xiaoping's "Southern Tour" in 1992, the state became more certain than ever on its market-oriented reform. Right after Deng's tour, CPC's 14th Congress decided that China would establish a "a socialist market economy," i.e., an economy of predominating public ownership for the sake of socialism and a competing market for efficiency. Women would then become one of the first groups that the state would ask to bear the pain of social transformation. This would be most saliently crystalized in mass gendered layoffs of the reforms of state-owned enterprises (SOEs).

With the blessing from the highest party leadership, reforms of SOEs, though started in 1984, now began to accelerate and expand in scope. For most women working in

those enterprises, however, this would be ominous news, and it was to take some of them until today to cope. SOEs before the reforms were established in the early years of the People's Republic to replace the labor market as part of the socialist reform. Each SOE is a work-unit (*danwei* 单位).[1] Employees of a work-unit were assigned by the state for which full-employment was its goal for the ideal of socialism. A work-unit is also the state's regulatory agent at the very local level, making sure that the state's policies to be effectively implemented in each work-unit member. These included struggle sessions during the "take class struggle as the key link" years, mandatory intrauterine devices for women under the "one-child" policy, and recently compulsory COVID-19 testing and quarantines.

Hence, as a work-unit, an SOE was not a profit-seeking organization like businesses under market economy. It was not concerned with their cost of labor, nor did they have much autonomy in administrating their labors, either in recruitment or in dismissals. As a work-unit, it was also responsible for provisions of social goods – which a business is not responsible for – including housing, medical care, pensions, recreational facilities, communal canteens, daycares, and school education, with affordable cost or no cost. So admittedly, women employees of SOEs were shielded from many hazards they would have encountered a capitalist labor market: they had relatively easy access to affordable support from the work-unit on the reproductive labor that were expected

[1] The work-units are – until today – also China's most basic administrative unit in its urban areas. It could be an SOE, as well as a police station, a school, a university, a sports team, or a department store.

based on their gender, and they had state-sponsored security of employment that could have been interrupted in a market economy because of their needs for maternal leaves.

All these benefits were to be significantly cut or simply terminated in the reforms of SOEs. The reform gave the SOEs much more autonomy in their management, but also more pressure to produce profits; the result was massive lay-off of SOE employees, as well as drastic decrease of the social goods they used to provide. Small wonder that women would suffer disproportionately in the pains of these social transitions. Before the reform, women were mostly assigned to non-technical and service jobs in SOEs to start with; they soon became the first to be deemed redundant, as the SOEs, now transforming into profit-seeking entities, were first and foremost to cut their social functions so as to lower their cost, like any business would logically want to do. Now that the SOEs became much less generous in providing reproductive service such as day-care and catering, stereotypical expectation for women to perform such work resurfaced to justify gender disparity in layoffs or pressured women to give up their positions or retire early. In addition, reformers and enterprise leaderships also assumed that laid-off men were more likely to take collective action to the street whereas women were less likely to do so – though such stereotype were not always supported by empirical evidence.[2]

[2] For example, in Zhong Rongpeng. *A Turn of the Century Problem: Who is to make the rice bowl for Chinese people?* Beijing: China Economic Publishing Houswe [*zhongguo jingji chubanshe*]. 1998. 240. Zhong wrote: "if we let me return home…it will cause social instability. For example, they may gather to petition, protest, or stage disturbance. If we let women return home and make vacancies, then men can generally find suitable positions…This way, we can stabilize the society's unstable element – men."

Accompanied with these social transitions were discursive shifts in the society's discussions of women and gender; and now our protagonist Li were to encounter some new interlocutors in the 1990s. In the 1980s, arguing with both male humanist Marxists and female cadres from All China Women's Federation, Li's main goal was to defend the autonomy of women's liberation as a social movement and women's studies as an academic discipline. For this purpose, I have discussed in Chapter Two, her main theoretical move was to make a distinction between women's questions and questions of women's liberation. Now in the 1990s, with the effect of the reform felt more extensively in the society, it became difficult to deny that the old Marxist theories of women could barely help to understand and address issues emerged because of the transitions the state took on post Mao, including the massive, gendered layoffs of the SOEs.

As early as 1983, there had been debates over whether women should retreat from workforce and become full-time housewives.[3] However, unlike discussions in the 80s when both proponents and critics argued from a standpoint of utility and practicality, advocates of women to return home in the 90s came to assume more theoretical sophistication thanks to a growing number of non-Marxist theories that were gradually introduced to the Chinese Mainland. The crust of the debate was no longer whether women remaining at or retreating from their work positions was beneficial to the society, or to the nuclear family, or to women themselves; rather, it was elevated to a

[3] See Lin Songle. "a few rounds of debates on gender roles." In *Sociological Research*, 1995. 106-7.

dispute over more abstract notions or principles, for example, of equality, fairness, justice, and freedom, and should there be clashes between them, what should be done.

The next section will discuss this new intellectual ecology that Li and her fellow defenders of women had to navigate in the 1990s. Before that, however, let me say a few words on why it matters in the first place to political theory and feminist theories to study these conversations, given that its central question – whether women should return to home – soon became moot. As China went onto its transition into a market economy, the laid-off SOE workers who could not adapt were eventually left out in miseries and became sacrifices placed on the altar of China's Reform and Opening, a project to save the state's legitimacy. As universities ceased to be responsible to assign jobs to its graduates in 1993, later generations of Chinese women never expected guaranteed life-long employment sponsored by the state. Full-time housewife also soon became a choice of a person with little moral or political meanings attached to it.

However, with the benefit of hindsight of today not only of where China is at but also of the development of global feminist theories and movements, these debates and conversations between Li Xiaojiang and her fellow Chinese intellectuals are useful to us. They are useful to those who want to understand China, indeed. But for me, they are useful because they put issues of fairness *versus* efficiency, of gender roles, of the public spheres into a historical site.

In these discussions over "women returning home," we see that post-Mao China's academic/intellectual scene where the intellectuals had not yet grasped the different "schools" and "traditions" outside party-approved Marx-Leninist theories. But the

issue they were facing was nevertheless urgent and did not seem to allow time and space to sort these ideas out, so they simply took whatever was available in their theoretical/intellectual repertoire to defend their positions. This is not to say that their discussion is any less valuable because of its lack of academic depth. On the contrary, it is precisely because the discussion is so oriented to prominent, practical issues that Chinese people (including these scholars) must address and respond in their rapidly changing society, that these discussions are still valuable to us today. The raw conflicts precisely show us the stakes for us today to think through these issues seriously, as they are never just philosophical questions but political questions affecting lives of each of us.

## 2. From the Chinese Adam to Zheng Yefu: a changing intellectual ecology

I now turn to describe the new intellectual ecology that Li and her associates found themselves in in the 1990s. First is the rise of structural functionalism – which started to decline in the West from the 1980s – due to the Chinese state's decision to recover its research capacity in social sciences for the sake of its modernization. Second is the introduction and popularization of liberalism and neoliberalism since the Reform and Opening, which became more accessible to Chinese scholars.

### *Sociology and structural functionalism*

In 1994, *Sociological Research (shehuixue yanjiu)*, one the most prestigious academic journal in social sciences in the Chinese Mainland until today, carried an article by Zheng Yefu 郑也夫(1950- ) entitled "a sociological reflection on equality of

men and women".[4] Zheng's article immediately provoked intense discussions, most of which fierce oppositions. He argued: "equality of men and women" had more cons than pros under China's changing social situation; the state should extensively cut its intervention in the labor market to ensure women's employment. Women who lacked capacity or desire to stay in the work force should return to the household. From 1994 to 1995, *Sociological Research* published more than 20 articles in its subsequent issues, all but one of them were rebuttals to Zheng, including a few using strong languages to express grievances. Li Xiaojiang was also one of the responses.

Zheng's proposal was not new – we have already read the Chinese Adam in the previous Chapter. However, the eight-year gap between the two articles did make differences between the flavors of the two. As outrageous as Adam's suggestion that women should find positions suitable to their genders in the society, his advice seemed to come from some genuine care of women's wellbeing: his main concern throughout the essay was that the labor market may be too much stress for women, and that such stress would negatively affect marital relationships. Adam also did not shy away from his position as a man. His gesture was one of curiosity: as a man, I'm confused why women would want to compete with me in the labor market at the price of hurting themselves – and hurting me too because the stress gave them bad temper at home and negatively affected my sex life![5]

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[4] Zheng, Yefu. "nanü pingdeng de shehuixue sikao [a sociological reflection on equality of men and women]." *Shehuixue Yanjiu* [*Sociological Research*]. 1994 (2). 108-113.
[5] "Adam's Confusion." In Li, Xiaojiang. *Eve's Exploration*. 221-9.

Eight years later in Zheng Yefu's article, such gesture of care and curiosity, along with its recognition of one's positionality, gave way to a language of neutrality, predicating arguments on freedom of exchange as a moral principle of the market and on the efficiency of economic growth as an *a priori* Good. Zheng shared with Adam's concern that "equality of men and women" intensified marital conflicts; however, whereas Adam recognized gender equality as a worthwhile social value despite also a burden to women and to families, Zheng elevated this concern to a critique of "equality of men and women" as an "ideology (*yishi xingtai*)" that can be in tension other values that a society may want to prioritize. Unlike Adam whose critique of gender equality was limited in a concrete issue within the household – which can potentially be resolved locally by each party adjusting their behaviors – Zheng globalized this critique to an unresolvable tension that requires the sacrifice of one to keep another.

The first important value sacrificed for gender equality, in Zheng's view, was the efficiency of the society's division of labor. Citing Émile Durkheim, Zheng argued that patriarchal gender norms, despite being tyrannical and rigid, served an important function to a society when an organic solidarity was not yet formed. Conventional gender roles in which men participate in social production whereas women are responsible for reproductive and domestic labor, he argued, brought the society security and order, because they provide each individual with a set of approaches to life based on gender, so they do not have to take pains to choose what to do in each circumstance. "Women's liberation in China," he wrote, "pushed women to the society…but never successfully established new patterns of division of labor in place of the old patriarchal

one". "Who should do the housework?" he wrote, "Chinese people had lost guidance from social culture, and are left to choose, fumble, and collide on themselves. As a result, family conflicts proliferate, with role conflicts manifesting in all kinds of forms possible." [6]

To some of us who are familiar with and devoted to feminist movements, to say that patriarchy is conducive to social efficiency and order may sound offensive, if not idiotic. However, if we take a step back from our critique of patriarchy – which we almost take as a Truth – we may be able to have the mental lucidity to recognize that Zheng's functionalist argument for patriarchy could gain purchase if we take gender equity down from its throne of the Good, a throne that was a hard-won achievement of generations of feminist movements.

This small argumentative move of Zheng revealed to us an important piece of puzzle of the intellectual background over which Li and her fellow advocates of gender equity fought their battle. From the surface, the popularization of structural functionalism in Chinese academia of social sciences in its Reform Era was a historical coincidence. In 1979, the Chinese state decided to recover social sciences in higher education and other research institutes. The party state turned around and claimed that research in social sciences, which was previously considered counter-revolutionary, was now what a "Chinese socialism" needed.[7] However, years of political turmoil had almost destroyed

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[6] Zheng. "a sociological reflection on equality of men and women". 108.

[7] For example, the then Chinese Vice Premier Yao Yilin stated on the national television: "China's modernization effort needed professional educated researchers in the discipline of objective recording and analyzing facts and that for this reason sociological training was important." In Tang, Wenfang and Holzner, Burkart. *Social change in contemporary China: C.K. Yang and the concept of institutional diffusion*. University of Pittsburgh Press. 2007. 22

the field of social sciences in China. The country barely cultivated any new talents; those who survived were of old age and had been cut off from the global developments of their fields for decades. Fei Xiaotong 费孝通(or Fei Hsiao-tung, 1910-2005) was one of the latter and soon, at the age of 70, became the state's top candidate to lead the restoration of Chinese sociology.[8] Already internationally known for his work before the founding of the PRC, he then reached out his good friend back in college Yang Ch'ing-k'un 杨庆堃(known as C.K. Yang in the West, 1911-1999), a professor of sociology at the University of Pittsburgh at the time.[9] With Yang's help, in 1980 Fei was able to invite Yang and his American colleagues to Beijing. In a two-month summer school held at Chinese Academy of Social Science, these scholars helped a small group of younger Chinese scholars to catch up with the developments happened in the discipline in the past 30 years when China cut itself away from most of the rest of the world. Similar to Li's experience of learning feminist theories, from Fei's memoir I again found a profoundly touching moment when Chinese scholars, young and old, worked together to rebuild social sciences with bare hands and limited resources. For example, as Fei recorded, because of the students' limited skills in English language, Yang had to introduce scholars from The Chinese University of Hong Kong, the

[8] He was asked personally by Hu Qiaomu, one of the highest party leaders to do this job. See Fei, Xiaotong. "Reflections on Social Investigation" in *Academic Self-Narration Reflection: A collection of Fei Xiaotong's Scholarly Writings*. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing (*Sanlian Shudian*).1996. 77-78.

[9] Fei obtained his doctorate from London School of Economics under anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski, published works overseas, and had connections with scholars in sociology overseas. He published his first work *Peasant Life in China: A Field Study of Country Life in Yangtze Valley* based on his PhD thesis in 1939, and later in 1953 *China's Gentry: Essays in Rural Urban Relations* by University of Chicago Press. From Malinowski, Fei learned to examine the functional interrelationships among various "parts" of a community and to understand culture from the perspective of its members.

sociology department of which also received ample assistance from Yang, to teach in "Cantonese-accented Mandarin."

I could not find first-hand records of what was taught at this summer school. This is, however, such a critical moment when Chinese scholars had their first taste of non-Marxist Western social theories.[10] I could make some speculations from a commemorative article of Professor Yang by Burkart Holzner, one of the Pittsburgh scholars invited to teach in the program. The teaching team included Holzner, Yang, Wesley Posvar, and Jiri Nehnevajsa. They decided to name their lecture series "The Sociology *for* Modernization" specifically to differentiate it from "sociology *of* Modernization." The latter, Holzner wrote, was a "descriptive enterprise," whereas the focus of their lectures was "applications of sociology and the field's usefulness in modernization."[11] In the end, Holzner commented that their project to reestablish sociology in China reflected Yang's sociological vision. That is, "[s]ociology for the modernization of China, while built on the experience of sociology in the West, would become an endogenous enterprise in China and would help to master the difficulties of the social transformation that needed to be addressed."[12]

Such instrumental approach to research in social sciences, i.e., research in social issues to make policy suggestions for society/state goals rather than to expose and criticize flaws in society and politics, would later become an undertone of social sciences research throughout the 1990s in Chinese academia. This may look like a

[10] Fei. "Reflections on Social Investigation". 78.
[11] Tang and Holzner. 2007. 28, 22
[12] *ibid.*

coincidence, given that the scholar available to lead happened to be from the functionalism school and so was the resources he was able to access. Yet, that the Chinese academia found appeal in this way of thinking also made sense given the historical juncture they were at. We can see this in the intriguing ambivalence and caution toward structural functionalism in the first post-Mao sociology textbook authored by Fei and some of the graduates of the 1980 summer school.[13] The textbook presented in its appendix a short historical account of sociology's development in the West where it criticized all non-Marxist Western sociology as inherently "in service of capitalism and bourgeoise." Structural functionalism as the most influential tradition post-war, stated the authors, ultimately privileges maintaining social equilibrium whereas opposes social change and revolutions.[14] But such critique only seemed to be a camouflage of the textbook's functionalist core revealed at its opening when it gave sociology a definition. "Sociology takes the society as a holistic changing system," it wrote, "it [sociology] studies the society's structures, functions, origins, and its laws of development via analyzing people's social relations and behaviors."[15]

Chinese scholars in early years of the Reform Era were cautious in their critique of how communist ideas were misused into dysfunction of society and blatant assault of basic human dignity. For those who stayed in the mainland, they probably had learned from history that they needed to negotiate carefully with the state-endorsed ideology to keep their newly gained space for research. The state continued to hold onto "Social

[13] Fei, Xiaotong, et al. *Shehuixue Gailun* [*Introduction to Sociology*]. Tianjin People's Press. 1983.
[14] *Introduction to Sociology*. 1983. 389, 400.
[15] *Introduction to Sociology*. 5

sciences in China must be directed by Marxism" as its official discourse until today. Such constraint was to be explained away by a younger scholar Zheng Hangsheng 郑杭生(1936-2014), who also worked closely with Fei, three years later. At various places – including the *Guangming Daily* 光明日报[16]– argued that a sociology directed by Marxism could be both critical/revolutionary and maintaining/constructive, the latter used to be the nature of non-Marxist Western social theories only. Citing Engels' "Anti-Duhring," where he defined a communist society as "a society reasonably coordinated" where "humanity's leap from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom" takes place,[17] Zheng argued that a sociology focusing on maintaining social functioning rather than criticizing social ills and flaws could be one that is properly "socialist," rather than serving interests of the capitalist class.[18]

Like this, China's post-Mao sociologists were able to reach a coherence between a Marxist ideology and a research approach that focus on resolving social conflicts rather than mobilizing it. Social issues newly emerging from China's social transitions – including the tension between the socialist ideal of gender equity and the state's urgent need for economic growth – rather than irreconcilable class conflicts that can only be resolved by radical revolutions, can now be analyzed as temporary, partial malfunctions

[16] Also known as the *Enlightenment Daily*. It is one of the major national newspapers directly under supervised by The Central Propaganda Department of CPC.
[17] Engels, Friedrich. *Anti-Dühring*. Lawrence and Wishart. 311.
[18] Also see Zheng, Hangsheng. "*Shehuixue yanjiu duixiang xintan* [A new exploration of sociology's research object.]" In *Sociological Research*. 1986 (1) .68-75. And in *Introduction to Sociology: A New Edition* [*Shehuixue Gailun Xinbian*], Beijing: Renmin University Press, a textbook first published in 1987. This textbook became one of the most popular textbooks in China's higher education. It went through several reprints and revisions; the latest edition was published in 2019.

of the social machine that can be fixed by local adjustments. One conventional wisdom from Western philosophy to counterargue teleological arguments as such was to set some deontological boundaries, that is, there are moral limits of means that can used regardless how good the outcome is. However, Zheng Yefu in the 1990s obviously was freed from the ideological grip of Maoist "women can hold up half of the sky," so he would feel comfortable to propose that a patriarchal division of labor could be the antidote to fix China's problem in its slow economic growth and surplus labor. In fact, he took a step further to find a new deontological base – those that earlier advocates of women to return to the home did not get their hands on – to compete with the socialist ideal of gender equity. This is the point I will now turn to.

***Liberalism's discourse of rights: an ineffective rescue***

In the 1980s, discussions over women returning home had not yet utilized the language of rights. Advocates of women returning home mainly predicated their arguments on practical, contingent concerns: women returning home to take care of housework and childcare is a more efficient division of labor for the nuclear family. Those who disagreed argued that leaving professional life hinders women's personal development, or that staying at home is not productive to women being good mothers and wives. None of these discussions interpreted the notion of "equality of men and women" as a "right" of women. At best, defenders invoked "women's liberation" as having intrinsic value regardless of social or historical circumstances.

This was to change in Zheng's article and the criticisms he received. Aside from "disturbance of order with the division of labor within the family," a more sinister vice of "equality of men and women," Zheng argued, was that it interfered with "free and fair exchange of the market".[19] Driven by "administrative intervention," he wrote, "women's liberation" in China "aids the weak but suppresses the strong".[20] That is, "Equality of men and women" was taken to an extreme to a pursuit of a complete equality (*wanquan de pingdeng*),[21] the result of which was a violation of free and fair trade of the market, and an exploitation of the strong by the weak, which, as Zheng lamented, is "a ridiculous form of inequality".[22]

Zheng then wrote:

> "What is women's liberation (or to put it differently, feminism) in its genuine sense? How to achieve women's liberation without social chaos and disorder, and without exploitation of men? The answer is to recognize that equality is a right, not an outcome. A woman has the right to have education, to choose employment, to run business, and to take office. But whether she will get a certain position should be a result of fair competition, not a handout from the society. The principle of social competition should be equality without favoritism (*yishi tongren*), without prejudice based on ideologies. For women, this means 'from the top there's no ceiling' – a successful woman can become a scholar, a professor, a businesswoman, a minister, or the president, the society should not put any human-caused (*renwei de*) constraints on her; at the same time, it also means "from the bottom there's no minimum guarantee," – if she does not have competence nor desire to work in the society, or if she willingly wants to be a housewife, the society should never hand out human-caused assistance to ensure that she has a certain occupation. In my understanding, physical strength, money, and

[19] Zheng. "a sociological reflection on equality of men and women". 112.
[20] Zheng. "a sociological reflection on equality of men and women". 110.
[21] I translate this term literally from his choice of language in Chinese instead of translating into "substantive equality" or "egalitarian" because of some complexities I shall discuss later.
[22] Zheng. "a sociological reflection on equality of men and women". 113.

> knowledge constitute the foundation of power and productive forces in different stages of human history. Today, although knowledge became more important, but physical strength and money are by no means insignificant. Hence, under such social reality today, it is still difficult for women to gain the same social power (*shehui quanli*)[23] and social position as men have. But in personal development, social participation, and in pursuing of achievements, she has the same rights as men do."[24]

His language of "the weak" and "the strong" is disturbing indeed because of its lack of critical distance to inequality in social powers. At the end of the paragraph, he even suggested that unequal social power is simply a necessity which justifies unequal prospects of success. For him, fairness is to follow such necessity, i.e., the strong should have more whereas the weak should have less. Using "human-caused" assistance (read: against the "natural" rule of the market) to aid the weak, on the flip side, was unfairness. Like Thrasymachus' "justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger" in Plato's *Republic*, Zheng struck our intuition and conscience as so profoundly wrong, yet we do not quite know how to give a rebuttal that immediately works.

We may be tempted to debate with Zheng from a perspective of Truth. That is, we imitate Socrates' rebuttal to Thrasymachus, and argue that Zheng's opinions on equality, fairness, and justice are corrupted and false, whereas we propose alternatives that are moral and true. In fact, this was what most Chinese scholars did in response to Zheng. Li Yinhe 李银河(1952-), for example, wrote bluntly that the question of "women returning to home" should simply be dismissed because it is a violation of women's

[23] I translate the term "social power" literally from his original writing in Chinese *shehui quanli*. I doubt that this was a reference of Foucault, because if it was, he would not take unequal social power as a necessity without any critical distance.
[24] Zheng. "a sociological reflection on equality of men and women". 113.

right to work which is both a universal human right and a constitutional right for Chinese citizens.[25] Jin Yihong 金一虹(1947-), pivoted to challenge Zheng's understanding of equality. Citing American sociologist Daniel Bell's different dimensions of equality, i.e., equality of conditions, of means, and of outcomes,[26] Jin argued that the right to work is an equality of conditions, a legal right of each citizen regardless of gender identities. She also invoked John Rawls and Arthur Okun and argued that the old socialist practice to reserve quotas for women in working positions are appropriate aid to women because women are the "disadvantaged," "less well-off" of the society.[27] Liu Bohong 刘伯红(1950-) first cited a United Nations document stating that economic development itself does not respond to all needs to human beings;[28] she then suggested that Zheng's "rational and efficient" division of labor between wife and husband, though might be helpful to economic growth, fell short of respecting women's right. Unlike Li and Jin who understood women's right to work as a formal/legal right, however, Liu associated women's rights to their self-realizations.[29]

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[25] In an almost accusatory tone – it was obvious that she was really annoyed by Zheng – she then wrote that prioritizing efficiency over all other values would only lead a society to evil, just like Hitler's Germany who sent people with mental illness to gas chambers. See Li, Yinhe. "*'Nüren huijia' wenti zhi wojian*'[My view on the question of 'women to return to the home']" in *Sociological Research*. 1994 (6). 71-2.

[26] Bell, Daniel. *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Basic Book. 1976. 262.

[27] Jin, Yihong. "*Yetan nanü pingdeng de shouhuo yu daijia* [Also to discuss gains and losses of equality of men and women.]" in *Sociological Research*. 1995 (1). 98-9.

[28] World Summit for Social Development. "Draft Declaration of the World Summit of Social Development." 1994.

[29] "In modern society," she wrote, "work and employment are means for living, at the same time, it is also the source of personal development, as well as a prerequisite of one's health, dignity, and social participation…we should not treat women as a mere reserve pool of labor and a means to realize a certain goal of the society [economic growth]" (70). See Liu, Bohong. "*Dui 'nannü pingdeng de shehuixue sikao' de sikao*. [Reflections on 'a sociological reflection on equality of men and women']". in *Sociological Research*. 1994 (6). 68-71.

All three responses emphasized that women's right to work was by its definition a non-negotiable, especially when it comes into conflicts with other social values. Li, Jin, and Liu were China's younger generation of feminist scholars at the time.[30] Their writings here were part of the Chinese intellectuals' much needed reflection on the disastrous consequences of destruction of rule of law under Cultural Revolution. However, we can see from Zheng's response to them, such arguments based on legal rights and reparative justice were not the most productive, even without aid from criticism of liberalism that we have access today as a benefit of hindsight:

Li Yinhe's appeal to constitutionalism invited attack from Zheng that read unpleasantly sophist. Her language of rights immediately gave leverage to Zheng to compare superiorities of different kinds of rights. He ridiculed – if not deliberately misrepresented – her comment that there should be no space for discussion on whether women return to the home, accusing her for challenging "the freedom of discussion." He wrote: "As for whether opinions that do not align with the Constitution can be discussed, my response is a firm Yes…freedom of discussion and its relationship to the Constitution is a much more important question than gender equality."[31] When Jin Yihong drew on Rawls to require correction of inequalities in social backgrounds to achieve fair competition especially his language to identify women as the "less well-

[30] Li Yinhe gained her doctorate in sociology at the University of Pittsburgh in 1988. She then returned to China and worked at Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. She continued to be a household name to the Chinese public today, especially the younger generation, as a sexologist and a LGBT rights activist. Liu Bohong was a research associate at All China Women's Federation at the time. Li, Liu, and Jin were all in their forties when they wrote their responses to Zheng.

[31] "Freedom of discussion" also almost gave him a moral calling, as he ended his comments on Li saying, "I cannot stay silent on this." See Zheng, Yefu. "*Quanli, ziyou, chulu: dui jiwei tongren de dafu*. [Right, freedom, way-out: response to my colleagues.]" In *Sociological Research*. 1995 (3). 97.

off" or "the disadvantaged," she also took on the assumption that women are indeed less talented in their natural endowment. But precisely, this is Zheng's logic: the weak (the less talented in strength and money) should own less whereas the strong more; for the strong to let go of their strength is indeed a loss to them.[32]

When Liu Bohong pitted women's right against development, the very thing that the Chinese state was pursuing with unprecedented assertiveness, she put herself in impasses of efficiency versus fairness, market value versus social values, and common good versus identity-based interest. We are tempted overcome such impasses from the following two approaches. We could either define gender equity as a sweeping notion that comprises all good things in life that we would like equal access for all genders; but at the same time, we would make it an ideal so porous that could be interpreted in any way. Or, we could follow a strict definition of what gender equality is, like how Isaiah Berlin defines liberty: "Everything is what it is: liberty is liberty, not equality, fairness, justice, or culture, or human happiness, or a quiet conscience… [the loss of liberty] may be compensated for by a gain in justice, or in happiness or in peace, but the loss remains."[33] Similarly, women's right is women's right, the loss of it is the loss of it. But this also indicates that the loss of it may be justified, for example by economic efficiency that the state desperately needed like the gendered layoffs of SOEs, or by a

[32] Small wonder that in Zheng's response to Jin he simply reiterated that his principle is that "equal pay for equal work" which strictly means equal pay for work of same quantity and quality; for women who do not produce the same quantity and quality of work but receives equal pay is to "take advantage of men" Zheng, 1995. 98.

[33] Berlin, Isaiah. "Two Concepts of Liberty." 1958. in Berlin, Isaiah. *Liberty: Incorporating "Four Essays on Liberty"* ed. Hardy, Henry. Oxford University Press, 2002. 172.

"common prosperity" that had inherent legitimacy in a culture of collectivism over individualism.

By describing women's right and economic development as two competing values, Liu also precisely presented a visualization of gender equality like Berlin's negative liberty, the sacredness and untouchable-ness of which is guarded by an imaginary wall. It encourages an imagination of legal equality as substantive equality of a lesser extent, as if equality could be "protected" at its essence that even when equality's "extras" is so limited that it barely exists, some value of equality is still secured. Characterizing women's right to work as such, however, would only trap those who oppose "women to return home" in an endless tug-of-war with those who support it in the name of economic efficiency. Where should the line be drawn between the amount of gender equality to be appropriately sacrificed for other things that are equally important and urgent? Where to set the limit of the society's pursuit for substantive equality so it does not affect these latter values? In fact, Zheng simply ignored Liu in his response essay; maybe he knew that it would be a deadlock.

Contemporary criticism of liberalism's discourse of rights would tell us that we simply are not able to navigate these impasses via philosophical reasoning. If we, again, take reference of Plato's *Republic*, the realm of philosophy would leave only two way-outs: we follow Socrates to take a leap of faith to accept a Truth that can only be approximated by the philosopher or be taught to the lay people; or we side with Thrasymachus – and Zheng – to embrace justice as a notion of "the strong should earn more." Theorists of deliberative/antagonistic democracy today would argue, instead,

that how substantive equality should be interpreted when applied to state policies is a perpetually debatable question that needs to be constantly negotiated and contested in the political sphere.

Interestingly and ironically, Zheng's own account of "fair competition" would precisely invite a democratic solution. His proposal of what a "fair competition" should be is *yishi tongren* 一视同仁: *yi* means one, *shi* means to view, *tong* means equal, and *ren* is the Confucianist notion of care, compassion, and love to others. The question then goes: for the issue of equality of men and women, what are the things to be admitted to the category that deserve care, compassion, and love? Apparently, for Zheng, unequal distribution of social power across genders – "strength, money, and knowledge" as necessities – do not qualify. By such exclusion, Zheng was able to differentiate his *yishi tongren* from more substantive sense of gender equality. But such exclusion is a dangerous move. In *yishi tongren*, we hear echoes of the notion of "equal consideration," a term that animal right theorist Peter Singer used to differentiate from "equal treatment." "Equal consideration" of human and non-human animals, his argument goes, requires that we consider the interests of animals in not suffering because we share with animals this interest; Ergo, meat-eating is unethical. But this does not require that we treat animals as equals because us and animals have different interests. With this distinction, Singer was able to explain away the difference between humans and animals – a moral difference that many of us feel strongly – so he can make his case against speciesism. However, the problem with such distinction is its assumption that there are at least some material differences between humans and

animals. Once such difference is hailed to justify different treatment; it opens a logical pathway to justify differentiated treatment of human beings too. This, as some reader already known, is a dangerous move, as

later follows this logic to very unfortunately indicate that a person with a disability has a similar interest as a cow in their level of sensitivity to pain.[34] It is such an ironic coincidence that Singer titled his book *Animal Liberation*. Singer – a human – assumes the position to stipulate what animals' interests are, and which of those interests should be taken into consideration in human's treatment of animals, whereas in the meantime claiming this is for the *liberation* of animals. Similarly, Zheng – a man – assumes the position to prescribe how the society should treat women with equal *ren*, that is, such equal care and love should not be extended to corrections of unequal social powers in "strength, money, and knowledge," whereas calling such equal consideration women's *liberation* "in its genuine sense."

When Singer draws our attention to the fact that humans and animals share an interest in not suffering, he precisely echoed Aristotle's account of the difference between humans and animals. "[M]an alone among the animals has speech," wrote Aristotle, "The voice indeed indicates the painful or pleasant, and hence is present in other animals as well…but speech serves to reveal the advantageous and the harmful, and hence also the just and the unjust…"[35] Animals indeed can suffer and they scream when they feel pain, but they are not capable of using speech to tell Singer that the way that

[34] Singer, Peter. *Animal Liberation*, chapter one.
[35] Aristotle and Carnes Lord. *Aristotle's Politics*. Second edition. The University of Chicago Press, 2014. 4.

they treated by some humans, not just the way that human beings eat their flesh as food, maybe harmful and unjust. Aristotle is right: it is human beings' capacity of speech to reveal the just and the unjust that makes them by nature political animals, whereas animals, by lacking this capacity, are not capable of politics. Animals cannot debate with Singer on where to draw the lines between equal consideration and equal treatment; otherwise, for example, they might have argued that they also have an interest in having autonomy so there should be no leash.

However, for those who disagree with Zheng in his proposal of what should be taken into consideration for *ren* in the society's treatment of women, a rebuttal must be organized. This rebuttal should start from reclaiming space and gathering power in the political sphere to participate in those questions that Zheng attempted to settle for women. The three scholars I mentioned above – Li, Jin, and Liu – missed this point despite all other merits in their arguments. Jumping right into the debate over Truth, e.g., what women's liberation and gender equality *are*, whether women's right to work *is* untouchable, or which one *is* more important, fairness or efficiency, they forfeited what should have been their most powerful ground to defend women. That is, how the society should write into its legislation on how it should treat women is a *political* question before it is a *philosophical* one. Before Chinese women give alternative answers to compete with those given by Zheng on what gender equality *is*, they need

to first fight for grounds in the public space to discover, to speak, and to build political movements to struggle for what they *want*.[36]

### 3. Li's intervention: the awakening of women's subjective consciousness

As structural functionalism and rights discourse of liberalism became the most prominent paradigms to think about social issues which cornered Chinese feminist scholars into the theoretical impasses we discussed above, the 1990s also witnessed a more ominous environment for Chinese women and feminism in China than the 1980s. Chinese women came be exposed more capitalism and its inherent patriarchy; the limited ideological and policy protection from "equality of men and women" also started to fade. The Marxist verdict of women's liberation being a quintessential part of the proletarian revolution lost its inherent authority thanks to Li and her male humanist colleagues; but Chinese feminist scholars immediately found themselves confronted an alternative authority that is equally powerful, i.e., the state's ambition for economic development with its predatory gaze upon women's unpaid reproductive labor. Chinese women and Chinese feminism urgently needed new theoretical resources.

For me, Li's work in the 1990s is a thoughtful project to find a way out of such conundrum. I characterize her work as two theoretical moves: i) moving beyond rights discourse and prioritizing subject formation, and ii) moving beyond structural functionalism's binary understanding Marxism's legacy in China's modern history.

[36] Also see Wendy Brown. "Postmodern Exposures, Feminist Hesitations." in *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Later Modernity*. Princeton University Press. 1995.51.

These moves, consistent with her account of the awakening of women's subjective consciousness, I argue, differentiated her from her colleagues we discussed above, and would provide more effective antidotes to the predicaments Chinese feminism faced in the Reform era.

***Liberation as jiefang: a triumph of equality over freedom***

As we have seen earlier, Li's almost stubborn resistance against being identified with "feminism" later became a major point criticized by her diasporic colleagues, as well as a major point to celebrate by domestic commentaries affirming her position as an indigenous scholar. Both sides, however, missed the point, for Li's refusal of "feminism" has less to do with emphasizing a difference between China and the West than a concern with the efficiency of the language of "feminism" in promoting the society's consciousness of the importance of women's liberation.

Li's critique of "feminism" started in *Eve's Exploration* (1987). Identifying feminist movements to those took place in "the West," for which she meant those happened in Europe and North America, she wrote that the achievements of these movements were a "beguiling deception."[37] Guided by women demanding equal rights to men, she argued, these movements only led women into a world that was already constructed to prioritize men's values and interests, so women came to be pressured to live up to standards of men.[38] In the 1990s, she revised this critique of liberal feminism (and an

[37] *Eve's Exploration*. 219.
[38] *Eve's Exploration*. 215-221.

erroneous identification of it to feminism at large), and elevated it from a diagnosis of the limitation of legal equality to an orientation to the future. She started to ask the question that Adam was once asking: if equal right is not sufficient, then what is genuine women's liberation? What do women want in addition to their constitutional right of "equality between men and women" ?

"Feminism" is commonly translated into Chinese in two forms: *nüquan zhuyi* (*Nü* 女 women, *quan* 权 rights, *zhuyi* 主义-ism) or *nüxing zhuyi* (*Nü* 女 women, *xing* 性 sex, *zhuyi* 主义-ism). Either way, Li wrote, the term "feminism" in the Chinese context was attached to three principles: 1) its reference point is men, 2) it aims for equality, and 3) it's from a perspective of rights.[39] The problem with these principles, she argued, was not that they are inherently unfit to Chinese women, but rather that feminism framed as a request for equal rights to men was not the most productive for Chinese women of her time. Her resistance of "feminism," she wrote, was not to "draw clear boundaries from the West," nor was due to "fear to be put on a 'political hat'". [40] Rather, it was because "the law in China had already given Chinese women equal rights, so it put us in a difficult position to ask for any special rights [for women] …Written codes in law have already established equality of men and women," she reasoned, "if you bring up women's rights, people do not understand what your requests are."[41]

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[39] Li, Xiaojiang. "*Dong, xifang zhijian*. [Between the East and the West.]" in *Towards Woman*. 1995. 97.

[40] "Gains and Losses of China's Women's Liberation." A talk she gave at Center of Women's Studies, MIT in 1992. See *Challenge and Response.*1996. 152

[41] "Women's Studies and its role in the social development of China." a talk she gave at School of East Asian Studies, Freie Universität Berlin in 1991. See *Challenge and Response.* 1996. 133

Li's criticism of using the language of right came to assume more theoretical importance in her response to Zheng Yefu, where she elevated her critique to liberalism's misplacement of politics in the state rather than in the civil society. In that response, we see one of the rare moments in her writing where she directly used a tone critical of the party-state, accusing that state-led women's liberation program was not to liberate women for its own sake but to deepen its social control mechanism. She wrote: "it was via 'liberating women' that the state accomplished its complete control (*kongzhi* 控制) of women…One direct result of the state liberating women is that women turned their dependence on and identification of men to that of state-society….Via pushing women to work, the state integrated women to the 'employment – work unit (*danwei*) – state' model, accomplished its reform of traditional families, and hence realized its control of the entire society (including every single person in the family)."[42]

That China's women's liberation movement was more part of the state's agenda of social control than for women's happiness and wellbeing is not an innovative point; yet it is an important theoretical breakthrough in Li's intellectual journey. Her analysis of the limitation of women's liberation from now on moved beyond a critique of the "iron girl" per se but pointed out a conceptual root making the discursive pathway to make the "iron girl." The "iron girl" had lost its appeal in China's economic reform; however,

[42] Li, Xiaojiang. " '*Nannü pingdeng:' zai zhongguo shehui shijian zhong de shi yu de*. [Equality between men and women:' losses and gains in China's social practices.]" In *Sociological Research*. 1995 (1). 95-6.

Li wanted to remind us, this mistake was still haunting Chinese women as shown in Zheng's blunt attack of gender equality in the name of economic efficiency.

The issue, Li discussed with more clarity in her later works, was that the notion of "women's liberation" in China was more conceptually closer to "equality" rather than to "liberty."[43] "Women's liberation" used in "Western languages," she wrote, has important differences from how the term is commonly translated in the Chinese Mainland as *funü jiefang* 妇女解放. "As a keyword to the socialism's discourse," she wrote, "*jiefang* can be used with all groups that are 'oppressed.'" For example, class liberation and national liberation (examples Li presented) both indicate a requirement of equal status, that is, for proletariats and the people of the colonies to achieve the equal status of their previous oppressors, e.g., the capitalists and the imperialists. So unlike "women's liberation" which from the root of the word naturally connotates "liberty," *jiefang* has more to do with equality but does not necessarily imply a pursuit of freedom.[44]

She is right on this point. *Jiefang* does mean to be freed from ball and chain of some kind from its literal sense, *jie* 解 to untie, *fang* 放 to set loose. Yet, because in the socialist discourse it is commonly used with reference to an oppressor, its weight lands on a desire to have the status of the oppressor rather than on the freedom of the subjects who are liberated. This assumption of a dyadic, antagonist relationship between a master and a slave then narrows our imagination of liberation as the slave's

[43] Li Xiaojiang. *Questions and Answers on Women*. 1997.
[44] *Questions and Answers on Women.* 82

achievement of what their previous master has, be it self-determination, rights, dominance, or luxury. For example, a synonym of *jiefang* in China's socialist discourse, *fanshen* (*fan* 翻 to turn over, *shen* 身 body), is commonly used in the expression "[the proletariats, the working class, the surfs, or the Chinese people] turning over their bodies to be masters (*fanshen* 翻身, *zuo* 作 to be, *zhuren* 主人 master)." Little insights, however, does it provide to answer what precisely is desired for in mastery itself.

One important result of *jiefang*'s closer relationship to equality than freedom, Li then argued, was that Chinese people tend to think of "liberation" as something that has already been achieved.[45] Li is quite right on this point as well. Especially in CPC's official accounts where it credited itself to lead the Chinese people to achieve national liberation from Western powers and the proletarians to achieve class liberation from the landlord class and the capitalist class, *jiefang* indicated a status of a group of people already "being liberated." For example, as Mao proclaimed on the Tiananmen Rostrum at the Founding Ceremony of the People's Republic, "from this day on, Chinese people have stood up and taken their place among the nations of the world!" In both official and ordinary language, people in the Chinese Mainland refer to the historical period after 1949 as the "post-liberation (*jiefang hou*)" era. Liberation in this sense indicates a linear process of struggle, the end of which is the achievement of equal status of the Chinese nation with other nations. It is more about a removal of relationship of

[45] *Questions and Answers on Women.* 83

subjugation with an oppressor – the imperialists, the colonialists, etc. – whereas there is less to say about the establishment of the "liberated" nation looking into the future.

***Equality as Plato's form coming into being in a human soul***

For Li, liberation understood in such a way became a conceptual hinderance for Chinese feminism of her time. Her new project in the 1990s was to urge Chinese women to think about women's liberation more in line with "freedom" – what it means, why it is desirable and worthwhile, and how to work for it – than with a struggle for an "equality" to men. This notion of freedom, however, must be differentiated from the concept of freedom that Zheng privileged as a notion of freedom that competes with equality.

In her response to Zheng, Li wrote:

> "What is 'equality?' Is it merely an ideal, a principle, [or] a marker of progression? [I argue that the answer is No.] While Western feminists still hold the flag of 'equality' to demand equal rights of men and women, Chinese women have started to conduct a critical examination on the concept of 'equality.' Once the idea of equality descends into the human world, it must face the entire reality that this world and this age have to provide. During wars, equality means to shed blood equally with men (Chinese women had tasted equality of this flavor in China's military turmoil of over half a century); during famines, equality means to equally drink soup[46] in [the collective] "big pot" (for example in "the Three Years of Natural Disasters)[47]; In political turmoil for example the Cultural Revolution, equality means to equally wear tall hats and to be

[46] To "drink soup" in Chinese means to have food barely enough to keep one not hungry. Generally, when a family does not have enough food, they put what they have in a soup, a form of dish that makes one feel full faster and feeds more people than solid food. Unlike soup in some other cuisines, Chinese soup is often clear, light, and watery.

[47] This an official euphemism for the Great Chinese Famine (1959-1961) in the wake of the Great Leap Forward.

> shaved bald,[48] dignity of being a human and being a woman equally trampled …Chinese women had learned from their experience of 'equality of men and women' that 'men's world' is not heaven. [It is from here] that they came to be able to look at the society, rather than at men only, when they throw critical perspective to the notion of equality. It is from gains and losses of 'equality of men and women' that they [Chinese women] came to be able to reevaluate the contents of 'equality.'
>
> What, then, is 'equality?'
>
> 'Equality' is a fundamental human right; from the beginning it should not be a question of 'who gives to whom [equality]' or 'who should get how much [of it].' It was because part of human beings (women, and slaves) used to have been deprived of [equality] that it became a historical goal they had to fight for. However, it [equality] is not an ultimate goal, nor should it be a means [to other ends]: it should not be a means for an individual to ask for what she needs from others or from the society, this way it becomes an excuse for parasitism; nor should it be a means for the society to force a unification among all people, this way it becomes an accomplice of totalitarianism. *Essentially, equality is subjugated only to the purpose of freedom, it is the foundation of freedom of choice.* When there's no freedom of choice, equality becomes meaningless. Chinese men were 'deprived' is not because of women's liberation, [as Zheng claimed] – as Chinese women were endowed with equality as a right, they were also equally 'deprived.' One important mission of China's women's studies and women's movement is precisely to restore such previously 'deprived' subjectivity on the foundation of their endowed (*enci*) rights [by the state]."[49]

For us situated in today's discipline of political theory in Anglo-American context, this passage may confuse us. Specifically, Li's language of "human right" and "freedom of choice" may disappoint those of us feminists holding critical distance from liberalism's discourse of rights and its tendency to understand freedom as negative freedom.

[48] Common forms of public humiliation rituals to mark political disgrace during the Cultural Revolution.
[49] Li, Xiaojiang. "'Equality between men and women:' losses and gains in China's social practices." Emphasis mine.

However, if we acknowledge the fact we have only became sensitive to these terms because we are currently situated in post-modern criticism of liberalism in Euro-American academia – which was not where she was situated – we would have a bit more patience to turn off the false alarms set off by these terminologies and to really feel the pulse of her thinking

First, notice that although she names equality as a "fundamental human right," she nevertheless gave a description of the term resembling Plato's notion of *eidos* in *The Republic*. Her account of equality "descending into the human world," and that such equality would necessarily take what the material worlds has to offer at concrete historical circumstances as the content of equality, reveals a sense that equality has a perfect Form that is outside of this world. In other words, when she wrote that equality is a "right," it does not have the connotation of a formal equality which requires equal status before the law only. Rather, as Marx would say, if equality is a "heavenly" idea coming down to human society, then its content and requirements corresponds to the "earthly life" of human beings in the civil society vis-à-vis the state, that is, where one's "birth, rank, education and occupation" do make a difference to her experience regardless of the formal rights that the state grants her as an abstract human being.[50]

Li's imagery of equality as an idea fallen from heaven also hears echoes from Plato's Allegory of the Sun where Socrates uses the Sun's relationship to the eyesight as a metaphor to describe how human beings come to knowledge. Just as the Sun, with its

[50] Marx, Karl. "On the Jewish Question." In *The Portable Marx*. Ed. Eugene Kamenka. New York: Viking Penguin. Inc. 1983.101-2.

light, makes sight possible in the human eyes, Socrates said, knowledge come into being in the human souls with the Truth which can only be provided by the Good.[51] This metaphor suggests that, unlike how knowledge was understood after the rise of modern science, knowledge is not ethically neutral but a Truth that is enlightened in the human soul only by the Good. What's helpful to us about Plato's Allegory of the Sun, however, is not how it is conventionally understood by Enlightenment thinkers; that is, it is an evidence of Plato being an idealist for whom the justice is a transcendent idea, a disembodied notion that is to be strictly detached from the material world and concrete, particular experiences. Instead, this metaphor, because of its analogy of knowing to viewing, indicates that the acquirement of knowledge is an embodied practice where Truth comes into being in human souls like sights in human eyes – each pair of human eyes that can see inhabit in a human body. A similar metaphor of knowledge to vision is in Donna Haraway's "situated knowledge" where she differentiates a feminist epistemology – a vision embodied in the human sensory system – from a God's view disguising its positionality, though Haraway would disagree with Plato that each is rational alike so the knowledge they attain will be the one, pure Truth.[52]

Now we come to read Li's characterization of equality not from the surface of the writing as a "human right," a moral status of an abstract human being or a legal status

[51] Plato. *The Republic of Plato*. Translated by Allan Bloom, Paperback third edition., Basic Books, 2016. 506d-509a.
[52] Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledge." In *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*. Sandra. Harding ed. Routledge. 2004. 81-102.

applicable to all who have the laws' recognition. Rather, we come to understand that her emphasis was that equality – its meaning, content, and extent, etc. – is like knowledge in Plato's Allegory of Sun that is acquired by concrete human beings living on earth. Equality as an *eidos* is indeed heavenly; yet for this heavenly idea to have an earthly life in human society, it must ultimately land within each human soul (not human mind) of us knowers who intellect necessarily within our concrete positionalities. For Li and her contemporary Chinese women, the *eidos* of equality landed with their souls when their bodies were hungry and their hearts broken, given the period they lived in PRC history. This experience, however, as Li wrote, has a silver lining in the sense it compelled her generation of Chinese women to think what was about equality that is valuable and worth pursuing. Obviously, "equality of men and women" written in the Constitution does not exhaust such value.

Reading Li's notion of equality as such also put us in a better position to approach her account of equality in relation to freedom which from its appearance is puzzling. Li wrote: "Essentially, equality is subjugated only to the purpose of freedom; it is the foundation of freedom of choice. When there's no freedom of choice, equality is meaningless." This comment puzzled Zheng too. In his response, Zheng suggested that Li's notion of how equality related to freedom fails to see that on many occasions equality is not compatible to freedom; and hence he bluntly criticized her for being incomprehensible, if not entirely flawed. Of course, he would raise examples of China's Pre-Reform era where freedom was given away for more equality, which was now reversed: "the Chinese society now," he wrote, "eagers to give up some of its

aspirations for equality so as to gain more freedom."[53] Apparently, like his response to other three scholars discussed above, Zheng again followed liberalism's understanding of equality *versus* freedom such as those of Rawls and Berlin. If freedom is not in strict "lexical priority" to egalitarian values as Rawls stipulated his principles of justice, when it is traded for other human aspirations, for example, equality, we should at least be clear that it is indeed sacrificed, as Berlin would argue. This position of his was more clearly revealed in his later almost accusatory tone to Li. "Li Xiaojiang said: 'for Chinese women…equality is more valuable than gold; because it is the foundation for us to be humans,'" he wrote, "'but I only want to ask: if I ask you to trade freedom for equality, would you trade? If I ask everybody to trade their freedom of moving, freedom of choosing jobs, and freedom of speech for equality, would you want that? [Li wrote that] 'equality is the foundation for us to be humans;' reading this sends shiver down my spine."[54]

But this only shows Zheng's incapability to think about equality and freedom beyond the trope of liberalism that pits the two against each other. He also, like most liberal thinkers, immediately attached normativity to both notions and established them as worthwhile human values, which makes the tension – which could have been generative – into an impasse. These limitations would not constrain Li, however, given her description of equality as a heavenly idea descending onto the human society. If for one person, the *eidos* of equality comes into being in her soul via her humanly vision,

[53] Zheng, Yefu. "Right, freedom, way-out" 1995. 99.
[54] Zheng, Yefu. "Right, freedom, way-out" 1995. 100.

what equality means to a society's social policies would be an ongoing question to be answered collectively, whether via majoritarian voting, public deliberation, competition of social power, or struggle of sheer force. Either way, equality is neither an abstract human right nor as a perfect form of egalitarianism. As she wrote, equality is neither an ideal, a principle, nor an indicator of progression.[55] From what she had experienced under China's "equality of men and women" politics, equality being an ideal (as an ideological requirement of socialism) or a principle (as a legal right written in the Chinese Constitution) does give equality a normative name and some normative power. Yet, without Chinese women actively participating in defining what concept of equality they desire and see fit, such equality only hand them from the control of their families to the control of the party state.

***A calling for women's subjective consciousness***

In response to Zheng's claim that the loss of gender equality (inefficient division of labor) outweighed the gains, Li wrote: "In fact, she [Chinese women] never lost anything… the subjective consciousness as women that we have been calling for is a higher aspiration emerged on the foundation of us "being liberated;" it is not a loss of ours, because we have never had that."[56] Formal equality had provided Chinese women with the legal ground to participate in social life as men's equals, rather than dependents of their fathers and husbands. Yet, they needed to first know what they *want* to strive

[55] Li, Xiaojiang. "'Equality between men and women" 1995. 96.
[56] Li, Xiaojiang. "'Equality between men and women" 1995. 97.

for in the social life newly opened to them. Without a capacity of subjectivity – which Chinese men were also deprived of under Maoism – formal equality only ended up being empty, or to use her language, "meaningless (*haowu yiyi*)." This is what Li meant when she wrote that "equality is subjugated only to the purpose of freedom," that equality is "the foundation of freedom of choice".

To defend a "public space (*gonggong kongjian* 公共空间)" for women became an important theme in Li's thinking in the 1990s.[57] In 1993, she encouraged her fellow Chinese feminist scholars that now it is time to "say goodbye to the past:" whereas in the 1980s women's studies' main achievement in China was to "separate" women's studies from social sciences generally, and to establish autonomous status of women's issues as a legitimate research subject, she said, now it was time to move beyond that achievement and to "integrate back to the society."[58] And indeed, essentialist emphasis of gender differences started to fade from her writings since the 1990s; she continued, however, with her injunction of the importance of women's subjective consciousness being awakened, and more concretely associate it with women actively participating in the China's deepening and expanding social reforms.

[57] She may have borrowed this notion from Habermas who began to gain popularity among Chinese intellectuals in the 1990s. But I'm not go into discussions over whether or not her concept of "public space" has substantial intellectual ties with Habermas' "public sphere," especially given that her writing did not engage with him directly.

[58] Li, Xiaojiang. "Looking back on women's movement in the New Era," a talk she gave at "Chinese women and development – social positions, health, and employment," a workshop partly funded by The Ford Foundation at Tianjin Normal University in 1993. See *Gaobie zuotian: xinshiqi funü yundong huigu*. [*Saying Goodbye to Yesterday: Looking back on Women's Movement in the New Era*]. Hennan People's Press. 1995. 19-20.

Her new emphasis of a "public space" may be related to the declined political climates in the Chinese at the turn of the1990s that had led to a sudden deterioration of environment for research in humanities and social sciences. That is, it might be a strategic retreat from a more progressive activism to a defense of space for survival.[59] I will more substantively discuss how events in 1989 had affective Li's thinking in the next chapter. However, if we looked at this shift in light of the debates over women's rights versus economic efficiency that we discussed above, her "public space" comes to assume more theoretical importance regardless of whether or not it was a strategic protection of the field under hostile political situations. When Li accounted for her hesitation to use the term "feminism (*nüquan zhuyi*, women's rights-ism)" in the Chinese context, she made the following comments on what politics is:

> "women's studies [in PRC] at its beginning seemed to have depoliticized itself [because of its avoidance of using the word *nüquan* (women's right)], [however,] when women's studies became a kind of power and formed a public sphere, *this is precisely politics*.[60] [On the

[59] In 1991 at a Q&A session at the Department of East Asian Studies, Harvard University, she said: "in the aftermath of 1989 [The Tiananmen Protests] … whereas almost all fields in social sciences have been severely undermined [in China], we were able to preserve women's studies…the first reason was because of its low politicization…as long as we do not mention 'feminism (*nüquan zhuyi*, women's rights-ism),' that we do not mention women's movement, we will be able to do many things. The reason that we call our field 'women's studies' is to depoliticize it." See *Tiaozhan yu huiying: xinshiqi funü yanjiu jiangxuelu* [*Challenges and Responses: Talks on Women's Studies in the New Era*]. Henan People's Press. 1996. 61

On a different occasion when she was questioned on her appearing at a government approved meeting which many others refused to attend as a protest of China's human rights issues, Li answered: "this is a question about personal choice. If I also protest, then I would not be able to stay in China. But had I left, I would not be able have done as much as I managed to do [for Chinese women]." See "On the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women" A talk she gave at Ontario Institute of Studies of Education, University of Toronto. March 1994. *Challenges and Responses.*1996. 157

[60] It's worthwhile to note that the notions of right and power are easily confused for Chinese people because both pronounce as *quanli*, but rights as 权利 and power as 权力. Both has the root of *quan*

> flip side], women's studies and women movement in the 1920s looked political at face value; but because women were objects while men were subjects [of these movements and research], this precisely depoliticized women's studies, making it a science."[61]

Rather than a language of rights which in the Chinese context was political because it was potentially confrontational to the state, for Li, a public sphere that allows women's issues to be spoken by women and to be heard by the public – with constraints, yes – was a politics more useful to Chinese women because that is where women's social power would grow. Once that social power has taken its root, it became harder to be taken away than the discourse of rights. And on a side note, two decades later in 2017, "civil rights" indeed came to be listed one of "Seven Don't Mentions" that the party required college teachers to avoid in their teachings.

When her colleagues were taking pains arguing with those who prioritize freedom of exchange to gender equality, Li rose above these philosophical and moral impasses and reminded them that these are not questions for us theorists to give determinate answers, but instead, political questions to be debated in the public sphere; and it is by taking part in that debate that Chinese women will come to accumulate their social and political power. "Freedom" and "equality" in this light, are not ahistorical values that

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which originally meant the weight used on a balanced scale and later came to mean "to measure and to evaluate." In "power," a concept indigenous to Chinese, 力 *li* means strength. This makes sense because when a person has power, it means she is in the position to hold the scale and decide the balance. In "right," an imported concept from the West in late Qing, 利 *li* means interest. It is a common mistake among ordinary Chinese people to confuse the two. In college political sciences majors, this would be one of the first things that a professor clarifies to the students. This makes it more important for Li Xiaojiang to clarify that for her power is closer to politics than rights.

[61] "Women's Studies and its role in the social development of China." a talk she gave at School of East Asian Studies, Freie Universität Berlin in 1991. See *Challenges and Responses.* 1996. 133. Emphasis mine.

need clear definitional boundaries when applied to social policies, but conceptual containers that all of us constantly fill with meanings. The political significance of these notions, however, does not lie in each of us defining them via careful reasoning, but that although we are bound to take from containers that have already been filled by our peers to live our live, but we are also able to pour new meaning to them. In this light, Li reminded her fellow Chinese feminists, what they should do is not to involve in arguments in what "freedom" and "equality" are. Rather, the political life of women's movement lies in us firmly defending women's positions, in helping them grow their powers, and in creating contents for notions like "freedom" and "equality," just as men have always been doing.

***The "Marxist hat:" growing up means to come to term with the past***

Understanding women's movements' political efficacy beyond a discourse for rights also opened conceptual pathway for Li to think about women's liberation's Marxist heritage in China beyond either abandoning it completely (as required by some of her diasporic feminist colleagues) or abandoning Marxism's critical edge for pro-market arguments (like the newly emerging functional structuralist sociologists). Either approach, for Li, did not address how Marxism had shaped Chinese feminism and Chinese women; instead, for her, to term with China's socialist legacy is crucial for Chinese women to develop a subjective consciousness and reclaim their agency as humans.

In "the Marxism's hat," (1993) Li again used her figurative language to guide us beyond binary categorizations via the dialectical lens she started to develop in the 1980s. Responding the criticism that she still put so much weight on Marxism – both its theoretical framework and its significance to understand feminism in China – after more non-Marxist theories and materials became available to Chinese scholars, she wrote:

> "Marxism changed China; China also changed Marxism. When my generation of women gradually came of age and started to think, we came to find ourselves inhabiting this changed China and this China-nized (*zhongguohua de*) Marxism. Born from such a mother's womb, attached to a umbilical cord that is still dripping blood, how can we join the global family [of women's movement] without cleaning and healing [of the wound]? If we are still attached to the umbilical cord, how can we grow healthily in this family with autonomy, confidence, and strength? …My "cleaning (*qingli* 清理)" is not to seek the true orthodox of Marxism…but to free ourselves [Chinese women] from fetters of those theories that have been imposed on our minds as Truth…I'm currently on this project of cleaning, but it is a different project than critiquing [Marxism]."[62]

Her metaphor of an unbilicacord takes us back the notion of self-contemplation she developed in *Aesthetic*, that is, a concept of subjectivity that is enabled, rather than hindered, by social construction, where we also heard resonance in Pitkin's account of "growing up". Li was reminding us that being born inevitably is connected to a wound. It is a wound that becomes a permanent mark on each of our bodies – the belly button – that signifies our undeniable status of dependence in the past. It is also a wound,

[62] Li, Xiaojiang. "The Marxism's hat". in *Towards Woman*. 17.

however, that must occur for the infant to come to gain her independence from the mother; and if we do not clean and tend this wound properly, and give it time to heal, we would not be able to grow up healthily, not to mention self-development and -realization. Women's liberation in China, in her view, was given this wound by China's communist past. Chinese women must eventually outgrow these traumas, but that requires more than just cutting off the umbilical cord without proper care for it to heal, not even to mention pretending that it never existed, because without it we would not grow into who we were today. So, unlike her functional structuralist colleagues in sociology who used Marxism as a mere textual resource they can appropriate to make their points, for Li, it is a living discourse. And unlike her colleagues who were eager to break with the Marxist tradition, for Li, it was living discourse that used to give women's liberation in China resources, if not life. Like the Yellow River shaping the Chinese land, giving Chinese people life-sustaining resources but also deadly floods, Marxism in Li's account, while it had brought hardship that her generation of Chinese women had endured, also gave life to women's liberation of China. Now that Chinese women were opened up to more resources other than Marxism to think about their liberation, their project should be one of "cleaning (*qingli*)," that is, to recognize that they have shaped by China's past socialist practices, as in their self-contemplation on how they have shaped by patriarchal culture, and from there to decide where their future should land and how to get there. And this, again, is an expression of her formulation of women's subjective consciousness.

At the end of the article, she wrote: "criticism from my friends is sensible. Women's research is women's research, it is for women, and for the entire humanity, it should integrate all kinds of schools of thought, there's no need for it to wear any hat…I should say farewell to the past too. *Eve's Exploration* [where her arguments engaged mainly with Marxist theories] surely will not stay relevant for later generations. And I have no regret".[63] As we will now turn to see in the next chapter, from mid-1990s onwards, Li did move on from her Marxism's hat as she was to encounter some new interlocutors she felt compelled to respond to, and as the Chinese state eventually found her positions beyond toleration and regulated by direct force. However, as I will show in the next chapter, her original formation of subject formation as a synthesis of the Self and society would continue to underpin her new intellectual journey.

[63] Li, Xiaojiang. "The Marxism's hat". in *Towards Woman*. 18-9.

# Chapter Four

## Philosophy *versus* Politics:

## Finding Freedom in Post-Utopian Ruins beyond the 1990s

### 1. A theorist's choice: self-exile from politics?

Li was turning forty in 1990. Ordinary Chinese people like to quote Confucius that by the age of 40 one should "no longer be perplexed," especially when they want to patronize a younger person to be more responsible for his or her life. In *Analects*, however, this is part of Confucius' review of his life which takes place right after he establishes that the king should rule the people by virtue and propriety vis-à-vis laws and punishments.[1] Some thus argue that Confucius meant specifically that he became politically mature at the age of forty. Li's life and career post 1990, however, turned out to be trying years when political maturity was mostly needed precisely because how perplexing politics was.

This section tells a story of Li's 1990s as decade of self-estrangement. There is ample evidence to support this narrative. Apparently, she voluntarily distanced and marginalized herself from various scenes where she could have played important roles. As Li recollected in 2014, in the 90s, she chose to "raise reins and steer the horse onto

[1] The full quote is "At fifteen, I set my heart on learning; at thirty, I stood firm; at forty, I came to be free from doubts; at fifty, I understood the Decree of Heaven; At sixty my ear was attuned; at seventy I follow my heart's desire without overstepping the line." *Analects.* Book 2.

a different path (*fendao yangbiao* 分道扬镳)" with her many of her fellow Chinese scholars,[2] specifically parting ways with those who directly used concepts in "Western feminism" – which she meant Euro-American Gender Studies – to analyze Chinese women and assumed that it could directly speak to Chinese women's lived experiences.[3] She decided to "abandon her arms, step away from the battlefield, and return to her rural home (*qijia guitian* 弃甲归田)."[4] That is, like many other Chinese scholars of her time, she became excited about theoretical possibilities introduced to China from Western academia – which she meant mostly postmodern/post-structural theories – but eventually she was disappointed and decided to retreat to field research in grassroot China. Her two major non-theoretical projects "20th century Oral History Chinese Women" and "the Women's Museum" took shape in early 1990s and materialized in early 2000s. In both these projects, she collected firsthand narratives from ordinary women, from those working in the Women's Federation to some of her fellow academics, from CPC women cadres – high ranking to street level – to illiterate women peasants. Indeed, she retreated from the battlefield of academic debates – in which she used to be active in 1980s – and returned to her rural home.

***Rejecting state intervention and nationalism***

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[2] Li, Xiaojiang. *Duihua Wang Hui: Guankui zhongguo dalu xueshu fengxiang yu jingxiang 1990-2011*. [*Dialogue with Wang Hui: a case study of scholarism in mainland China (1990/2011)*.] Beijing: *Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe*. (Social Sciences Academic Press). 2014. 9-10

[3] We know that she referred to this specifically because of the reference entry she pointed us to when describing her "raising reins and steer the horse onto a different path" at *Femin?ism*: *the Clash of Cultures and Recognition of Identities.* ed. Li Xiaojiang. Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Press. 2000. 1-5

[4] *Post-utopian Critique*. 2013. 547

The first scene from which she exiled herself was the non-government organizations (NGOs) on women starting to burgeon since the state's decision to hold the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women and its parallel NGO Forum. For many Chinese feminist scholars and activists, The UN Conferences were a turning point for feminism in China, because since the start of their preparations in 1992, they only introduced concepts of feminism, gender, and non-government organizations (NGOs) to China, but also involved an unprecedently number of Chinese women, giving them opportunities to visit overseas and building connections with global feminist movements that could never have happened if it was not for these conferences. The UN women's conferences turned out to be a turning point for Li personally as well – but apparently not with the same bright prospectus. Because of her open criticism of the Chinese government's handlings of these conferences, and her open withdrawal from preparation work for and rejection to attend these meetings, she lost her tenured professorship at Zhengzhou University and in the rest of her life lived under government surveillance and unstable working conditions for women's studies that she cherished to her heart.

Li was not the only Chinese scholar who approached the UN conference with skepticism. Most Chinese women participants were aware that the government held these meetings for political expediency. That is, after the state's international image was severely undermined by how they treated protestors in the Tiananmen demonstrations in 1989, hosting the UC Conference on women would be a good opportunity showcase to the world that China was still committed to progression and

openness, and more important, to integrate in global capitalism.[5] For Chinese scholars and activists, government endorsement might bring public attention and support to women's issues; but to the opposite to how those in liberal democracies would commonly see it, for Chinese feminists, public attention also meant more state monitoring of their activities.[6]

Their worry was prescient. Both UN Conference and the NGO Forum were eventually held in China in September 1995, the Government's growing paranoia as the meetings approached had widely documented and received many criticisms. The most internationally faulted move of the state was its hastily arranged relocation of the NGO forum, which was set to take place in downtown Beijing, to Huairou, an obscure town 40 miles north of Beijing. As Susan Magarey – an Australian historian – recalled, this relocation was so rushed

some of the meeting venues in Huairou were roofless, unfinished buildings and temporary tents. Such infrastructure situation later became an issue when an untimely torrential rain later collapsed some of the tents washed sideways of the concrete blocks connecting the tents – which then invited more criticism from disability advocates groups because it made movement difficult for wheelchairs.[7]

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[5] Wang Zheng. "Maoism, Feminism, and the UN Conference on Women: Women's Studies Research in Cotemporary China" *Journal of Women's History*. 1997. 142. Also see Wang Zheng "A historic Turning Point for the Women's Movement in China." *Signs*. 1996. 193.
[6] Wang. 1997. 143
[7] Magarey, Susan. 1995. "Looking at the World through Women's Eyes: One Experience of the Ngo Forum on Women Beijing, 30 August – 8 September 1995." *Australian Feminist Studies* 10 (22). 139, 149.

Sub-standard infrastructure was out of character for the Chinese government which until this date cared the most how it presented itself to the outside world. But this indicated how important the other side of the trade-off was to Beijing at the time. It was not about the overseas women attendees who triggered uneasiness – which the state claimed to be[8] – but having local non-government affiliated(monitored) activists gathering already disturbed a lot of nerves, not to mention having them gathering at the center of the capital city. The one-hour distance between Huairou and Beijing made it difficult for NGO Forum participants to travel to the UN Conference, but foreigners were less affected than locals. Professor Magarey reported being able to share taxies with other NGO delegates to travel to Beijing to meet foreign government representatives they wished to lobby – unbothered by the Chinese authority – but the fare was obviously beyond affordable for the Chinese back then.[9] Foreign NGO delegates were also able to hold their panels at the Forum free from interference and restrictions; but this did not apply for the local Chinese participants. First, they were not allowed to hold panels jointly with foreign women; then all 47 panels held by Chinese women were impelled to undergo strict screening beforehand to make sure they focus on displaying Chinese women's achievement rather than discussing

[8] Rumors about foreign women planning to protest naked.
[9] See Magarey, 1995. 148. One-way cost of taxi, she reported, of was roughly 100 Chinese *yuan* (approx. 14.5 USD today). For Professor Magarey this was a reasonable 16 Australian dollars, but the average monthly salary of an ordinary Chinese living in urban area was only around 460 to 480 *yuan* in 1995. See Website of National Bureau of Statistics of China. See https://www.stats.gov.cn/sj/tjgb/ndtjgb/qgndtjgb/202302/t20230206_1901939.html.

problems. At the time that the forum took place, all Chinese woman participants read line by line according to pre-approved scripts rehearsed many times.[10]

For many Chinese women participants back then, their cooperation with the government was a worthwhile tradeoff to keep the space open for their work, no matter how limited the space was. As Wang recounted, her Chinese friends who were part of the NGO forum told her, "just keep a low profile and wait for the paranoia to pass." "They sound like seasoned farmers," Wang wrote, "who knew all too well how to contend with bad weather: in this kind of unfavorable political climate, one should just do some fixing and repair work, preparing for a warmer, more productive season." [11] We might expect Li to agree with them because we heard similar perspectives from her in 1991 and 1994 in last chapter. That is, to "depoliticize" women's movement – specifically to refrain from invoking the concept of human right – was precisely the politics that Chinese women needed because it helps to keep a public space for feminist activism under the authoritarianism. We remembered her saying that "when women's studies became a kind of power and formed a public sphere," she said, "this is precisely politics."[12] However, only a year later in the fall of 1995, she decided to openly criticize the Chinese government in Chinese on Hong Kong-based journal *Ming Pao Monthly* and explained her withdrawal from both the UN Conference and the NGO Forum.[13] In

[10] Wang Zheng. 1997. 145.
[11] Wang Zheng. 1997. 145.
[12] Women's Studies and its role in the social development of China." a talk she gave at School of East Asian Studies, Freie Universität Berlin in 1991. See *Challenges and Responses.* 1996. 133.
[13] Until March 1994, it looked like she was still positive about the Women's Conference and thought that despite the state's interference, the meeting would still benefit Chinese women. See "On the 1995 Fourth

this statement, she criticized the Chinese government for turning the two conferences into a "patriotic and nationalist movement mobilized by the state," and that she did wish to participate in "any kind of quasi-militarized exercise of presenting a united front to the outside world."[14] She then revealed the sanctions she received because her disagreement with the government's handling with the conferences. Journals across the Chinese mainland received instructed to not to publish her articles or photographs; book exhibitions during the Women's Conference were not allowed to display her works or volumes she had exhibited. Research projects under her direction also suffered serious setbacks. What angered her the most, she wrote, was that "President of Zhengzhou University accused us for 'promoting bourgeois feminism' and dissolved overnight the Women's College that I had founded".[15]

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World Conference on Women" A talk she gave at Ontario Institute of Studies of Education, University of Toronto. March 1994. *Challenges and Responses.*1996. 157.

In July 1994, in an interview with Chang Xiangqun, a then PhD student at the City University of London, Li mentioned that she refused to be part of the preparation for the UN women's conference because she received a lot of political pressure since late 1993. I did not find any certain information on what precisely such pressure was, but it definitely had something to do with her disagreement with the government silencing voices of women that beg to differ from the government proved script. As she said, "The entire 95 Conference became a meeting of the state; all women's issues became political issues...everyone just repeats what the state says. The state issued a White Paper, everybody needs follow what it instructs, all can only say the same thing, and do the same thing". See *Challenges and Responses.*1996. 350.

[14] Li, Xiaojiang. "*Nüquan zhuyi de jueze – zhongguo dalu shoujian nüzi xueyuan chuanbanren jujue chuxi shifuhui* [A feminist's choice: the founder of the first women's college in China refused to attend UN Women's Conference]" *Ming Pao Monthly*. 1995. 83. She also revealed that for this reason, she decided to apply to a visiting scholar program at Harvard University to "disappear" and remain silent on the issues that the government forbade her from having a different voice.

[15] *Ming Pao Monthly*. 1995. 83. In this statement, Li also revealed that she was working on a book entitled *Women and Nation: A Memorandum of 1995* in which she planned to analyze the intricate dynamics between the state and women's movements via the narratives of the conferences from Chinese participants. This book was never published, but some similar efforts were seen in a later edited volume Li, Xiaojiang. (ed.) *Shenlin "Qi"jing* [*Entering a "Wonderous" Realm*.] Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Press. 2000.

Her women's college was dismissed in March 1995. See Li, Xiaojiang. 2024. *Huaren Jiaguo yu Tianxia: Zhi "Yangwang Xingkong, Xinxiang Yuanfang" de Nianqin Xuezi* [*Chinese People: Family,*

This open statement would change Li's stable life as a tenured professor at the age of 46. Official accounts of her life since 1995 remain deliberately ambiguous, recording only roughly her teaching experiences in various universities. We can only indicate from scattered evidence her life of this period. Since 1993 She was on the visiting scholar program at Harvard University and was still in Massachusetts at the New Year of 1995.[16] Despite obvious political pressure she sensed that the Chinese state put on her since late 1993, she was back to Zhengzhou in April 1995 the latest.[17] Her *Ming Pao* statement was out in October 1995. In 1997 she was pressured to leave Zhengzhou University because the university stopped issuing her salaries. In the same year, she started teaching at Dalian University where she later founded a center for gender studies. Her experience in Dalian did not seem promising either, because for some reason the gender studies center stopped functioning in 2008.[18]

In 1997, she started establishing some working relationships with Shaanxi Normal University in Xi'an, including taking with her 471 items she had collected since 1990 for a "women's museum" which eventually came into being in 2002.[19] In 2010, she donated over 4000 volumes of books and reference materials, as well as recordings collected from her women's oral history project to Women's Studies Center at Shaanxi

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*Nation, and the World – Letters to Young Scholars Who "Gaze at the Stars and Aspire to Distant Horizons"]*. 2024. London: Global Century Press. ISBN 978-1-913522-90-2 (paperback, in Chinese). 126

[16] See Li, Xiaojiang. "Creating a public space." 175.

[17] *Challenges and Responses.*1996. 350. Interview with Chang Xiangqun.

[18] *Chinese People*, 126

[19] See http://bwg1.snnu.edu.cn/index.htm. Website of Shaanxi Normal University Museum. The "women's museum" is now part of the University Museum. Exhibits include Jiangyong women's scripts (a script invented and used by Yao women in Jiangyong, Hunan to write to each other), reproductive culture, needle work, and wedding costumes. Also see https://wsc.snnu.edu.cn/zxgk/zxdsj.htm. Website of Shaanxi Normal University, Women's Studies Center.

Normal University, but it was not until 2019 that she was hired as honorary professor there.[20] I cannot find much information from open resources of precisely what sorts of political harassment she received throughout these years, but from her own account, it sounded like intense state surveillance. "For over 20 years," she wrote, "I had lived a life like a fish in a glass tank, with my entire private life transparent."[21]

***Estranging from Western academia and overseas China Studies***

Many of Li's contemporaries opted to move overseas when political climate at home went ominous. Li did consider that option, but eventually she decided not to go to any of her immigration interviews with the United States nor with Canada. "I am not afraid of being chased away [by the Chinese state], I am more afraid not being able to come back," she wrote.[22] She was already an established, internationally known scholar at the time, it would be easy for her to leave China; but once she did so, she might never be allowed back to the country.

Li's cherishment of her work on Women's Studies in China was beyond doubt; yet she also left us with ample writings to ponder that her uneasiness with overseas academia had also contributed to this decision. The early 1990s was a disheartening time for scholarly inquiries in Chinese politics generally; It was the aftermath of the Chinese state turned its guns to its young student protesters asking for democratization

[20] See https://wsc.snnu.edu.cn/zxgk/zxdsj.htm. Website of Shaanxi Normal University, Women's Studies Center.
[21] *Chinese People*, 58
[22] *Chinese People*, 58

and of the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc. As Li recounted, Chinese scholars overseas like her were mostly met with "half suspicion, and half pity."[23] Some frowned without a second thought and challenged that feminism was simply logically incompatible to exist in China because of the authoritarian nature of the Chinese state. Others were almost certain that China would follow the path of Soviet Union.[24]

No wonder when a 27-year-old Tang Ling wrote to Li in 2019 expressing her frustration with having to "spend 90% of [her] time listening to 'China is the head of all evils'" at Oxford University – where Tang was studying her doctorate in sociology – Li decided to write back to this young student she had no prior acquaintance a series of five letters.[25] It looks like that thirty years had passed, Chinese scholars' experiences in Western academia of humanities and social sciences had nevertheless not changed much, despite the fact that China has not collapsed, at least not yet. The issue, unlike some would frame it, was not whether Chinese scholars agree that China will follow the Soviet Union, that China is the head of all evils, or whether feminism is possible under China's authoritarianism. Both of Li and Tang knew the criticisms of China and why such criticisms.[26] What wrenched their hearts, suggested by writings of them both, was something else.

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[23] *Chinese People*, 5

[24] *Chinese People*, 5. Also see "Open letter to Su Shaozhi." 277

[25] Tang wrote to Li originally to invite her to a China Studies event at Oxford. Li was not able to attend at last, but this initial correspondence grew into a series of exchanges of letters which later published in *Chinese People.*

[26] We have already learned political and personal trauma Li had experienced during the Cultural Revolution and her positions on that from her work. Tang received her undergraduate education in Hong Kong early 2010s when criticism of the Chinese regime had unfortunately morphed into explicit hostility and discrimination against immigrants from the Chinese Mainland. Tang raised the example of a

In Tang's letter to Li, she did describe everyday blatant racist harassment she experienced from ordinary Oxfordians which was unfortunately also exacerbated by her gender noncompliance appearance. She also highlighted her disappointment with academia which she used to romanticize. It was at Oxford University, the jewel in the crown of academia, that she found the parochialism and biases in their worst forms. Maybe those centuries' old chandeliers and stained-glass windows give so much dilutional light refractions that self-entitled arrogance and inability of self-retrospection could pass as literati refinement? But if all of these were just a young person getting to know the real world, the end of the letter revealed the issue specific to her situation as a Chinese scholar in Western academia:

> "Oxford had entirely shattered the idealism that I once held about academia…I believe I must return to China…though I know that there will be more and greater problems awaiting me if I return.[27] But at least these problems will not *be like empty air which I cannot even strike a blow*, because at least [back in China] *my anger and tears will find some echoes there.*"[28]

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derogatory song went viral in 2011 on the Hong Kong Internet adapted from Hongkong-ese singer Eason Chan's "under the Fuji mountain," "Locusts' takeover:"

> "The insect-state, alia 'Shina' [a derogatory term of China originated in Japan's invasion], long being disgraced across East Asia. One sentence of Mandarin a day to assimilate me. You come to Hong Kong to break into my borders; a love of encroaching [others'] territories is your very nature, parasitizing your way in, until finally to secure your identities [permanent residencies]."

See *Chinese People*. 81-2

[27] By which she meant lack of political right, academic freedom, rule of law, and etc.
[28] *Chinese Nation*. 96. My emphasis.

It may surprise the reader, but these sentences strike me with a resonance in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. With poignant, moving language, Fanon described the black man coming to total disillusionment of the radical freedom and human agency celebrated in existentialism that his French education once taught him:

> "I wanted, quite simply to be a man among men. I would have liked to enter our world *young and sleek*, a world we could built together…[But] *my body was returned to me* spread-eagled, disjointed, redone, draped in mourning on this white winter's day…[w]hereas I was prepared to forget, to forgive, to love, *my message was flung back at me like a slap in the face*..."[29]

By no means do I intend to suggest that Tang's experience at Oxford is the same as that of a black man from the French colony of Martinique in Paris, but the similarity in image of having one's pure heart desirous to engage, to contribute, and create only flung back at oneself, of having one's enthusiasm only amputated is hard to miss. The lived experience of colonialism for the black man is not misrecognition, as Charles Taylor had it, a demeaning image of himself mirrored back to him by the society; nor is an internalization of such images encroaching his understanding of himself as some feminist theorists argued.[30] What was unbearable to the Black man's heart, Fanon wrote, was not "a feeling of inferiority," but "a feeling of not existing."[31] Tang was the same age as Fanon at the time they wrote the passages above, both 27-year-old. In fact,

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[29] Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Philcox, Richard. (1952/2008). New York: Grave Press. 92-4. Emphasis mine.
[30] See for example Taylor, Charles. "Politics of Recognition." in Taylor, Charles, and Amy Gutmann. *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Princeton University Press, 1994. And Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and Politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press, 1990.
[31] Fanon. 2008. 118.

Fanon's language of entering the world "young and sleek" also hears an echo in the a well-known concept in Confucianist classic *The Mencius* where Mencius argued that a truly virtuous person would not lose his "heart of a naked child" (*chizi zhixin* 赤子之心). I do not know if Tang was thinking either of Fanon or Mencius at the time she wrote to Li, but the idea that the perfect form of human virtue lies in a person's moral sincerity being intact from worldly experience like a newborn infant – unlike in Aristotle where virtue comes into its full potential in worldly activates – has been very well stored in Chinese society until today.

Tang and Fanon's first-person narrative draw our attention to the psychological burden that colonial subjects experience in colonialism's legacy. For me, this seems to be an aspect that does not get talked about enough in critiques in the criticism of Eurocentrism of political theory. Emerging from the 1990s, such endogenous critique of political theory challenging the discipline's long tradition to revolve around the "canon" of Westen political thought has been raised from various angles. It could be a question of methodology: Is a "Eurocentric" academic discipline sufficient to address world-wide political issues, especially that now such issues easily spilt over nation borders? Or it could be a concern with philosophical coherence: if political theory defines itself as the study of foundational, if not universal, political questions such as the legitimacy of political authority, nature of the state, principles of justice, and etc., does it not necessitate a prescription for it to enrich itself by incorporating perspectives from non-Western societies on these issues? Otherwise, it should have changed its name to Euro-American political thought. It could also be an argument of reparative

justice: non-Western political thoughts have been ignored and marginalized in mainstream academia because of the West's domination of the world established via settler colonialism and military invasion, so now a decolonization of political theory should be down the line to rectify such historical injustices.[32]

None of these perspectives gives satisfactory answers as to why it is intrinsically problematic to use resources from the Western "canon" to analyze issues in non-Euro-American contexts.[33] Postcolonial historians come to rescue with a perspective of knowledge production. For example, Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests that categories and concepts originating from European traditions became necessary structures to understand the phenomenon of political modernity anywhere in the world thanks to a "historicist" notion of time that the colonial powers carried to the non-European peoples with their gunboats and cannons in the nineteenth century.[34] Time that is single, homogeneous, linear, and secular, is a historical construction of modern Europe; but it became a way for the European powers to put the colonize people in an imaginary "waiting room of history," telling them "not yet" in their search for political

[32] See Jenco, Leigh, Idris, Murad, Thomas, Megan. "Comparison, Connectivity, and Disconnection." In *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Political Theory*. Leigh K. Jenco, (ed.) et al. 2019. 1-14.
[33] For example, the critique of political theory for being Eurocentric cannot merely be framed as a concern with the diversity or pluralism which are values cherished by liberalism in the first place. It is also a stretch of argument so say that the people from non-Western cultures are necessarily in any way "oppressed" by having to use non-native languages and conceptual frameworks to theorize about their situations. Do these people really feel oppressed? Is it of necessity that a people/person's subjectivity is undermined if the theorist does not use a discourse indigenous to the people he theorizes about? Are we, who write in English about non-English-speaking populations not respecting these people's subjectivity? Are we oppressed too, because Western academia left us with no choice but to write in a foreign language? Maybe we are, but then what? Are "oppression" and "subjectivity" Western concepts too?
[34] Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference.* Princeton University Press. 2000. 4, 7.

modernity.[35] Such historicism, Chakrabarty suggests, is well alive in today's discipline of history, where global political thoughts are categorized as those to be historicized and those that historicize. Thoughts that are not compatible to historicist understanding of time, for example, Indian peasant rebels' narrative of supernatural beings exercising agency to aid their movements, are "pasts that resist historization" which need to be reorganized or reduced to accounts that these rebels have primordial superstitions, which eventually need to be modernized and secularized.[36]

The distinction between those who historicize and those who are historicized was depicted as a psychological burden of the colonial subjects in Fanon. Even when blackness was allowed to be asserted and celebrated, he lamented, it came to be deemed a historical phase of human history; regardless of how much positive color is assigned to it, it is seen as a primitive civilizational stage of human history, which is to be overcome eventually under the universal scheme of modernization. "And there you have it;" he wrote, "I did not create meaning for myself; the meaning was already there, waiting."[37] Having nowhere to go but to be prisoned in a European narrative of modernization, the black man felt that his subjectivity to author his own story – a sense of personal autonomy that is valued so deeply in modernity – was perpetually taken away from him.

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[35] Chakrabarty, 2000. 8

[36] Chakrabarty, 2000. 106. To clarify, Chakrabarty does not suggest that political narratives of non-Western contexts should be taken in its original, pure form without any mediation of academic disciplinary standards. The best that historians can do, he wrote, is to let go their desire for common grounds of what can be counted as "workable truth," but just to sit with the multiplicity of ways of being in the world. See Chakrabarty, 2000. 99, 101.

[37] Fanon. 2008. 113.

"I hailed the world, and the world amputated my enthusiasm."[38] Such is how both Tang and Li felt when they were abroad as Chinese scholars. The first time Li went outside the Chinese Mainland to Hong Kong towards the end of year 1989, a woman lawyer from Taiwan said to her: "there's not even human rights in the Chinese Mainland. What's there to talk about women's rights? what's there to talk about women's studies?" So carelessly, all the work to which Li had devoted herself for almost a decade, to address concrete and mostly painful lived experiences of Chinese women under Maoism, to defend room for Women's Studies in China painstakingly against stubborn male scholars and politically privileged Women's Federation cadres, got casually waved away as irrelevant by one way-too-abstract concept of human rights of liberalism. Her dejection was reflected in her defensive response out of instinct. She said: "There're 600 million women in China," she replied, "think about this number. Is this not a question of humanity? They are human beings, and they are living their lives, have you thought about that? I want to know why they cry and why they laugh, and I want to know what they are thinking and what they are doing. This is my women's studies."[39]

Unlike the 27-year-old Tang, however, 40-year-old Li went further and indicated a conceptual issue within overseas China studies more generally that had contributed to such shared emotional strain Chinese scholars experienced overseas. As she reflected later on this exchange with the Taiwanese lawyer, she said: "By saying this [to her], my

[38] Fanon. 2008. 94.
[39] See *Towards Women*. 1995. 53.

point was that we should first learn the conditions of Chinese women, looking at what Chinese women want rather than what the [Chinese] government currently wants them to do. These are two completely different perspectives."[40] Of course, that feminism is impossible under authoritarianism is simply a flawed perspective: to the contrary, it is precisely because that authoritarian state suppresses political and civil liberty that feminism as a democratic social energy is felt and needed the most. This unexamined prejudice, however, Li showed us, reflected a conflation of Chinese people with the Chinese state; the latter is a conceptual flaw.

For us political theorists/scientists, this is not a remarkable point to make. We all learn to distinguish concepts of "state," "country," "nation," and "regime" in our college Political Science 101 classes. An anecdote that Li once shared at a talk of hers, however, shows us that well-intentional people would miss this point because they are not always aware of their positionalities in geopolitical power dynamics. She recollected:

> "Before I visited overseas, many women's studies scholars from the West came to China. Almost all of them would ask me the same question: 'what is the most major problem for Chinese women?' … I found this question very difficult to answer, so stayed silent… They told me, [however:] 'you should not stay silent, [because] if you go abroad, whether in the US or in Canada, you will encounter the same question.' So, when I went to Canada, I asked [Canadian scholars]: "what is the most major problem for women in Canada?" They said they didn't know how to answer. When I went to Washington and Boston, I asked [American scholars]: "what is the most major women's problem in the US?" They also said they could not answer, because it is too complicated

[40] "Making a public space – women's studies in China in the 1980s." A talk she gave at Center for China Studies, UC Berkeley. October 1991. See *Challenge and Response.*1996. 13-4.

> a question. So, I ask them: 'then why you ask *me* this question?' (The entire room burst into laughter.)"[41]

With her tongue on the cheek, Li flipped the question posed from the "center" back to "center," and thus helped scholars like us positioned in the Euro-American center see that if we imagine all societies as necessarily diverse, with each of their members as agentic, full persons – each of whom has concrete and distinct characters, experiences, and thinking – then maybe we need to think twice about research approaches that treat people from any society – for example, China – as unifying population from which they generate knowledge. And alas, the latter is still the case today.

## 2. A pursuit of truth: necessarily anti-politics?

Turning away from a disappointing western academia to live with a repressing authoritarian regime, Li's academic trajectory from mid-1995 onwards looks like one of retreating. Indeed, since then, she had marginalized herself from the center of debates in Chinese academia. We were not to see any new academic work from her until 2010. In this over-a-decade silence, Li focused instead on fulfilling her aspiration to "leave Beijing to gain China," as she wrote in her letter to Su,[42] committing to her oral history project and her "women's museum" which materialized in 2003 and 2011 respectively.

Since 2010s, there emerged in her work a new emphasis of a pursuit of truth as the appropriate orientation of academic research, and that such a pursuit of truth is

[41] "Women's problems in China's social reform in the 1980s." a talk she gave at the School of Humanities at Heidelberg University, Germany. December 1991. See *Challenges and Responses*. 84.
[42] Li, Xiaojiang. "Open Letter to Su Shaozhi". *Positions*. 1. February 1993. 271.

incompatible with "politics." We have discussed in the previous Chapter that in the 1980s, she already invoked an "objective fact" in her insistence of an essentialized notion of woman. But it was until her 2014 book-length critique of Wang Hui (1959-), a male Chinese scholar who rose to fame as Li faded out, that Li explicitly used the language of "truth (*zhen*)" and "a pursuit of truth (*qiuzhen*)" as the most essential criteria to define academia vis-à-vis politics. Such distinction continued in her letter series with Tang in 1990 and ended at a note advising young Chinese woman scholars like Tang to prioritize doing well in one's own profession to participating in collective movements. The latter, she cautions, oftentimes turned to be abused by those who pursue private interests in the masquerade various leftist formations.[43]

A reading of her as retreating from the political sphere to personal ethics is valid; there is also strong textual evidence to support this view as I will show below. In the rest of the chapter, however, I would like to advance an alternative reading, suggesting that the distance she insisted to put between politics and academia indicate, ironically, a political potential where politics looks impossible but is mostly needed.

***Rescuing Truth from politics: Li's Platonic move?***

In the previous chapter, we have discussed China's new generation of sociologists who learned from Western structural functionalism, and reformulated Marxism into a project for modernization rather than a critical project to expose social ills. We have witnessed how modernism and its cherished value of personal liberty, rights, and

[43] *Chinese People*. 76-7.

rationalism, in Li's debate with Zheng Yefu, could create conceptual pathways to utilitarian weighing of efficiency of the market and other social values. Such views did not only receive criticism from feminism. In fact, it also became the center of criticism of a newly emerging group of scholars – often called the New Left – who focus on social issues emerged in China's integration into global capitalism but at the same time express a nostalgia to China's communist past. Wang Hui 汪晖(1959-), hailed as the leading figure of the New Left, would provoke Li from her long-time "hibernation" and came back to the theory scene.

By no means is Li the only critic of Wang who had been in spotlight of fierce debates with many other Chinese intellectuals. Criticism of him mainly surround his praise of some of CPC's experiment of socialism which he also suggests may offer solutions to a problem of depoliticization of party politics.[44] Critics challenged this view on two issues. First is his praise of the CPC's tradition of "theoretical debates and political struggle" as an important "corrective mechanism" that also helps to maintain the party's political vitality.[45] Cultural Revolution, to Wang, started with Mao Zedong using this tradition to combat the revolutionary party's tendency of statification – the problem of depoliticization in his words.[46] Tragedies happened in later years of the Cultural Revolution, he argued, because of a "depoliticization" where political debates became means of fractional struggles whose binarism eliminated autonomous social struggles

[44] Wang, Hui. "Depoliticized politics, multiple components of hegemony, and eclipse of the sixties." Translated by Christopher Connery. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. 2006. 686.
[45] Wang. 2006. 687.
[46] Wang. 2006. 684.

and transformed the concept of "class" from a political concept into an essentialized identitarian concept.[47] Second is his commendation CPC's tactics mobilizing peasants movement in its land reforms in the rural areas. Mass politics – or "people's war" to use CPC's language – Wang argued, had increased political participation of the peasantry class, and had produced a new political subjectivity by uniting the peasants to the party.[48]

Li's criticism of Wang, like most of his other critics, do share the same trope: first a scholar's intuitive discomfort with academic work maintaining no critical distance from rhetorics of those who are currently in power, and then rebuttals via disputing historical facts Wang cited to support his theoretical points. Wang's proposal to reclaim CPC's revolutionary legacies, to many of his critics, first came across as rhetorical tools to legitimize party's actions, which in and of itself is problematic and off-putting.[49] Wang's 2010 article "The Rise of China: It's Experiences and Challenges," aroused anger in Li and others by its "gesture of a state leader," and a language "exactly the same as mainstream official newspapers."[50]

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[47] Wang. 2006, 690.
[48] Wang, Hui. "The Crisis of Representation of Post Party Politics." in *China's Twentieth Century: Revolution Retreat and the Road to Equality*. Ed. Saul Thomas. Verso. 2016. 170.
[49] For example, see Rong, Jian. "Wang Hui's 'Heidegger Moment?" Translated by David Ownby. *Reading the China Dream*. 2020 https:// www.readingthechinadream.com/rong-jian-wang-huis-heideggermoment.html Also Rong, Jian. *Shiji de Qilu: Zuoyi Gongtongti Pipan Shangjuan Er*. [A Century of Divergence: A Critique of Left-Wing Communities, vol. I, Part II]. New York: Bouden House. 2023. I would also like to acknowledge that I learned the debates surrounding Wang Hui's theory of party politics that I quote here mainly from Luo, Simon Sihang. "Reawakening a revolutionary party: the ancient and modern princes in Wang Hui's political theory." *American Political Science Review*. 2024.
[50] *Conversation with Wang Hui*. 46. Also see Kang, Zhengguo. "Towards a political liberation of civil rights and civic virtue – a critique of Wang Hui's recent work: Whose sovereignty? What equality?" 2010. https://blog.wenxuecity.com/myblog/80638/202503/18064.html

More substantive criticism then debates with Wang on the historical evidence he cites. Exiled scholar Kang Zhengguo 康正果 (1944-), for example, condemned both Wang's assessments of CPC's legacy of "theoretical debates" and "people's war" for turning a blind eye to historical facts where such tactics most of the time ended up bringing material hardship and psychological trauma to Chinese people.[51] Historian Yang Kuisong 杨奎松(1953-), for another example, pointed out archival mistakes in Wang's references to Mao that would seriously undermine his arguments.[52] Similar to Kang and Yang, Li counterargued Wang's praise of "theoretical debate" by raising that such debates in history always happened in the aftermath of bitter and costly lessons: for example, in 1935, Zunyi Conference happened after the Red Army's defeat at Jinggangshan, and in 1978, Truth Criterion Discussion happened in the aftermath of Cultural Revolution's ten-year turmoil. Rather than a corrective tool of the party's mistakes, Li argued, CPC's theoretical debates were excuses to justify these mistakes.[53]

Li then lamented:

> "Scholarship is an exacting endeavor: any superfluous identity or obligation [other than those of a scholar] may become an impediment to the pursuit of truth. "A scientist in search of truth is inwardly bound by a discipline akin to that of a Puritan: he cannot indulge himself or yield to emotion," [wrote Albert Einstein.] The humanities are no exception: scientific spirit must also take priority. Entangled in identities and

[51] Kang. 2010. I have to point out Kang's article is also problematic in that it used effeminizing language to criticize Wang, describing his writing like little girls playing elastic rope jumping games – an obviously gendered game coded as a "girls' game" in China.
[52] Yang, Kuisong. 2014. "Ye tan 'quzhengzhihua' wenti." [Also on the Problem of "Depoliticization"]. *Dongfang Zaobao*. January 19. https://www.aisixiang.com/data/71721.html In this article Yang points out that Wang mistaken the writing time of one of Mao's essays and attributed an essay to Mao that had proved to be not Mao's writing but was published in Mao's name without his approval. Both mistakes, Yang suggests, undermine the praise Wang conferred to Mao.
[53] *Conversation with Wang Hui*. 45-46.

> standpoints, a commitment to truth requires "a self-discipline even in solitude (*shendu* 慎独)."[54] Otherwise, [scholars may be] misled into conclusions in the name of "righteousness" or "justice." Academia's responsibility is to disclose what is concealed: whether in the face of "rise [of China]" or "decline [of China]," its task remains the same: to look at the truth and to speak it."[55]

Li's unequivocal distinction between academia and politics predicated on whether a pursuit of truth takes absolute priority would unsurprisingly remind us of Plato's theoretical reorientation of Socrates in *The Republic*. Moving away from Socrate's search for knowledge in the overlaps of opinions, Plato's solution to Athen's declining civic virtue and political ethics was to separate knowledge from public opinions, given that the latter is already beyond help in the corrupted political sphere where lust for power override all commitment to justice. This parallel reading could be especially compelling given Li's scathing lament of the Chinese Mainland post 1989 for "a public at large (*baixing dazhong* 百姓大众)" that is "spiritually empty, amoral, demoralized, degraded to the lowest level of what is human."[56] This, in combination with Li's repeated emphasis that "academia can have one and only one aim, that is, *truth* – grounded in the pursuit of truth, bringing truth to light and standing by it,"[57] could attempt us into the conclusion that Li indeed, like Plato, opted for a cleansing project

[54] *Shendu* is a term originated from *the Book of Rites*, one of Confucianist classics. The original quote is "The superior man is watchful over himself, when he is alone."
[55] *Conversation with Wang Hui*. 49
[56] Li, Xiaojiang. *Wolf Totem and the Post-Mao Utopian: A Chinese Perspective on Contemporary Western Scholarship*, trans. Gunn, Edward Mansfield, Jr. Leiden and Boston: BRILL, 2018. 558.
[57] *Conversation with Wang Hui*. 7.

of "the city" guided by a pristine philosopher class insulated from power and committed to Truth and Truth only.

***Pitkin's dilemma in China studies***

However, like there are potentials in Plato's *Republic* to read his theory of knowledge beyond a strict separation of the realm of transcendental ideals from worldly opinions and conventions contingent to social circumstances, similar ambivalences also characterize Li's writing that could dissuade us from a conclusive, and disheartening, reading of retreating to philosophy from politics. After all, the kind of knowledge that both Li and Plato cared to protect from politics were not those that can be secured by discoveries of science: "what justice is," as Pitkin pointed out, requires a different kind of discovery than that of "the evening star is really the planet Venus".[58] We can quite unproblematically know the meaning of "the evening star" as well as "the morning star" in Gottlob Frege's example, by linking it to its reference "the planet Venus." But this is not the case in determining the meaning of "justice."

By way of later Wittgenstein's theory of language as activity vis-à-vis language as reference, Pitkin argued, we should not simply explain away Socrates and Thrasymachus' quarrel over justice by a distinction between what justice is and what justice ought to be. Rather, the creative openness of language, as later Wittgenstein sees it, allows us to see that both are actively giving meaning to what justice *is*.[59] Moving

[58] Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought*. University of California Press, 1993/1972. 192.
[59] *Wittgenstein and Justice*. 177-80.

the activity of defining justice – the knowledge to guide the ordering of the *polis* – to the realm of *eidos* guarded by philosopher-kings' true love of and commitment to Truth, Plato evaded Socrates from a political battle he must fight with Thrasymachus: the latter's action to assign meaning to justice, no matter offensive-sounding it is, must be fought back by another action to assign an alternative meanings.

Pitkin would not, however, merely follow an easy criticism of Plato for being totalitarian by eliminating politics to address competing meaning of justice, a political issue. Instead, she pointed out, Plato's theoretical move in *The Republic* is one of the many manifestations a dilemma in the theorizing itself. Though most of canon of political theory we value today share commitments in egalitarianism and democracy – however loosely defined – "there seems to be something of the enterprise of theorizing itself," Pitkin wrote, "that makes the resulting system seem totalitarian and, in that sense, nonpolitical." That is, "[t]he theorist stands outside the political system about which he speculates and writes; of necessity he deploys and manipulates its citizens without consulting their wishes and opinions".[60]

Interestingly enough, Li also liked to invoke from philosophy of language to make her points in politics, though she did not do so as systematically as Pitkin did and sometimes, she might not manage to cite concepts in linguistics accurately. For one, her critique of Wang Hui in fact went beyond a challenge of the facticity the latter's account of China's revolutionary history, but pointed out such account was animated

[60] *Wittgenstein and Justice*. 326-7. This problem was called "Pitkin's dilemma" by Ruth Lane. "Pitkin's Dilemma: The Wider Shores of Political Theory and Political Science," *Perspectives on Politics*. 2004 (2). 459.

by an anxiety shared by Wang and some of his Chinese peers – that is, an anxiety to defend the legitimacy of the Chinese state to the rest of the world as China became one of the few remaining socialist regimes after the Soviet Union's disintegration. One could easily see that anxiety is unnecessary, Li however pointed out, if they could see that "China is a proper name, and is also a common name."[61] She cited these terms from *Leviathan* where Hobbes wrote that whereas "a proper name bringeth to mind one thing only," common names "recall any one of those many [things for their similarity in some quality],"[62] which is an uncommon reference for this distinction; it may also be inappropriate from a linguist's point of view to say that "China" can also be a common name. But by borrowing these concepts from philosophy of language, Li provided us with a different perspective to see how a unifying concept of China identified with its current political regime – the same critique that she raised in her response to her overseas audience of feminism in China – could also mislead Chinese scholars like Wang to judgements that are political dangerous.

As a proper name, Li wrote, China is the China the country with its territory, population, and history[63] – as a teacher will teach to school kids. If a student pointed to Australia in the middle of the Pacific Ocean or referred to the 1776 Declaration of Independence as China or Chinese history, the teacher would tell them that they made a mistake. "No, that is not China," the teacher would say. China in such sense – a proper

[61] *Conversation with Wang Hui*. 52.
[62] Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*, (ed.) Edwin Curley. Hackett Publishing Company., inc. 1994. Book 1, chapter 4, paragraph 7. p.17.
[63] *Conversation with Wang Hui*. 52

name – does not need a justification. It just is, just like "the evening/morning star" is planet Venus. Justification is needed, however, when one treats China as a common name, making a "conceptual China," to use Li's language.[64] In Wang's case, as he felt impelled to give the "China" a definition of which its current political authority is an essential part, he needs to justify both the legitimacy of the party state and his identification of China with it. It is for the sake of making these justifications, Li then suggested, that Wang made his painstaking effort to integrate China's revolutionary legacy, including the Cultural Revolution and Land Reforms into a historical account of a unifying concept of China; and because he felt impelled to make these justifications in front of a Western audience, he made it a story of this unifying China moving forward in its endeavor of modernization. Then the Cultural Revolution and other mistakes made in contemporary Chinese history – regardless of the damage they had brought to the Chinese society – must be part of this process of modernization.

However, as Li indicated, Wang's "conceptual China" – which identified China with its revolutionary past and its socialist regime – is only one of many possibilities to define China. In response to Wang's praise of "China's experience" in being able to overcome the 1989 incidents which he claimed as "China's biggest crisis in the three decades after "Reform and Opening Up,"[65] Li asked sharply:

> "When he [Wang] talks about 'China's crisis' in 1989, it has nothing to do with collapse of the nation and annihilation of the people (*wangguo*

[64] *Conversation with Wang Hui*. 53
[65] Wang, Hui. "*Zhongguo jueqi de jingyan jiqi minalin de tiaozhan* [The rise of China: its experiences and challenges.]" in *Wenhua Zongheng*. No.2 April 2010. 24.

> *miezu* 亡国灭族); there was no foreign invasion (*waidi ruqin* 外敌入侵), nor were ordinary people left without means of substance (*minbuliaosheng* 民不聊生): *whence the crisis?*"[66]

1989 was indeed a crisis to China's socialist regime, but is it really a crisis of China the country and the people? As Li wrote, "the end of the socialist bloc is not the same as a national crisis".[67] In other word, it would be a "crisis of China" only when China is defined by its socialist regime. But for Li, "China" the socialist regime is only one of the many possible representations of "China" as a common name. Conflating his "conceptual China" with "China" the proper name, she indicated, Wang gives the former normative power over our conceptualizing of "China" that only belongs to the latter. Simply put, Li wanted to point out that China is not Beijing, and neither is Beijing China. To her disappointment, however, many China scholars did not seem to see this. In a letter she wrote to Su Shaozhi, an exiled Chinese intellectual, she criticized China studies overseas for committing a mistake of "Big Beijing, Small China."[68] When she left Harvard University in 1992, she told Su, she was disheartened by the fact that the Fairbank Center[69] fellows were most interested in how the rank structure of the "Party of the Princes" would influence on China's future: was China going to collapse, or was political democratization still a possibility?[70] Such narrow focus on the state power,

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[66] *Conversation with Wang Hui*. 44. Emphasis mine.
[67] *Conversation with Wang Hui*. 44.
[68] "Letter to Su Shaozhi". 269, 271
[69] The Fairbank Center for Eastern Asian Studies at Harvard University. It changed its name to Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies since 2007.
[70] "Letter to Su" 277. "The party of the princes," or "the Princelings," a more common equivalent today, was the slang for the children of high-ranking CPC officials.

she suggested, overshadowed the wider Chinese society – the "China" that she asserted that one must "leave Beijing to gain"[71] – and led to a mistaken political despair.

She wrote:

> "China is China; it has a population of more than 1,200,000,000 people…and a history of 5,000 years of civilization. Could one government, one 'June 4th,' [and] a few government officials represent her? Yes, the government has its will and its own needs. But can that be completely equal to the will and the needs of the [Chinese] society? …When we merely search the government and upper echelons of the power structure to find China's way out, we end up regarding the actions of a few officials as if they really were helmsmen controlling China's fate. That is why we often feel disappointed, as though there is no way out."[72]

Moreover, it saddened her even more, when such mistaken judgement led to an almost cruel, dehumanizing attitude towards Chinese people. Exiled Chinese intellectuals post June 4th, she indicated, had let their disillusionment and anger with the Chinese government morph into a wish for a political collapse of the country, which she thought would come with the price of people losing their livelihood.[73] This, for her, is not only ethically cruel, but also an anti-democratic position to take, ironically, when pursuing democracy. Here, we come to see in a real-life example of Pitkin's caution of a tyrannical tendency of theorizing when the theorist places himself outside the political system that he writes and speculates. Li wrote:

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[71] "Letter to Su". 271.
[72] "Letter to Su". 277
[73] Whether this judgement was valid or not, I really don't know. I think we need rather complicated empirical data to make predictions as much, and we need to define what livelihood is. But all these do not affect my analysis of her theorizing.

> "If they [some Chinese exiled intellectuals] claim it is necessary to die for democracy and indicate that others [Chinese people living in China] must do the dying, then they have gotten 'democracy' at a very great discount…If we fix our gaze exclusively on the government and power, and neglect the public and society, *we are in fact acceding to totalitarianism within our very selves*. Then it matters not that we politically oppose totalitarianism and advocate democracy; *we have already unconsciously adopted totalitarian methods* in our academic positions."[74]

Though driven by an aspiration to democracy, the theorist ended up with totalitarian conclusions. As Pitkin would say, this happens when the theorist falls short of the democratic spirit of *isegoria*, that is, to respect each citizen's equality in speaking to the assembly. That is, instead of addressing from one citizen to other citizens, the theorist treated himself as a professional making his skills available to the ignorant laymen, or as a prophet claiming more attention in the name of higher powers. One of Pitkin's antidotes to theory's seemingly inherent tyrannical tendency, again, lies in language. That is, to carefully attend to our style of speaking, to speak about the political situation of "we: as an invitation for other citizens to think along with us, rather than "you" or "they," and definitely not to anoint oneself as the royal "we," commanding others to follow one's lead.[75]

***The unattainable Truth, the fallible knowledge, and the scholar's vocation***

[74] "Letter to Su" 276-7 (emphasis mine, and I changed some of the translations as I see productive from the original Chinese version *Qiushui Magzine*.1993)
[75] *Wittgenstein and Justice*. 328

For Li, Wang and overseas China Studies scholars – though the former is a Maoist whereas the latter liberals – have all spoken in the royal "we" by identifying their standpoints with the state power vis-à-vis the Chinese people, letting the big Beijing overshadow China the land, society, and people. However, it is in the latter, Li suggested, where they should search for China's way-out or China's "political dignity." China, when taken as a common name, is open for definitions and creation by ordinary Chinese people; and it is in their speech and action that we can avoid deadening pessimism of China's politics. Back to 1995 in Li's open statement of her withdrawal from the UN conference on women, she wrote:

> "Through my absence, I have in fact participated in the Forum by making clear that many Chinese women's voices remain outside the Forum…I know that such a gesture is powerless; yet I think it is necessary. In today's China, people everywhere long for human dignity and social fairness (*gongzheng* 公正). I do not think these will descend from the sky; [instead,] they should come into being through the choices each of us makes. For this reason, I chose refusal [to attend the conference]."[76]

Notice her choice of language of social "fairness ( *gongzheng* 公正)," instead of social "justice (*zhengyi* 正义)". It looks like she was indeed aware of a subtle but important distinction between the notion of "justice" and its common Chinese translation *Zhengyi*. Like "justice" in Plato's *Republic*, *zhengyi* also aligns better with the Greek word *dikē*

[76] *Ming Pao Monthly*. 1995. 83

rather than the English word justice.[77] Whereas "justice" is more of the legal notion clearly denoting a public in modern English, *Zhengyi* – where *zheng* 正 means upright and correct, and *yi* 义 means moral rightness and appropriateness – starts as a personal ethical integrity practiced in local scenarios and later finds its manifestation in political institutions. Chinese children learn their first elementary school lessons that one should write characters upright (*zheng*) as if they have spines – meaning to follow a copybook – and so should be one's character. An ordinary Chinese person would quote "the noble person understands things in terms of what is right (*yi*) whereas the petty person in terms of profit" from Confucius when opting to uphold moral principles at the price of personal interests.[78] In this sense, justice as *zhengyi* has a normative connotation that things should be done in certain ways following standards that are not subject to change to personal opinions. In contrast, fairness (*gongzheng*), where *gong* 公 means public, indicates whether an issue is handled correctly depends on how a collective of people think. For example, the republican revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen took the political ideal of *tianxiaweigong* 天下为公 ("all under the heaven belongs to the public") from the Confucian classic *Book of Rites*, and made it a powerful moral slogan to challenge the Qing monarchy as a private rule. (And today we can see this slogan in almost every single overseas Chinatown inscribed on its gate). For Li, it is fairness (*gongzheng*), not justice (*Zhengyi*), that Chinese people yearned for their society. More important, as she

[77] See a discussion of the translation of *dikē* in Plato's *Republic* in *Wittgenstein and Justice*. 1972. 306-7.
[78] *Analects*. Book 4.

wrote, fairness is not an ideal coming from heaven but depends on each Chinese person's choices in concrete life scenarios for it to come into being.

What does come from the heaven, however, is *dikē,* or *zhengyi* – the master virtue not to be found in the humanly world but in the realm of forms, the purely just as a Truth that cannot be possessed but only approximated by any mortals. Two decades after Pitkin's prompt of theory's tyrannical tendency exemplified in *The Republic*, Wendy Brown came to invite us to see that the Plato's formulation of knowledge and knowing nevertheless opens a possibility that the division he sets between Truth and politics may not be as rigid as his critics think today and that theory may not be necessarily tyrannical. That is, though Plato did characterize *dikē* in terms of an absolute, ahistorical Truth, he did not describe the acquirement of such Truth as a purely disembodied, rationalist inquiry. Rather, as Brown showed, in their inquiry of what the truly just is, Socrates in *The Republic* would break off from the dialectical mode of inquiry when he and his companions reached an impasse; he would pivot to myths or allegories, so as to call his comrades back to their concrete, local experiential knowledge of the world,[79] that is, to take a break from their preoccupation with a universally applicable answer to what justice is. Brown then went on to point our attention to Plato's rather peculiar language to depict Truth as a woman that men can only court and please with a love of wisdom that is speechless, erotic, and even mad,

[79] Brown, Wendy. "'Supposing Truth Were a Woman...:' Plato's Subversion of Masculine Discourse." *Political Theory*. Vol. 16, No. 4. 1988. 602-3.

but not take possession of via reason only, and definitely not sophistic speech – reason in its corruptive version.[80]

If Truth can only be approximated with appropriate attitudes and virtues whereas cannot be owned by a seeker striving for recognition or power, then a theorist's enterprise to come up with a somewhat coherent political order in light of such Truth would not necessarily be totalitarian. If the tyrannical, and hence anti-political tendency of political theory comes from the latter's habit of deriving the Good from the True as Brown later suggested, what if Truth is something ultimately unfathomable and inaccessible? Truth itself as Plato suggested is indeed in the realm of *eidos* – absolute, unchanging, and undebatable– but because by its definition Truth can only be approximated by but not fully revealed to humans, then maybe a pursuit of Truth is not necessarily anti-political, though Truth itself is an "extra-political term".[81]

That Truth is beyond the human reach was precisely Li's point when she maintained that a scholar should always practice "self-discipline even in solitude (*shendu*)" to not let politics interrupt her responsibility to pursue Truth. This became salient in her 2019 letter series to Tang Ling. In these letters where she could have been a tyrannical theorist in Pitkin's sense – after all, these are letters started from a position of power of an older scholar giving advice to the confounded younger – Li repeatedly emphasize that Truth as the yardstick to differentiate a scholar from a politician is nevertheless

[80] "Supposing Truth were a woman," 605-9. Brown also quoted *Phaedrus* and *Symposiu*m aside from *The Republic* for this point.
[81] Brown, Wendy. *States of Injury*. 37

unreachable; and it was because Truth was unreachable, that academia was the place that freedom and hope can find refuge in bad times.

The letters started from a tone of sorrow to China's current political situation. (How timely it was on the eve of the COVID-19 outbreak.) "Regrettably," she wrote, "on this homeland and native place of Chinese people, the place where I live and work, though the New Year is approaching, spring feels distant." "Yet," she turned to write, "in academia, a spiritual spring resides only in the heart, untethered by the changing seasons…like a gentle rain silently nourishing all things."[82] This is a reference of Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu (712-770) 's household classic "Spring Night Rain:" "Good rain knows its season, coming right in spring. It enters the night with the wind, silently moistening things." I will come back in the next section to the natural imaginary of rain, water, and river signifying flux and fluidity that Li frequently invoked; but let me just flag this for now. She then presented an extremely Platonic sounding description of Truth, both in terms of its transcendence of earthly life and of the almost erotic personification of it:

> "The Truth that scholars jointly seek, in effect, is a utopia that is invisible, boundless, but precisely for this reason it holds an infinite allure: in the imagination of each of us, such Truth embodied 'the True, the Good, and the Beautiful (*zhenshanmei* 真善美)' in one; it is a dream that all who hold sincere devotion to learning and life itself are willing to spend their entire lives pursuing."[83]

[82] *Chinese People*. 2.
[83] *Chinese People*. 2.

However, to her dismay, such pursuit of Truth had become difficult for scholars in China. So, despite her validation and empathy of Tang's despondency with being a Chinese scholar in Western academia, Li urged her to not to return to China because of it lacked academic freedom. Indeed, in the year of 2019, any person with a sane mind would agree that "though China has many universities, but none of them would tolerate academic spirit of independence;" yet it was still fair to say that Western academia, "despite its cognitive biases, does not attempt to silence dissenting voices."[84] But notice how she made a distinction between scholarly outputs and Truth, and that the spirit to pursue the latter is only possible where there is freedom. In response to Tang's invitation of her to Oxford so as to "introduce voices of truly outstanding Chinese scholars to the West," Li wrote:

> "My response may disappoint you: west-centrism and China-centrism are equally harmful…Categories such as nation, gender, and class are indeed cognitive tools and senses of identity important to the pursuit of knowledge and scholarship; yet the attainment of knowledge depends precisely on transcending them [these categories] …[In this sense,] *scholarly outputs are cold and dispassionate, [because] they are beyond good and evil, grounded in objective perceptions. Yet, academic spirit has life and warmth, only taking root and growing in souls that are free*, and [hence, it] is not about science but a matter of faith; it is a religious spirit that transcends utility. What is called "Truth" resembles a utopia in the sense of *eidos* (*linian* 理念):[85] it exists only in the heaven, beyond the reach of those in the mortal world."[86]

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[84] *Chinese People*. 12

[85] *Linian* (理念) – Li's language – is a customary translation of the Greek word *eidos*, so I translate it back to it.

[86] *Chinese People*. 7, 10 (emphasis mine)

So, in Li's conceptual universe, scholarly outputs/knowledge, which is beyond good and evil, are not Truth which is Good itself. Whereas knowledge is a (temporary) output of scholarly inquiry, such inquiry is to be guided by spirit to pursue Truth which the scholar nevertheless knows it is out of her reach. Comparing to Donna Haraway's "situated knowledge" where knowledge is necessarily positioned on concrete standpoint of the knower, one could say that for Li, it is "pursuing Truth (*qiuzhen*)" that is situated. As the vocation of a scholar, seeking Truth takes place only it is situated in a free soul, which predicates on the seeker practicing constant self-discipline to not to be led on by desires for things other than Truth despite knowing that Truth is ultimately unreachable. So, it looks like we eventually still came back to a depiction of a solitary scholar; but unlike Pitkin's theorist who stands outside the world and commands, Li's lone scholar does not even invite others to her quest to Truth.[87] After all, she again and again returned to the image of Don Quixote tilting at windmills – the archetype of the lone, mad, and tragic hero – as how she imagined herself to be and had been a scholar.[88] Maybe like Plato who were no longer able to hold out any hope to Athenian democracy in the aftermath of Socrates' sentence to death, in the year of 2019, Li felt a similar sense of despair with Chinese politics where a decade of tightening of space for civil society and freedom of speech saw no sign of taking a turn, whereas politics as the state's monopoly of power and fractional struggles became more and more apparent. The "public space" she was hoping for Chinese women to develop their subjective

[87] Again, refer to *Wittgenstein and Justice*. 328
[88] *Chinese People*, 2, 10, 73.

capacity – which she said "was precisely politics" in the 1990s despite a lack language of "rights"– now look like a land of ruins under a prolonged bad weather for which even an extremely seasoned farmer like Li would feel pessimistic. So, if we understand politics as by its definition a collective human activity – as politics is formulated by Aristotle, Hannah Arendt, Pitkin, and Brown – then yes, for those aspiring more political agency in the Chinese society, Li was indeed giving a gesture to retreat to the private, and in that sense, she was anti-politics.

Yet, as Li depicted Truth as unreachable – also similar to our previous reading of Plato's depiction of knowledge can only be approximated but not owned – she also took away the lone theorist's capacity to command in the name Truth, and in this sense, she was also anti-tyranny and hence allows room for politics. And for that room to survive, she urged her younger scholar comrades nevertheless to stay away from political power, so as to take care of their soul and to tend their freedom within. In the final section below, I will end my analysis of Li with her account of freedom, and by so doing as I shall show, we can avoid concluding our analysis of her on an anticlimax note that she simply understood politics differently from Western democratic theorists do. And this would require us again to invoke her dialectic and the Self and society.

### 3. "Freedom does not have the other shore"

We have discussed Li's analysis that "liberation" (*jiefang* 解放) in the Chinese context is conceptually closer to the notion of "equality" rather than "freedom." Women's liberation in China's socialist discourse, she argued, was clear about its prescription in

women's being "equal to men" in rights, standards, and benefits that the society conventionally confers to men; yet such rigid and limited understanding of equality also hollow out Chinese women's understanding of liberation of its essence which, Li emphasized, should be freedom. "Liberation" in the Chinese context as such was characterized by Lin Chun 林春 – a scholar of Li's generation – as an "intrinsically contradictory character of a communist feminism."[89] Starting from as part of a communist revolution which by its definition was a struggle for human emancipation, Lin suggested, feminism in communist China ended up incompatible with freedom precisely because the revolution's politicization process.

***"Personal is political" in Maoist China***

In an autobiographical-style essay,[90] Lin reflected on her formative years under Maoism as a youth who was on the "right" side. With both her parents being veteran Communist rank and files, Lin did not become targets of humiliation and violence in various post-1949 political movements like Li did. Her family background also allowed her to be one of the first students in her school to put up a rebellious "big character poster" criticizing school authorities and teachers, though later she realized that this

[89] Lin, Chun. "Towards a Chinese feminism: a personal story." *Dissent*. Vol. 42. 1995. 63. This article does not have an original PDF version from the library database, so I'm not able to provide page numbers for the information and quotes I cite here. For now, I mark page numbers from the Chinese translation of this article in *Women's Research Movement*. Li, Xiaojiang, ed. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press. 1997

Lin Chun received a doctorate from the University of Cambridge in history and political science and has taught at the London School of Economics and Political Science since 1993. She's now emeritus professor in comparative politics there.

was part of the massive and blind process of persecution in the Cultural Revolution.[91] It was not until she returned from her "reeducation by the peasants" – which she signed herself up voluntarily at the age of 16 – in northern Shanxi at the age of 21, that her socialist idealism started to falter. Having witnessed poverty and backwardness in the rural areas, Lin wrote, she the first time realized the hard fact that her sustained, naïve devotion to the collective ideal of socialism was predicated on her privilege as an urban student. It was this privilege that had protected her from, for example, early and undesired marriages that rural women had to accept and hence gave congruence of her conviction that her personal feelings and aspirations were ultimately unimportant in the greater collective struggle.[92]

Socialism for her and her peers, Lin wrote, was an entirely abstract concept, in the sense that freedom and happiness, which was supposed to be two key notions tied to the very idea of liberation, was lacking in their understanding of why socialism – the goal of proletariats' liberation movement – is desirable. Socialism was defended for the sake of socialism.[93] "The feminist thesis that 'the personal is political' was no novelty for the Chinese," she wrote.[94] What she meant was that unlike in the Second Wave feminist movement where the slogan is a request to politicize matters in the private sphere and to subject these matters to social and legal interventions, for the Chinese living state socialism, private matters were always already politicized, in the sense that

[91] Lin, 66
[92] Lin, 71
[93] Lin, 71-2.
[94] Lin, 68.

any private desire getting in the way of the ideological correctness of socialism is seen as politically offensive and hence subject to political intervention. In the case of women's liberation, "personal is political" meant that state power came in to replace patriarchal power – as Li had shown us in the previous chapter in her debate with Zheng Yefu. For example, in the notorious "one-child policy," this means that the state used political force to suppress patrilineality's preference of sons to daughters. Women did benefit from such intervention for having state-enforced protection from being pressured to repetitively getting pregnant until a son comes along, though indeed they were also subjected to forced abortion and sterilization. It also meant, at the same time, women like Lin, and Li, were compelled into a self-repression mechanism to work against "bourgeois" individualism of which the state thought expressing a certain kind of femininity was an important part.

Now we come to understand that when Li gestured towards a retreat to the free soul under China's declining political climate – as she suggested in her letters to Tang – her imagination of politics was probably more constrained by her experience of state intervention with personal life in the name of higher, collective ends, but less animated by the democratic promises in public sharing of power and collective participation in public affairs anchored in Western democratic theories. For Chinese women of her generation, it looks like to achieve freedom, and happiness, what they needed was not to make the personal more political, but for politics – which in the Chinese context is a right exclusive to the state only – to retreat from the personal.

But this also means that we, again, find ourselves back to our original analysis of Li holding a notion of politics different from that in Western democratic theories. This would be an anti-climax conclusion because we started our journey from wanting to tell a story about Li's work beyond a disappointing and disheartening trope of a theorist giving up hopes in democratic possibilities in politics and retreating to philosophy and Truth. But I would rather hold out my hope that Li would not leave us on this note, that like her idol Don Quixote the mad man, she would require a leap of faith from us and take us onto her knight-errant's adventure. In this last section, I shall advance a reading of Li as such; but rather than to the windmills plain, we are to follow her to the grasslands of Inner Mongolia. There, I shall argue, she was to show us a hope for political agency in an environment where politics looks impossible; and such hope is made possible via a rumination of the ambivalences surrounding the concept of freedom which, interestingly, we can find echoes in Western political theory as well.

***Arendt's puzzle of freedom, liberation, and politics***

Before we press on to Inner Mongolia grassland with Li, let me recap briefly on the debates within Western democratic theory over the identification of freedom with political participation. As feminist theorists, probably the controversy we are most familiar with over Arendt's assertation that freedom is the raison d'être of politics and that genuine human freedom is only possible in politics. With the strict separation of politics from the necessity/the household/the private in her conceptual world, without much surprise Arendt had attracted feminist criticism for excluding issues like care and

reproduction where gender inequality affected women the most from politics, and for creating a gendered hierarchy privileging the public (male-coded) over the private (female coded). Even if we set the gender issue aside, Pitkin for example suggested, Arendt's definition of politics with publicity, speech, and glory, as well as her exclusion of "social questions," i.e., economics and needs of the body, from politics end up making an image of public sphere that is curiously empty.[95]

Moreover, as Pitkin pointed out later, Arendt's insistence that *eleutheria* was Ancient Greek counterpart of English word "freedom," an important piece of supporting evidence for her identification of freedom with participation in self-government, could be incorrect from an etymological point of view. In fact, it was "liberties/liberation," from which Arendt differentiated "freedom" in that the former referred as legal exemption from abuse of power but not active exercising of public power, that had a linkage to *eleutheria* via the Latin word *liber*. "Freedom," on the other hand, with its Germanic root in *priyos*, had no such connection.[96] And even if we do not take Arendt's reference to *eleutheria* a strict etymological claim, Pitkin suggested, she still needed to account for the fact that *eleutheria* only took on the connotation of democratic participation later whereas it started from meaning unimpeded motion, non-slave status, and sexual pleasure, all of which were nevertheless closer to what Arendt characterized liberties – a legal status exempted from arbitrary power, and a license free from external

[95] Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. "Justice: On Relating Private and Public." *Political Theory*. vol. 9, no. 3, August 1981, 337-8.
[96] Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. "Are freedom and liberty twins?" *Political Theory*. vol. 16, no. 4, November 1988, 529.

constraint.[97] In the end, Pitkin concluded that all these ambiguities arisen from Arendt's distinction between "freedom" and "liberties," just as those from Berlin's distinction between negative and positive freedom, were due to the fact that ordinary language is inherently complex and incoherent so to draw neat distinctions as such necessarily comes with costs. In Arendt's case, her distinction left an important issue unaddressed, that is, if we follow her suggestion to privilege freedom to liberties, we would be ultimately at loss when these two words come into interaction and entanglement: does freedom (with its triadic unity with politics and action) need liberation and liberties (as in liberation from enslavement, necessities, and desires) as its precondition, or is freedom is a perpetual, in eradicable human potential?[98]

***Finding freedom and liberty on the Mongolia grasslands***

This puzzle of freedom and its relations to liberation, liberty, and politics that Arendt left us precisely captured the dilemma that Li and her peers found in Chinese politics. Socialist revolution claimed to have won the Chinese people liberation from their former oppressors,[99] but it did not bring them freedom; to the contrary, as we discussed above, both Li and Lin suggested that the Chinese needed a depoliticization of their understandings of freedom and happiness. At the same time, the authoritarian regime never promised civil liberties and hence there had never been freedom as in democratic

[97] "Are freedom and liberty twins?" 530-3.
[98] "Are freedom and liberty twins?" 547.
[99] CPC's official discourse portrayed the revolution as a struggle to overthrow "three mountains:" imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat capitalism.

self-government; so maybe freedom does need liberties as its precondition. So, if freedom is ultimately desirable, one does have to believe that it is a perpetual, ineradicable human potential. But if it is so, then we cannot hold on to definition of freedom with politics, because doing that would mean the Chinese would never have freedom, so it is not a universal potential. Where is the way out?

And now it is our cue to embark our journey to the vast, boundless grassland of Inner Mongolia. In her literary criticism work of a 2004 fiction *Wolf Totem* by Jiang Rong, Li provided us with her most elaborate discussion on freedom, its possibilities, limitations, and ambiguities under authoritarianism where political participation within institutionalized channels is not possible to ordinary citizens.[100] *Wolf Totem* follows protagonist Chen Zhen, a child of "black-class" backgrounds[101] during the Cultural Revolution, and his life as a sent-down youth (*zhiqing*) to a state-run ranch in Olonbulag District of Inner Mongolia. This unconventional fiction does not follow a clear plot but reads more like a series of graphic depictions of how grassland wild wolfs maneuvered around ranch residents – local Mongolian herders, party cadres of Han

[100] Li, Xiaojiang. *Wolf Totem and the Post-Mao Utopian: A Chinese Perspective on Contemporary Western Scholarship*, trans. Gunn, Edward Mansfield, Jr. Leiden and Boston: BRILL, 2018. Original Chinese version is Li, Xiaojiang. *Hou Wutuobang Piping: Langtuteng shendu quanshi* [*Post-Utopian Critique: A Commentary on Wolf Totem*.] Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press. 2013.

Jiang Rong's fiction *Wolf Totem* raised a national sensation in China after its publication in 2004. It was later translated into Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, French, English, and German. In 2007 it won the first Man Asian Literary Prize. The fiction also attracted much criticism for its indicated privileging of the "wolf spirit" of aggression, domination, and survivalism.

Jiang Rong (1946-) was a sent-down youth to Inner Mongolia ranch himself, so the fiction is also semi-autobiographical. He later did his graduate degree in political economy.

[101] Generally, this means their families fall into the categories of "landlords," "rich peasants," "counterrevolutionaries", "bad elements," "Rightists," and "capitalist roaders." Children of these families were systematically excluded from political participation and educational opportunities under Cultural Revolution.

ethnicity, and *zhiqings* like Chen – who saw them as threats to the ranch economy. The only apparent plot following through is that of Chen secretly raising, and imprisoning, a wolf cub from one of the herdsmen's raids of the wild wolfs. Injured in an accident later, the wolf-cub refused Chen's attempt to heal it and committed suicide by biting its wound.

Li read the wolf-cub plot as story of a search for a depoliticized freedom inevitably ending up a political project of liberation. First, she made a distinction between the English terms "freedom" and "liberty" that may confuse those of us situated in Anglophone academia. In her definition, freedom is associated with "spontaneity *(zizai* 自在)," is generally used in philosophy, whereas liberty is associated with "liberation (*jiefang* 解放)" tend to be used in political and legal circumstances.[102] This is exactly the two notions of freedom when Pitkin showed us in her etymological analysis that *eleutheria* (which Arendt associated to political and democracy) did not start from referring to political participation but arguably had a more etymology-based origin in unimpeded motion.[103]

Under this freedom: spontaneity: philosophy *versus* liberty: liberation: politics distinction, Li then characterized Chen's journey to the grassland as a search for freedom. He voluntarily sent himself to ranch as a self-exile to find freedom away from

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[102] See *Wolf Totem*. 422

[103] In fact, Li cited her distinction between "freedom" and "liberty" from an afterward that Li Hongtu wrote for his Chinese translation of Quentin Skinner's *Liberty before Liberalism*; but what she did not mention was that Li Hongtu cited this distinction from Maurice Cranston which was quoted at the beginning of "Are freedom and liberty twins?" Regretfully, it looked like neither Li Xiaojiang nor Li Hongtu read onwards Pitkin's essay. See Li, Hongtu. "Translator's afterwards: finding the definition of freedom in history: Quentin Skinner and Intellectual History." in Skinner, Quentin. *Liberty Before Liberalism*. Trans. Li, Hongtu. Shanghai: Sanlian Shudian. 2003. 133.

the political movements in Beijing. Partly influenced by the popular trope in traditional Chinese literature where politically frustrated intellectuals withdrew to countryside seeking refuge in nature,[104] and partly by Russian literature like *Quietly Flows the Don* like many others growing up in socialist China, Chen thought that the Mongolian grassland would allow him to "let his thoughts roam," that he could find peace and freedom in the cartons of books he and his friends brought with them from Beijing that they could "mull over, like sheep chewing their cud".[105] However, Chen soon became disillusioned because first, exiling himself to the wilderness did not bring him a feeling of spontaneity; rather, monotonous physical labor and the vastness and long winters of the grassland only left him feelings of boredom, isolation, and barrenness. Second, the wilderness ended up being not so far from politics anyway: Chen was soon frustrated by the party cadres on the ranch who are just as authoritarian and bureaucratic.

The way out that Chen found out by accident, in Li's reading, was to find freedom for himself through conquest, dominance, and enslavement of others – that is, he raised a wolf cub.[106] But as freedom became a concern not of just for Chen himself but a dynamic between him and the wolf cub involving conquest, dominance, and enslavement, it also became a problem, whereas before the wolf-cub freedom is just freedom.[107] From the wolf cub's unbending resistance against his enslavement, Chen

[104] Li used the example of Tao Yuanming (365-427) of Jin Dynasty. Another household example is Su Shi (1037-1101) of Song Dynasty.
[105] *Wolf Totem*. 420.
[106] *Wolf Totem*. 422. Some English translation here were incorrect, for example a mistranslation of enslaving into serving. Chinese version is at 417.
[107] *Wolf Totem*. 434.

felt inspired and enlivened by the spirit of freedom.[108] But knowing that it was him who took away freedom from the wolf cub, Chen also imprisoned himself in fear: he not only imprisoned the wolf-cub, he also killed the wolf mom and seven other cubs.[109] And after the wolf cub bit into its own wound to meet a brutal end of his life, Chen was also sent to life imprisonment in the senses of a permanent guilt as "a violator of freedom," while the wolf cub finally achieved freedom in spirit in its death.[110]

The Chen and the wolf-cub dynamic, Li then suggested, illuminates the fact that freedom is preconditioned by "liberty/liberation" which requires positive struggling of the seeker of freedom. Negatively running away from Beijing to find refuge on the grassland did not bring Chen the "depoliticized" freedom he longed for his psyche.[111] It was actively capturing the wolf cub, slaughtering its family, and establishing a master-slave relationship with it, and witnessing its unbending resistance that eventually make Chen experience freedom. This, Li wrote, was a situation where liberalism's notion of freedom – for example Berlin's negative freedom – as a personal

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[108] *Wolf Totem*. 434. Textual evidence Li used was in chapter 35 of the fiction:

> "The desolation vanished from Chen's heart each time he sat down by the cub, as if he'd received a transfusion of roiling wolf blood. Sparked by the wolf cub's high-speed engine, the generator of Chen Zhen's morale now surged humming into life, making him feel enthusiastic and fulfilled."

[109] Chapter 11 in *Wolf Totem* the fiction.
[110] *Wolf Totem*. 426-7.
[111] A "depoliticized" freedom is Li's original language. See *Wolf Totem*. 416. Also see Li's description of Chen's self-exile on page 432 indicating her disapproval of his negative escape:

> "Because of his [Chen] status as a 'child of the black gang' he chooses the grassland where heaven is high and the emperor far away. Faced with unavoidable re-education, he chooses active listening. Situated in the desolate wilderness, he chooses to read. In the stultifying life of tending sheep, he finds enjoyment in raising the wolf cub."

right became useless.[112] Comparing Chen to Berlin, with both the latter's concept of negative freedom and his early experience of leaving Russia and moving to Britain to escape persecution of Nazi Germany and of the Soviet Union, Li argued that both of them started their self-exile journey to find negative freedom yet went on different directions.[113] Berlin, Li wrote, held a "standpoint (*lichang* 立场)" at the "cradle of liberalism" where political liberation had already been achieved under a liberal democracy's protection of its citizens' constitutional rights.[114] Having witnessed fascism's persecution of Jews and of mass political purges in the Soviet Union, Li wrote, Berlin's privileging of negative freedom was a calling for individuals to "try to do what is Good but also preserve the self …and avoid harming others under the banner of political ideologies."[115] Chen's self-exile to Inner Mongolian, on the other hand, was no better than a "negative resistance:" negative freedom was not possible for him unless he actively strives for liberation first.[116] Referring to Berlin's door metaphor, Li wrote, "in a state of captivity with no doors ahead and no path of retreat behind, the only choice of freedom is the positive one that breaks down doors to come out and struggle for freedom."[117] To have negative freedom, Chen must practice positive liberty first to

[112] *Wolf Totem*. 423.
[113] *Wolf Totem*. 418.
[114] *Wolf Totem*. 420-1.
[115] *Wolf Totem*. 419. I replaced Li's language of "political correctness" to "political ideologies" to avoid confusing the readers. I would say Li has a biased understanding of "political correctness" as we understand in today's Anglophone academia. She meant something more generally as ideologies that had gained constraining effect and disciplinary power via state power or societal opinions. I also changed some of the other usage of words as I see fit. Chinese version at p.414.
[116] *Wolf Totem*. 417.
[117] *Wolf Totem*. 421.

muscle through those doors. In this sense, his freedom does need liberation as a precondition.[118]

***"Post-utopian criticism"***

It may sound peculiar to the reader for Li to compare having legal right under liberal democracy to establishing dominance over others via violence and to indicate that both are "liberation," a legal /political concept vis-à-vis freedom that she associated with philosophy. Yet, this was precisely what she wanted to remind us, that is, freedom only becomes a political problem when it is threatened or violated by dominance or abuse of power. This also makes sense in the political thoughts that we are familiar with in Anglophone academia. In Athen's democracy, male adult citizens were able to exercise their political freedom because they were liberated from the household and necessities via dominating slaves and women. In social contract theories, it is for a fear of subjugation to arbitrary violence that freedom come to be flattened into a right sponsored by the state. In democratic theories drawing lessons from prosperity and decline of Athenian democracy, it was partly a caution of public power being hijacked by private interest that Arendt and Pitkin, for example, emphasized that a notion of freedom should not be separated from democratic self-government. This is not even to

[118] The reader may immediately point out that an obvious difference between Chen and Berlin's circumstances that is that one lived in a liberal democracy and hence were protected by his constitutional rights whereas the other lived under totalitarianism where negative rights in Berlin's definition were simply not possible. This is indeed true, and I think she was indicating this already in her comparison of Berlin and Chen emphasizing Berlin's "standpoint" at the "cradle of liberalism." Also, if she explicitly wrote this, obviously we would not be able to see this book published in China, and she would again put herself in political danger like in the 1990s.

mention that Li hinted multiple times that Chen was a colonizer, a Han student wanting to seek license in "the wilderness" which is in fact an indigenous land of the Mongolian people, a human who imprisoned the strongest wolf-cub from a wolf den but violently killed its entire family; and more apparent, the conflict between humans and wild wolves threading the fiction together happened in the background of Han Chinese production teams' colonial agenda to convert Mongolian grazing land into arable farmland.

How is this fable of freedom, liberation, and domination useful to Chinese people for whom Li wrote this book? More important, how is it helpful to our original quest to find political potential in Li's insistence that academia, philosophy, and freedom must be separated from politics? Let us return to the title of the Chinese version of this book, *Post-utopian Criticism*. "Post-utopian criticism" is an analytical category that Li proposed as the most fitting tool to study China with its socialist past, as an alternative to postmodernism and postcolonialism which she saw as inadequate for this purpose.[119] Li never gave a straightforward definition to what post-utopian criticism means, but she left us enough puzzle pieces to put together.

On the dedication page, Li wrote that her book was written for people from the Maoist Era, for those who "diseased, left, and refused to forget," and those who went through "humiliation and ordeal, but still held dreams at the bottom of [their] heart." This was a generation of people who grew up under a discourse that liberation had already been achieved for the proletarians, women, and the Chinese nation. They also

[119] *Wolf Totem*. 551-2.

suffered, witnessed, or participated in the violent persecution of those who fell out of political favor in the Cultural Revolution in the name of building a communist society depicted as a utopia for all. And now, those who survived are standing in the ruins of the "utopian practices" of the Maoist era, wondering aboutg a way out.[120] "Post-utopian criticism," hence, is first Li's implicit effort to give China's socialist experiments a proper reflection, an alternative to Wang Hui's nostalgia for the Maoism[121] and to sweeping dismissals of these experiences under a discourse of rights – or in her euphemistic language – to "find a respected and proper discursive platform for those explorations of utopia and experiences that have long lost its voices."[122]

Second, "post-utopian criticism" is also Li's reminder for Chinese people to not to forget lessons learned from China's socialist experiments, and to remain cautious when other "utopias" come onto stage. For example, as the state actively seeks upper hands in global capitalism, as liberal intellectuals embracing rights discourse, as the market economy advocates touting neoliberalism, and as of course, as the New Left like Wang Hui glorifying China's revolutionary legacy, they all hold out the lure of visions promising security, wealth, prosperity, or happiness. Having witnessed the Cultural Revolution where the socialist idealism became a rigid discursive regime and had driven a generation of Chinese youth fanatic, some of whom became violent victimizers of their parents, teachers, and peers – Li had good reasons to be cautious. This also

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[120] *Wolf Totem*. xv.
[121] In fact, *Utopia* (https://www.wyzxwk.com/) is also a notable internet forum where the Chinese New Left promote their ideas.
[122] *Wolf Totem*. xvii. Some translation revised. Also see Chinese version at p.9.

helps us understand her life-time refusal to identify with feminism. The "ism" in it reminded Li less of its political potential to inspire and mobilize people desiring its promised gender justice, but more of the possibility of it turning into an ideology so politicized that commands unifying thinking and identities. For example, as part of her criticism of "feminism," she argued that patriarchy should first and foremost be analyzed as a "gender institution" which served some social function in human history, whereas what she saw in "feminism" was to "politicize" patriarchy, making its objection and eradication feminism's ultimate goal and definitive command. The latter, she wrote, like "to put an ocean in a horse manger," overshadowing women's tenacious will and capacity for survival and development presented in activities other than directly resisting patriarchy. It could also confine women in an inferior identity of "the second sex," allowing subordination to men as gender identity become "a birthmark stamped by history," which for her, was for woman to commit a "self-inflicted spiritual wound (*jingshen ziqiang* 精神自戕)."[123] Her understanding of "feminism" is obviously limited and biased, but we can also see feminist theorists resonate with her criticism of identity politics where an identity of trauma becomes just another disciplinary regime.

Post-utopian criticism was Li's reminder to us that no matter how seemingly attractive a social ideal is, there comes with the danger that freedom may become its sacrifice. In his search for an idyllic freedom, Chen turned himself into a colonizer, an executioner, and an imprisoner. Similarly, many of those from Li's generation, granted

[123] *Chinese Nation*. 70-1.

that their passion for socialism and revolution was genuine, unfortunately came to believe that such idealism could only be achieved by putting those on the other side in confinement, under mistreatment, or to death. As Li wrote:

> "The destination of ideals lies on the other shore...For ages people have been setting out [for the destination,] but we saw no one who returned, nor anyone to inform us of news of the other shore. The mission of post-utopian criticism is to inform: it tells stories of what is witnessed along the way, it reveals antecedents and their actual significance, it posts landmarks and warning signs – as marks of the defeated – at the entrance to the route teeming with temptation."[124]

***"Freedom does not have the other shore"***

Li did not turn caution into a rejection of idealism, however. In fact, she emphasized that post-utopian criticism is not anti-utopia. In contrast to Chen's struggle for freedom turning into a violation of freedom, she wrote, Berlin's privilege of negative freedom over positive freedom is a classic "anti-utopian" act, which for her, is "throwing away life in order to avoid death."[125] So despite her insistence that freedom as spontaneity would necessarily be compromised when "politicized," she nevertheless does not follow Berlin to define her preferred freedom in as a negative right – as a thing, a sphere called "the personal" or "the private" – that is to be protected. For her, freedom as negative right is just another case of freedom being politicized, in the sense that as it becomes a study of political institutions, of "prisons, and what sort of freedom is the

[124] *Wolf Totem*. 555-6. Some translation revised. Also see Chinese version at p.548-9.
[125] *Wolf Totem*. 437.

most reasonable," it also distances itself from the spirit of freedom in people.[126] In her reading, both Chen and Berlin unfortunately ended up politicize freedom and ended up either violate freedom and reduce freedom's scope.[127] However, what left us with hope, she suggested, was that both of them also started their journey to find freedom, which indicate that freedom as a spirit, an energy, and a desire is always within human beings. Idealism holds out the lure of the other shore, yet "in freedom," she wrote, "there is no salvation of the other shore:"

> "There you have it, freedom is forcing doors open, setting out, [and] displacement. Once the door is forced open and the previous emplacement left behind, the person is spiritually free. At the same time, he begins the journey… [he is] always traveling, never finding rest… Freedom is like water, whereas social institutions or government systems are like different receptacles. [Freedom has] different flows in different containers, but inevitably it fills every crevice: too cold, it will freeze; too hot it will distil or evaporate…[Freedom] is always itself 'free' and spontaneous."[128]

Once Again, Li used her beautiful metaphorical language to move but also to frustrate us due to its sacrifice of lucidity, just like Socrates appealing to dreams and allegories

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[126] *Wolf Totem*. 437.
[127] *Wolf Totem*. 427, for her comment that Berlin "reduced the scope of freedom."
[128] *Wolf Totem*. 438-9. Translation revised. Original at p.433-4 of the Chinese version.

when pressed to speak more clearly about what he meant. Her water imaginary, however, took us back to one of the roots of *eleutheria* that Pitkin told us about, that is, sexuality and procreation symbolically linked to liquidity and flow.[129] Freedom may lose its vitality when politicized and institutionalized, that's why we need to be cautious about how we talk about freedom in politics, but freedom as an energy inherent in human beings is *always already there*. It also takes us back to the Dionysian – Apollonian duality that had originally animated her earliest reflection on how women's subjective consciousness can be awakened. Despite patriarchy's constrains on us and its construction of us, our Dionysian impulse of flux and drunkenness in combination with our Apollonian impulse to dream for a better world are always already there for us to access. But what we should also bear in mind, especially as Chinese women who had experienced disillusionment of the communist utopia in its women's liberation, that each destination that we have arrived finding freedom bears the danger of rigidity and hence destruction; so, it is important that we take great care that our Dionysian spirit is alive, so we are always on our way pursing freedom. As she wrote:

> "What is ahead of freedom? What lies ahead for freedom is struggling for freedom."[130]

[129] "Are freedom and liberty twins?" 531.
[130] *Wolf Totem*. 438-9. Translation revised. Original at p.433-4 of the Chinese version.

In this sense, it looks like the freedom she maintained that must separate from politics, is after all a "political" concept in the sense of its emphasis of fluidity, natality, and action.

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# Contents

**CHAPTER ONE**
Introduction /1

**CHAPTER TWO**
The Beginning of the Journey: The Dialectic of Self and Society in Li's 1980s Writings /34

**CHAPTER THREE**
Breaking a Way Out: the 1990s Debates on "Women Return to the Home" /71

**CHAPTER FOUR**
Philosophy *versus* Politics: Finding Freedom in Post-Utopian Ruins beyond the 1990s /114

**BIBLIOPGRAPHY**
/171

# Abstract


**FINDING FREEDOM IN THE POST-UTOPIAN RUINS: LI XIAOJIANG's 40 YEARS OF WOMEN'S THOUGHT**

**Yudi Feng**

This dissertation investigates works of Li Xiaojiang (1951-2025), a foundational figure in the development of women's studies in post-socialist China who received comparatively little attention in international scholarship. Li has been criticized for essentialist understanding of sex and gender and for advocating women's self-improvement in ways that appeared complicit with China's state-led modernization and emerging market economy. Without dismissing these criticism, this dissertation argues that they capture only part of Li's theoretical and political significance. Reading her work across four decades, I recover a sustained concern with a fundamental political question: how might women cultivate subjective capacity and political agency under conditions that seem to leave little for either?

The dissertation traces Li thought roughly chronologically. I first examine her writings of the 1980s for which she received the most criticism for. Drawing on the body of texts that her critics did not pay much attention to, I argue that despite her explicit language of gender essentialism, her account of subjectivation as synthesis of the Self and the society contains the conceptual resource for a theory of transformative agency embedded in social construction. I then turn to the 1990s debates over women's return to the home, showing how Li distinguished herself from many of her contemporary feminist scholars by shifting attention from constatations over formal

rights to the preservation of a public space in which women could continue to participate in public discussions and thus cultivate their subjective capacities. Finally, I examine her later writings and argue that even her retreat from conventional politics and turn towards the pursuit of Truth constituted an attempt to preserve spaces for intellectual and political freedom under increasingly restrictive conditions.

Drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading, this dissertation argues that critical scholarship can attend simultaneously to the limitations of a thinker and to the possibilities contained within her thought. Li's work, I argue, offers not a finished theory but a sustained effort of locate political agency where politics appears impossible, and to preserve the possibility of freedom and hope under conditions that offer little reason for either.

# Chapter One

## Introduction

Li Xiaojiang 李小江 passed away on February 25, 2025, at the age of 74. In summer 2023, doctor found her breast cancer recurred when she fell ill while conducting fieldwork with Buddhist nuns in Jiangxi province. Since then, she had been working even harder than she had always been, as she knew that her over four decades of work on theoretical and practical issues of women was nearing its final ending. Only a few months before her passing, she again emphasized to an interviewer her life-long rejection of being referred to as "feminist person (*nüxing zhuyi zhe* 女性主义者)." "If future generations would still read my work," she said, "I would like to be remembered as a person who writes [and] a person who never stops learning. I see feminism as a perspective and an approach to understand the world, not something that defines me – please allow me to retain this little bit of freedom and let me reserve with my disidentification [with feminism] this little bit of trace in our shared history [as Chinese women]."[1]

These stances became the point of amplification on the handful of reports on her passing on state-sponsored medias, as if the fact that she distanced herself from "Western feminism" would affirm her position as a native, indigenous Chinese scholar

[1] See Zhang, Yue. "The person who leads the way for women's studies in China does not want to be a feminist." Retrieved from https://web.archive.org/web/20240917164822/https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/IRyKAxMD3FrB8cE-Bff1WA. 09/04/2024

– a persona that the state apparently wanted to celebrate.[2] What was brushed aside, however, was the fact that despite her forty-year long dedicated career of research and writing, and her fame as the most important figure in the founding of women's studies in post-socialist China, Li was considered almost obsolete in international scholarship of feminism; and because of that, her work post 1990s received only scarce scholarly attention.

International feminist scholars were taken aback by Li mainly on two issues. First was her apparent characterization of gender differences as binary, undeniable, immutable, and natural. Second, she seemed to suggest that Chinese women should commit to self-improvement in order to adapt to the new challenges and opportunities generated in China's economic and social reforms had assigned them. For the former position, she was criticized for "essentializing women," and for the later, she was labeled a "market feminism" in complicity with the Chinese state's modernization agenda which, inevitable, prey on women's reproductive labor. These criticisms have largely structured how later readers would approach Li; most of them, without much surprise, ended up agreeing that Li's work lost its radical edge as the collusion between capitalism and patriarchy became the dominant force shaping women's lives in both China and beyond.

[2] For examples, "Li Xiaojiang: I want to do more foundational work in my limited life." *Xin Jing B*ao (New Beijing News). 02/16/2025. Retrieved from: https://m.bjnews.com.cn/detail/1739711113168951.html; "Li Xiaojiang: Towards women, in Reflection of Equality" Tencent.com. retrieved from https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20250215A070BD00. 02/15/2025

## 1. Reparative reading: making room for hope and surprise

This dissertation acknowledges that these criticisms are valid but argues that they capture only part of what Li's work has to offer. For me, Li's women's theories is a story of a theorist who sincerely dedicated her thinking to the most urgent, and puzzling, issues that Chinese women confronted in China's post-socialist years. It is also a story of theorizing where a theorist wanted to find politics where politics looks impossible but is mostly needed, a story of forging hope when circumstances offered little reason for hope.

A story of hope is particularly timely for Chinese feminism in the recent decade. Since the arrest of the "Feminist Five" in 2015, the state's suspicion and hostility toward feminism have become increasingly evident in its tightening censorship and suppression of rights-based feminist activism.[3] Participating in activism on the ground is becoming more costly than many are willing to bear. In the digital space, discussions surrounding women's issues remains possible, though under tight surveillance, thanks to the rise of social media since the 2010s. Controversies over some issues even grew into nation-wide debates, bring greater visibility to the Women Question to the general public. These discussions have popularized vocabularies like feminism, patriarchy, misogyny, and etc., but also met with antifeminist backlashes aside from state suppression: China's decades-long one-child policy and son preference under the conventional patrilineal system had together contributed to an extremely unbalanced

[3] For details of the detention of the "Feminist Five", see Leta Hong Fincher. *Betraying Big Brother: The Feminist Awakening in China*. London and New York: Verso. 2018.

sex ratio, disproportionately constraining marriage prospects of men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds;[4] capitalism in China has fused with the state bureaucracy through a regime of governmentality, preying on women's labor and their purchasing power, but simultaneously cultivating anti-feminist sentiments among women.[5]

It is not Chinese feminism alone, however, that is experiencing a bad weather and in need a tale of hope. Political and social theorists in the North Atlantic seemed to also have reached to a broad consensus that we are living through a crisis of some sorts. Apparently, we are living in "dark times" that things we value – democracy, freedom, humanity, etc. – are under attack and we are "running out of steam" in our resistance.[6] Neoliberalism is a "never-ending nightmare" waging a "stealth revolution" on democracy and now we're living in its "ruins."[7] Can one ever live an "(ethically) good life" in a "bad life" – one conditioned by historical and systemic oppression and violence that render some lives valuable and grievable whereas others so much less so?[8] On the other hand, the ways we are used to read the cannon of Western political

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[4] From 1990s onward, China's sex ratio at birth ranged from 110 to120 males for every 100 females. See Zhang, Yanzhe, et al. "Empirical Research on Male Preference in China: A Result of Gender Imbalance in the Seventh Population Census." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* [Switzerland], vol. 19, no. 11, June 2022, 6482.

[5] For a recent summary of anti-feminism in China and discussion of future prospective of China's feminist activism, see Tang, Ling and Zhang, Yihuan. "Questions Facing Chinese Feminism: Anti-Feminism and anti-LGBTQ+ politics in China since the 2010s". in *European Journal of Women's Studies*. 2026. 1-8. The point on sex ratio is also from this article.

[6] See Kalinka, Irina. "Reading in Dark Times: Toward a Queer Politics of Repair." In *Media Theory*. vol.7, no. 1. 2023. 126-146.

[7] See Dardot, Pierre, and Christian Laval. *Never Ending Nightmare: The Neoliberal Assault on Democracy*. Translated by Gregory Elliott, Verso, 2019. Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. First Edition. Princeton University Press, 2015. And Brown, Wendy. *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*. Columbia University Press, 2019.

[8] See Butler, Judith. "Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life? Adorno Prize Lecture." *Radical Philosophy*, no. 176, November 2012, pp. 9–18.

theory seem to have only produced perspectives little more than tales of "impasse," of deadlocks, stagnation, and seemingly no way forward.[9]

In 1997, the aftermath of the AIDS epidemic, Eve Kosoksky Sedgwick cautioned her fellow scholars that social criticism is not merely an intellectually endeavor but also a politically consequential practice. "Whatever we know," she wrote bluntly, "we know there isn't time to bullshit."[10] Drawing from Melanie Klein's theories of psychoanalysis, Sedgwick argued that for critical reading to achieve its commitment in social transformation, its then-dominant practice of exposing systemic violence and oppression was insufficient on its own. Rather, such approach – which Sedgwick called "paranoid reading" – needs to be complimented by "reparative reading." In psychoanalysis, Paranoia emerges when a perceived threat is projected outward, causing one to experience the surrounding world generally as a source of danger. The reparative process – the "depressive position," in Klein's language – when one draws on one's own resources to "repair" these threatening parts, assembling them into a coherent whole to one's specifications and thereby offering oneself comfort and nourishment.[11]

Social criticism, Sedgwick then suggested, likewise needed a paranoid-reparative dynamic as such. The paranoid exposure, she acknowledged, is valuable for its capacity

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[9] See Shulman, George. "Fred Moten's Refusals and Consents: The Politics of Fugitivity." *Political Theory*, vol. 49, no. 2, April 2021, pp. 272–31.

[10] Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You", in *Touching Feelings: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.149. First published in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*. Duke University Press. 1997. 1-38. Pages numbers here are from the 2003 version.

[11] Sedgwick, 2003, 128.

to demystify and denaturalize oppressive regimes of discourse. Yet as the paranoid method became so dominant that it came to prescribe how critical readings ought to be conducted, she cautioned, it may end up having a stultifying effect on the very social transformation critics hoped to achieve. The problem, Sedgwick argued, lies in the paranoid critics' assumption of a homogenous affective relationship between knowledge and the knower, presuming that being informed of systemic oppressions and how they operate necessarily generates sentiments and initiatives required for social transformation.[12] Paranoid critical practice, in Sedgwick's analysis, is a strong theory of negative effect. Like paranoia in psychoanalysis that projects threat perceived in one particular object onto one's surrounding world, paranoid reading tends to theorize systemic oppression with an explanatory reach that is so expansive that experiences of oppression became predictable and inevitable.[13] Hence, just like the paranoid position in Klein's theory that is complemented by the "depressive position," whose reparative work restores a sense of safety, paranoid reading may likewise need a reparative process to make the bad news tolerable to the knower before it can become a source of transformative agency.

As Irina Kalinka recently lamented, Sedgwick's essay provided very few examples of what reparative reading/knowing might look like in practice.[14] I would agree with Irina Kalinka, however, that regardless of its particular format, what most clearly differentiates reparative critical practice from paranoid critique is that the former

[12] Sedgwick, 2003, 124.
[13] Sedgwick, 2003, 133-5.
[14] Kalinka. 2023. 127.

prioritizes "the subjective and affective needs of readers vis-à-vis an inhospitable world."[15] For me, this commitment is already vividly showcased in Sedgwick's example of the queer-identified practice of camp. For Sedgwick, in addition to the familiar interpretation of camp as parody and mockery of heterosexism – a paranoid reading – a reparative lens enables us to better understand the defining elements of camp performance. The excess and surplus in both bodily adornments and in the expression of passion, Sedgwick suggested, are expressions of the camp performers' impulse and capacity to assemble bits and pieces from the oppressive culture and transform them into resources for their nurturance.[16] From a reparative perspective, the theorist shifts attention away from the presumption that resistance must be the primary aim of engagement with the oppressive culture and toward the subjective needs of the camp practitioner that, aside from resistance, also include pleasure, sustenance, and hope.

Especially in our contemporary moment of forever crisis, as Kalinka suggests, what the readers need subjectively – not what we as theorists think that they need – might be positive affets such as forgiveness, solidarity, or love. Readers, theorists included, might be inspired more by hope and less by fear and humiliation to commit to resistance.[17] Both paranoid and reparative reader are future-oriented, to be sure; but it is the reparative readers who is more likely to cultivate hope and hold space for hope. Unlike the paranoid approach that projects the bad news it uncovers in the past or

[15] Kalinka. 2023. 132.
[16] Sedgwick, 2003, 149.
[17] Kalinka. 2023. 129.

present into the future so as to forestall bad surprises, reparative reading does not presume that all surprises are bad.[18] As Kalinka suggests, reparative practices preserve the possibility that a text, even a "sinister" one, may still positively surprise us, and hence contain a radical potential that some other scholars did not recognize in their readings of Sedgwick. As Kalinka wrote, reparative reading is a "prefigurative politics of imagination."[19] Its political efficacy lies precisely in its moving beyond merely revelation and prediction pain, thereby making possible the courage and hope needed to build – though on the debris of violence and oppression – new selves and a new world.

This dissertation revisits the work for which Li attracted the most criticism; it also brings to light another substantial body of her work that had received little scholarly attention. For materials both old and new, I invite the reader to explore with me what a reparative reading might look like. Li was a prolific and tireless writer. Working with the substantial body of work she produced over the course of her forty-year career is like piecing together a jigsaw puzzle: not only is the sheer volume of her writings considerable, but she also wrote for a diverse range of types of audience, including fellow feminist scholars, ordinary Chinese women, younger scholars, and male scholars with whom she disagreed with. Moreover, writing in the nascent phase of the reconstruction of Chinese academia in the aftermath of Cultural Revolution, Li developed her thinking through engagement diverse intellectual traditions and currents,

[18] Sedgwick, 2003, 130-1.
[19] Kalinka. 2023. 127, 128.

including Marxism inherited from China's revolutionary legacy; second-wave Western feminism, wo which she was exposed through her original major in West European Literature; and Enlightenment thinking from the May Fourth Period (c. 1915-1927) revived by new humanist thinkers in the 1980s, among others.

Yet as Sedgwick wrote, reparative reading assembles bits and pieces together not necessarily like any preexisting whole; rather, the reparative work aims for a "more satisfying object" in response to the readers' particular, subjective needs.[20] Li's original work is by no means anything satisfying. As I stated at the opening of the dissertation, her explicit language suggesting gender essentialism and neoliberal self-responsibility had invited her much criticism; I do not, of course, endorse these essentialist and neoliberal positions. My work, however, seeks to complement this paranoid critique, which is admittedly on solid ground, with a reparative reading. The readers are already well-informed that Li's work revealed her lack of sensitivity to heteronormativity and neoliberal self-entrepreneurship. Yet can her work also surprise us with potentials to be reformulated into a tale of hope where the theorist was able assemble the pieces available to her under conditions not optimal to imagine freedom and action? I ask the reader to join me in holding space for surprises as such as we revisit Li's writings, especially given our shared sense that consensus that we live, after all, in dark times and our desire for a tale about hope. Let us return, then, to the beginning of her work – to the seemingly the ominous origins of essentialism and market feminism.

[20] Sedgwick, 2003, 129.

## 2. Essentialism and the "double role": Li's main arguments in the 1980s.

### *The essentialized woman*

If gender essentialism means to see sex/gender as a non-negotiable binary system where a person's gender identity as in man or woman – as part of his/her innate characteristics – is predetermined by his/her assigned sex at birth, then Li had indeed committed a mistake as such. Her 1989 book *Sex Gap* starts from a statement that would for sure be denounced as anti-trans from today's standards. "No one can deny that human beings are consist of men and women as two sexes;" she wrote, "for natural species to sustain and evolve, there are intrinsic differences between physiological mechanisms of the two sexes."[21] Differences between the two sexes, she then pronounced, are "objective existences" that are based on nature and not subject to human consciousness.[22] Statements as such are everywhere to see in her works in the 1980s; and specifically given her heavy and explicit usage of a language of physiology when describing the differences between men and women, no wonder she would immediately trigger the sensitive nerves of her feminist peers in the West: when they later first encountered Li's work in the early 1990s, global feminism was just taking a poststructuralist turn, challenging gender/sex binarism.

One can reasonably read this position as a trauma response of Li to the Maoist suppression of femininity using state force, a "masculinization" of women as many had characterized, or just Maoist totalitarianism generally. Li herself gave us ample

[21] Li, Xiaojiang. *Xing Gou* [*Sex Gap*]. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing (*Sanlian Shudian*).1989. 1.
[22] *Sex Gap*. 4.

materials to fabricate such a connection, and as one of her critics Tani Barlow argues, Li had an extraordinary ability to dramatize her scarring experience under Maoism with vivid writing.[23] At various places, Li attributed her academic commitment to women's studies to her personal spiritual journey "towards women," i.e., her coming of recognition of her identity as a woman which she used to deny and resent growing up in Maoist China. For example, with emotionally charged language, she recounted that her first menstruation happened precisely as she witnessed her father being humiliated in a struggle session during the Cultural Revolution when Red Guards poured a big bottle of ink over his father's head. "I wanted to lunge forward [to protect my father]," she wrote, "but right at the time, sharp pain cut through my lower stomach, and a warm flow came down on my thighs… immediately I came to understand what this meant …all of a sudden, black ink, scarlet blood, and clear tears all mixed together, inundating me in humiliation and mortification of being a daughter and being a woman. At that moment, I hated myself for being born a woman."[24]

This incident, Li wrote, symbolized the start of her teenage resolve to "defy [her] destiny and defy [her] sex." She followed the example of the fictional character Rakhmetov in Nickolay Chernyshevsky's fiction *What Is to Be Done* to exercise self-torture. "I baked under the midsummer sun and swam in the bitter cold in the coldest winter," she wrote, "to learn to hone my willpower like a man." During her years as a

[23] Barlow, Tani. *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 2004. 295.
[24] Li, Xiaojiang. "Towards Women" in *Zouxiang Nüren* [*Towards Women*]. Zhengzhou: Henan People's Press. 1995. 3

sent-down youth (*zhiqing* 知青) in the rural areas, she wrote, it was from Irving Stone's biography of Jack London *Sailer on Horseback* that she drew the strength to persevere in her self-education during those hard years.[25] A Chinese young woman seeing role models in a fictional 19th century Russian man and a White American male writer would sound bizarre or almost incomprehensible to today's readers who have acquired cultural sensitivities to gender and ethnicity due to the rise of identity politics. But that is why these autobiographical writings would powerfully show the reader the extreme form of desire to deny one's femininity and gender identity that were common to Li's generation of Chinese women. However, as Li and her peers realized later, the state's exhortation of the "iron girl" not only had mistaken sameness as equality but also caused immense suffering to Chinese women both mentally and physically. In this light, Li's insistence on a restoration of difference between men and women is a reasonable response to her personal experience and collective trauma of her generation.

Historian Chris Gilmartin read Li's position as a "strategic essentialism" that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak used to advocate but later distanced herself from, that is, a group temporarily and self-consciously present itself as unified for political purposes.[26] This reading is particularly convincing if we look at the larger theoretical context Li needed to work with in the 1980s. As she recounted later, the main goal of women's studies in the Chinese 1980s was "separation," and she and her associates had successfully done

[25] "Towards Women." 4.
[26] Li, Xiaojiang. *Nüxing?zhuyi* [*Femin?ism*]. Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Press. 2000. 242. For Spivak's strategic essentialism, see Chakraborty, Mridula Nath. "Everybody's Afraid of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Reading Interviews with the Public Intellectual and Postcolonial Critic." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* [Chicago], vol. 35, no. 3, March 2010, pp. 621–45.

so. That is, i) as theoretical constructions, women's studies separated itself from orthodox women's liberation theory, ii) as an academic discipline, it separated from conventional humanities and social sciences, and iii) as a social movement, it separated from the state's monopoly in constructing women.[27] These three "separations" very well summarized the theoretical and political hurdles Li needed to overcome in her women's studies at the time.

First, the only permissible theory of women since the founding of the People's Republic was the what is called Marxist Women's Theories (*makesi zhuyi funü guan* 马克思主义妇女观), the core notion of which was that women's liberation ultimately predicates on diminishing private property, and hence women's liberation is part of, and is subordinate to, proletariats' revolution.[28] For Li, to argue that women and men are ontologically different was to challenge this view and to establish sex as an analytical category independent from, and equal to – if not higher than – the category of class.

Li's first article on women's issue "The Progress of Humanity and Women's Liberation" (1983) published in *Studies on Marxism* was a clear attempt to challenge the Marxist Women's Theories. As she later noted, the publication of this article was possible only because the journal editors – one of them Su Shaozhi who we will meet again in Chapter Four – took the risk to give it greenlight without securing endorsement

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[27] Li, Xiaojiang. *Gaobie Zuotian* [*A farewell to Yesterday*]. Zhengzhou: Henan People's Press. 1995. 16 The third "separation" also includes "maintained a distance from Western feminist movement centered on rights" in the third point. I took it out for the coherence of the argument here.

[28] See Wang Zheng. "Maoism, Feminism, and the UN Conference of Women: Women's Studies Research in Contemporary China." in *Journal of Women's History.* Vol 8, no.4. Winter 1997.129.

from the some "authority figures" on women's issues.[29] In fact, this article did receive much denunciation for "anti-Marxism" later in the aftermath of 1989.[30] The article made a "heretical" statement: the "five-stage" model of historical development, i.e., a successive development from primitive communal society, slave society, feudal society, capitalist society, and then communist society, Li argued, was only appropriate to describe the experience of men. Women, on the other hand, "experienced [instead] three historical period: the age of matriarchy, the age of slavery, and the age of liberation."[31]

From hindsight, Li's argument is a mundane one based on reproductive theories. Citing mainly *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* of Friedrich Engels, she argued, women, did not experience too much change in their lives since the end of matriarchal period of primitive society because they had been constrained in reproductive labor in the household until early stage of capitalism. So, unlike men who continued to experience later four stages of human development based the extend that they liberated themselves from natural necessities, women had stayed in their "age of slavery," enslaved by men at home for the continuance of human species. It was not only after the development of capitalism started to require women's productive labor,

[29] Li, Xiaojiang. "*gonggong kongjian de chuangzao: Zhongguo Funü Yanjiu Yundong* [Creating a Public Space: China's Women's Studies Research Movement]" In *Funü Yanjiu Yundong: Zhongguo Ge'an* [*Women's Studies Movement: the China Case*]. Ed. Li, Xiaojiang. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press. 1997. 147-8.
[30] "Creating a Public Space". 147.
[31] Li, Xiaojiang. "*Renlei jinbu yu funü jiefang* [The progress of humanity and women's liberation]" *Makesi Zhuyi Yanjiu* . [*Studies in Marxism*]. no.2. 1983. 143. An English translation by Edward M. Gunn is available at *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2013, pp. 22–50. This quote is at p.23.

in addition to those of men, that women started to be liberated from the family and entered the "age of liberation." Based on such historical arguments, Li was then able to conclude that "the disparity between males and females is a disparity similar to class disparities, in some sense as a social nature that is more universal," and hence women's liberation is not subordinate to proletarian liberation, but an autonomous movement of its own.[32]

Second, both the Chinese society and Chinese academia at the time were not ready to accept women's studies as a relevant discipline, not even to mention an independent one. "Equality between men and women (*nannü pingdeng* 男女平等)" had been written in the Chinese Constitution since 1950s and had been touted by the state as one of most important evidence of socialism's superiority. Slogans like "women can hold up half of the sky" and "whatever men comrades can do; women comrades can also do" had become part of the discursive reality that people lived with via propaganda and education. But this had only made gender equality an irrelevant issue for many Chinese people, especially men, because they believed it had already been achieved. Relatedly, women's studies were also denied its status as an academia discipline on its own. As Li later recalled, when she proposed notions of "women's literature" and "women's aesthetic consciousness" at an academic meeting, she was openly pushed back by a male colleague with "literature is literature; how could it be separated like men's room and ladies' room?"[33]

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[32] "The Progress of Humanity." 161. English translation by Gunn at 44.
[33] *Sex Gap*. 2.

The society's confusion over the relevance of the Woman Question is salient in an exchange between Li and an anonymous male writer that she included in In *Eve's Exploration* (1988). These exchanges were originally published in 1986 on *Women of China* (*Zhongguo Funü*), a general-interest periodical.[34] The male writer's article was titled "Adam's confusion (*yadang de kunhuo* 亚当的困惑), Li's response "Eve's exploration (*xiawa de tansuo* 夏娃的探索)."[35] Adam's letter, regardless of its content, was undeniably sincere in spirit: he was genuinely confused by why Chinese women of his time would still hold on to the relevance of women's liberation. Chinese Constitution had already confirmed gender equality, Chinese laws had criminalized domestic violence, commodification of sex, human trafficking, bigamy, and concubinage, Chinese women already walked out of the household, participated in social production, and took political office: for Adam, these meant that women's liberation had already succeeded. Beyond this, he saw no benefit of women desiring more "liberation," especially when it involves competition with men in professional lives.[36]

Women were, Adam wrote, simply more easily overwhelmed by the expectations of professional lives because they are emotional and sensitive – which he glanced over with one brief explanation of "physiological differences between men and women." So,

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[34] As part of the periodical's "Women's ideals and the ideal women" colloquium.
[35] *Yadang* and *Xiawa* were Chinese translation of Adam and Eve in the *Old Testaments*. It was the authors' choices to use these biblical characters to refer to Chinese men and women. They did not seem to think they needed a justification, nor that Adam and Eve needed to mean anything more than men and women.
[36] Li, Xiaojiang. *Xiawa de Tansuo*. [*Eve's Exploration*], Zhengzhou: Henan People's Press. 1988. 227-8.

the old slogan "whatever male comrades can do, female comrades can do also" would only bring unpleasant tensions between men and women especially between spouses. He even mentioned that burden at work would decrease women's sexual desires and henceforth negatively affect marital relationships. Thanks to women's liberation, Adam lamented, "women's faces have become bleaker and bleaker these days." Hence, he suggested, women's liberation may "no longer necessarily the progressive thing to do" and should be replaced by "women finding more suitable places in society" which he found more advantageous to women.[37]

Adam's suggestion might be immediately ridiculed and dismissed today; yet in 1986 Li wrote Adam a serious response because she found his confusion representative of Chinese men.[38] Adam's grievances and misgivings were heartfelt words, she wrote, which nevertheless betrayed his incapability to empathize with women who "share sweetness and bitterness (*tonggan gongku* 同甘共苦)" with him as comrades.[39] Adam's blind spot, Li analyzed, was that he failed to distinguish "women's problems (*funü wenti* 妇女问题)" and "problems of women's liberation (*funü jiefang wenti* 妇女解放问题)." For former, she defined, were criminal justice issues where women were the victims, like those raised by Adam. The latter, however, were social issues emerged after women started to participate in the social production thanks to women's liberation movements. Adam's complaint about worsening marital relationships and increasing divorce rate, Li suggested, was precisely a result of the liberated, working woman

[37] *Eve's Exploration*, 227-8.
[38] *Eve's Exploration*, 222.
[39] *Eve's Exploration*, 229.

however being burdened by expectations of her both at work and at home. It is reasonable for people to wonder, Li then wrote, whether problems like this would never have arisen had it not for women's liberation. Yet such doubts, she argued, only demonstrated that the Woman Question was far from settled in China and remained an unfinished task for both men and women. [40]

At the opening of *Sex Gap*, Li wrote: "'Sex gap' is a figurative metaphor, reflecting the phenomenon that men and women are not able to understand nor to reason with each other…the phenomenon of 'sex gap' is becoming more and more salient today, pressing us to retrospectively look at history and reflect on the [different] characteristics of evolution of men and women in each of their social development."[41] In this sense, Gilmartin is right that Li's essentialism was indeed "strategic," that is, it was for a phenomenological "sex gap" that she diagnosed of the Chinese society that she established a (de)ontological, essentialist "sex gap" between men and women as a solution.

***The "double role"***

This theory that women collectively have a history that is radically different from men then led to Li's other key thesis to defend the relevance and significance of research of women despite their formal rights secured by law. As women started to participate in social productions, she argued, they would inevitably come to be burdened with a

[40] *Eve's Exploration*, 231-2
[41] *Sex Gap*. 1

"double role." That is, their "traditional role" in the household as wife and mother to fulfill their natural imperative to procreate for human species and their "new role" to fulfil their "self-realization" in social production.[42] Li did not refer to any other theorists for her concept of "double role." But again we can easily find precursors for it. That women occupy both a familial role as wives and mothers and a social role as outside the home was no novelty in feminist theories from Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* to later socialist feminist analyses of unpaid reproductive labor.

However, instead of emphasizing women's "double role" as a systematic injustice that calls for social change like the socialist feminists, Li seemed to have adopted Friedan's more conservative approach to suggest that Chinese women should work on improving their personal capacities to better navigate both roles as China pivoted to a market economy, that is, to do well in both their roles. Under socialism, Li argue, Chinese women had unfortunately adopted a "mentality of dependence" to the state and the society, which contributed a prevailing low "quality (*suzhi* 素质 – *suzhi* means a person's general educational, professional, and cultural development; it also carries ideological connotations in the Chinese state's modernization agenda)" of women in comparison to men.[43] And now as China transforms away from a planned economy, Chinese women's most important task is to improve their *suzhi* and adapt to challenges that the new market economy brings to them.

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[42] *Eve's Exploration*. 126. also see Li Xiaojiang, Liang Jun, and Wang Hong, *Nüzi yu Jiazheng* [*Women and Domestic Science*], Henan: Henan People's Press. 1986. 41.
[43] *Eve's Exploration*. 170-5, 209-12, also see Li Xiaojing. *Nüren de Chulu.* [*Women's Way Out*]. Shenyang: Liaoning People's Press. 1989. 114-7.

As part of the project to ameliorate the burden from their double roles, Li and her colleagues organized a two-month "women's domestic sciences training program (*nüzi jiazhengban* 女子家政班)" in 1985 at Henan Women Cadres' School. The program was later published into a handbook for general audience providing practical skills, with some theorical resources, to navigate their double role so they can have both self-realization in the society and fulfilling relationships in the family. In plain, everyday language, Li wrote in the introductory chapter:

> "Three meals a day, the elderly and the children, and other endless domestic work big or small – all of these fell largely on women's shoulders. If not addressed well, 'family wars' erupt any moment and hold women back in their advancement in their careers. Facing such reality, we should not 'punch our own faces to pretend that we are fat,'[44] singing lofty slogans of "women's liberation from the family," while struggling with crushing burden of out dual roles and "pleading" for a way to live…why don't we confront such reality, organize our women and teach them some knowledge about domestic sciences, give them some practical, concrete help, and make their lives easier and happier under current circumstances?"[45]

The book discusses practical issues including how to cooperate with the husband on housework, how to navigate relationships with in-laws and parents, child education, how to manage marital conflicts, and basic sex education; it also provides advice on meal planning, interior decoration, fashion choices, and hosting etiquette. In the conclusion, Li even speaks through the course instructor's voice to suggest that the

[44] *Dazhong lian chong pangzi* 打肿脸充胖子. It is a Chinese folk-saying referring to a person pretending to be better off than he really is so as to save face.
[45] *Women and Domestic Science*, 4.

significance of women doing well in their double role is ultimately for the society's health and robustness:

> "Fellow sisters, now our classes come to an end…In our time together in the past two months, I have been deeply impressed by your strong drive for self-improvement. You aspire not only to succeed in your careers, but also to be gentle wives and competent mothers…We live at a time calling for a large number of career-oriented families…the function the family is no longer merely to ensure social stability through its own stability, but rather to serve as a positive and progressive force that would contribute to the society's development. Careers realize the value of our lives; families enrich our lives with joy. Let us end our class with the popular British song *Home, Sweet Home*…"[46]

### 3. Criticism of Li's: essentialism, statism, and market feminism

An essentialist understanding of sex and gender, plus a gesture encouraging women to be more skillful in balancing family and career, for sure would not make Li look good in her international readers, if not effrontery to us today from hindsight.[47] As Wang Lingzhen well summarized, Li's 1980s writings worked in distinct, if not fundamentally opposite directions to how feminism developed to address events in many other parts of the world.[48] Since the 1980s, poststructuralist feminism moved beyond a challenge of gender-based standards and stereotypes and argued that the way we understand biological sex as a binary system of men and women is also a historical

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[46] *Women and Domestic Science*, 270-1.
[47] She received much criticism at home at well. For example, she immediately triggered fierce accusations of her for "turning back the wheel of history and asking women to return to the household." See "Creating a Public Space." 145. Also see *Towards Women*. 22.
[48] Wang, Lingzhen. "Gender and Sexual Differences in 1980s China: Introducing Li Xiaojiang". In *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*. vol.24, no.2. 2013. 8.

construction and subject to critique. Since the 1990s, black feminism (e.g., Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlié Crenshaw) and third world/women of color feminism (e.g., Chandra Talpade Mohanty) began to problematize "women" as a universal category predicated on a homogenous "women's" experience and identity. Specifically, they suggested, the mainstream western feminism erred in that it produces knowledge and identity predicated on experiences of White, middleclass, Western women while claiming they are true to all women. Li's emphasis of sexual and gender differences and her sweeping definition of a Women's experience with a capital W, of course looked like an obsolete move, if not a reactionary one.

***Essentialism***

The first ones to point out Li's untimeliness were Chinese diaspora women scholars in the earliest Chinese cohort to pursue graduate studies in the First World in China's Reform and Opening Up (*gaige kaifang* 改革开放). Only a few of them had openly wrote on this, but Li's account of her personal interactions with these scholars gave us good taste of the quarrels between them. In early 1990s, Li started to travel oversea to present her work. The most famous event among these was what today's scholars called the "Harvard Conference." [49] As Li recounted, a group of seven to eight Chinese diasporic feminist scholars "ambushed" her at the conference. The situation became so

[49] The conference was entitled "Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State," and was held at Harvard University, Wellesley College, and MIT February 7-10, 1992. Papers presented at this conference later became an edited volume. *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State*. Ed. Christina K. Gilmartin, Gail Hershatter, Lisa Rofel, and Tyrene White. Harvard University Press. 1994.

unpleasant to her that she had to storm out of a meeting where these scholars who, from her perspective, tried to educate her that her theories of women were incorrect because they lacked a "gender perspective." "I have been way too terrified by all those occasions I experienced [under Maoist totalitarianism] of having to be 'unified'," Li wrote, "so this gesture of wanting to 'unify' me to their side made me very uncomfortable."[50]

Wang Zheng, now professor emerita of history and women's studies at the University of Michigan, is one of the few Chinese diaspora scholars who wrote to criticize Li in English. She was also singled out by Li several times, with apparent disapproval, for summarily "throwing an 'essentialism' hat" on her.[51] Wang commended Li's effort to establish sex as an analytical category separate from that of class as an efficient theoretical move. She lamented, however, that Li's focus on socialism's disregarding and suppressing women's femaleness was misplaced; a more appropriate target of criticism, Wang argued, should be its failure in changing patriarchal culture and institutions.[52] More important to Wang, Li's essentialist notion of women fell short of conceptual power to address an emerging "discourse of femininity" in China's economic reform where the capitalist market found women's sexuality, labor, and purchasing power lucrative commodities.[53] She cited Gail Hershatter and Emily Honig's observation that while Chinse women newly interest in self-adornment and

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[50] *Femin?ism*. 3-5.
[51] See for example, Li, Xiaojiang, "A Dialogue with Barlow: Feminist Research Movement in the 1980s". *Journal of Shanxi Normal University (Social Science Edition)*. Vol. 39 No. 6. 2012, and *Femin?ism*. 242-3.
[52] Wang. 1997. 138.
[53] Wang. 1997. 137

femininity in the 1980s did show an increased space and courage for self-expression and individuality, it was nevertheless a different kind of conformity and female subordination.[54]

Wang also attributed Li's insensitivity to essentialism to Chinese scholars' general limited knowledge of global feminist theoretical development at the time. By the time Li wrote *Eve's Exploration* (1988), Wang pointed out, she thought the latest feminist works in the West were *The Second Sex* (1949) and *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).[55] We have already seen an obvious resonance of Friedan in her notion of "double role." It is also confirmed by Li herself that it was not until 1985 that she got hold of these two texts as gifts from friends overseas, whereas before that, she only had access to Marxist literature on women for example those of Engels, Alexandra Kollontai, and August Bebel.[56] The only way for her to follow development of global feminism in the 1980s was to travel to Beijing from Henan a few times a year to sit at Beijing Library reading and transcribing articles from *Signs* and *Women's Studies International Forums*, the only two international journals on women's studies available in China.[57] I do not know her English level, but it probably was not too proficient with all those formative years lost in the Cultural Revolution to learn. So, if her grasp of the developments in global feminism was more than two decades behind in the 1980s, it made sense that she did not see a problem in defining women as a unifying category. On a side note, I

[54] Honig, Emily, and Gail Hershatter. *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980's*. Stanford University Press, 1988. 51
[55] Wang. 1997. 136. note 19.
[56] "Creating a Public Space"
[57] Li, Xiaojiang. "Where are you from? [Ni Cong Nali Lai?]" in *Towards Women*. 12.

always felt in deep awe that Chinese scholars in the 1980s had so much dedication and diligence to their work when there were so little resources available. We will see this again in Chapter Three.

***"Market feminism" and statism***

Li's limited knowledge of global feminism, for Wang, led to her failure to criticize capitalism and its inherent patriarchy but instead to suggest that Chinese women needed to make good use of the opportunities that market economic reform had provided them with.[58] This point was later more elaborately presented in Barlow's diagnoses of a "market feminism" in Li's thesis.[59] For Barlow, Li's imperative for Chinese women to improve their *suzhi* and navigate better in their double role at home and at work, is no difference from promoting a model of liberated Chinese womanhood of "a repatriated, modern housewife" which was precisely in complete coherent with the state's economic reform project.[60] As I will discuss more substantively in Chapter Three, China's transition from a planned economy to a market economy brought about large-scale layoffs in urban areas, particularly in state-owned enterprises. As early as 1983, calls for women to withdraw from the workforce started to emerge from the society, which later grew into a prominent public debate attracting policy makers as well as intellectuals to argue that women should return to the home in the interest of economic

[58] Wang. 1997. 136, Note 21.
[59] Barlow. 2004. 268.
[60] Barlow, Tani. "Woman at the Close of the Maoist Era in the Polemics of Li Xiaojiang and Her Associates." *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*. Ed. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd. Duke University Press. 1997. 531.

efficiency, market freedom, or social stability. In this context, Li's teaching for women to be "gentle wives" and "competent mothers" seemed only to exacerbate the pressures that women were already facing.

No wonder Barlow would conclude that Li's work "appear as nothing less than ideological justification for a form of national womanhood that is handmaiden to economic boom and frontier capitalism."[61] For Barlow, Li's seemingly pro-market gestures is a shared inclination with China's humanist intellectuals coming to their prominence in the 1980s.[62] The humanist intellectuals, generally, held that the Cultural Revolution had interrupted China's modernization trajectory starting from the May Fourth Movement in 1919; so now that the Cultural Revolution ended, China should return to its per-Maoist years and carry on with its unfinished mission of modernization. One important conceptual reorientation to achieve this goal, for the humanist scholars, is to abandon the Maoist voluntarist mass subject which for is "dehumanizing" and "alienating," and hence a betrayal of Marxism. In its place, they sought to recover the Enlightenment subject, the self-reflexive, self-determining, and rational individual subject, that their May Fourth Movement predecessors used to champion. Such teleological understanding of history and modernization driven by rational, self-reliant individuals, Barlow observed, soon came to be welcomed by the Reformists in Beijing for the ideological justification it was able to provide for their new economic policies, including those that undermined women's opportunities in the labor market.

[61] Barlow. 1997. 536.
[62] Barlow. 2004. 270.

For Barlow, Li's thesis on women also betrayed Chinese elite intellectuals' inclination to commit their theoretical work to impact state policy formulation. Especially under the rapid social change and loosened state repression, Barlow suggested, Li like more other "well-positioned, party educated intellectuals" believed that they will govern the country eventually.[63] Barlow's criticism of statism is further supported by her observation that Li's woman theory is a "rewriting" of Li Zehou 李泽厚 (1930-2021), a male humanist scholar widely regarded as the prominent advocate the disseminator of the Enlightenment ideal of the autonomous subject in the 1980.[64] Little wonder that Barlow would make a genealogical connection between Li and her eugenic feminist predecessors of the May Fourth Era who justified attention to women's wellbeing on the survival and health of the Chinese nation.[65]

I do not argue with Barlow's point that Li's theory of women falls into somewhat disappointing nationalist argument and end up justifying neoliberal economic policies. Such critique, as I have showed, had solid support from Li's texts, even if one read her generally. Li may be indeed nationalistic, though as Barlow rightly points out, her historical horizon of "the Revolution" in the sense of the proletarian and Marxist traditions in China, as well as the Enlightenment discourse she and her fellow Chinese intellectuals adopted, are by their definition trans- or internationalist.[66] I would only

[63] Barlow. 1997. 509-10, 517. Xu Feng, a Canadian scholar, also cites fact that most intellectuals are employed in state-run research institutes and universities and indicated that Li's work is part of the 1980s Chinese intellectuals revive their historical roles of scholar-official developed in imperial China. See Xu, Feng, "Chinese Feminisms Encounter International Feminism: Identity, Power and Knowledge Production." *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 11:2 June 2009, 198.
[64] Barlow. 1997. 510.
[65] Barlow. 2004. 300.
[66] Barlow. 2004. 277.

raise three brief points on Barlow before I turn to develop an alternative reading that I would like to advance.

First, part of Barlow's evidence to associate Li to market feminism is her claim that Li's women's theory is a "rewriting" of Li Zehou's Marxist humanism. Barlow herself admitted, however, that her account of Li Zehou was from an English article by Liu Kang connecting Li Zehou's Marxist humanism and May Fourth Movement's Enlightenment legacy.[67] Li Zehou's work in Chinese are dense and difficult to follow, at least for me, especially his *Critique of the Critical Philosophy: A commentary on Kant* that Liu heavily drew on.[68] However, as I will show in Chapter Two, had Barlow read the Chinese original – even just its brief appendix – she would likely to reconsider her identification of Li with market feminism. It is fair to say that Li did rewrote Li Zehou's Marxist humanism, but such rewriting did not follow Liu's reading of Li Zehou where the Kantian subjectivity was unambiguously aligned to China's modernization project.

Second, as I will show in Chapter Three, Li was a firm defender of women's right to remain in the work force in the 1990s as public calls for women to return to the home started to gain support among some intellectuals. In her 1980s writings, she had also clearly stated that for the "already liberated" Chinese women, to return to the household

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[67] See Barlow. 1997, note 11, 14-5. 511-2. And Barlow. 2004, note. 37. 428. Liu Kang's article is "Subjectivity, Marxism and Cultural Theory in China." in *Politics, Ideology and Literary Discourse in China: Theoretical Interventions and Cultural Critique*, ed. Kang Liu and Xiaobo Tang. Durham: Duke University Press. 1993.

[68] Li Zehou's book *Critique of the Critical Philosophy (pipan zhexue de pipan*) was first published in 1979 by People's Press. Its English translation was published in 2018 by Springer Singapore entitled *A New Approach to Kant: A Confusion- Marxist's Viewpoint*.

was not an option.[69] So Barlow's reading of Li as urging Chinese women to cultivate themselves into modern housewives at least overlooked this obvious tension within Li's theory of woman which could otherwise have been generative, as I will show in the next chapter, to both our reading of Li and for our concern of feminism in contemporary China.

Third, as I will also show in later chapters, Li's central diagnosis of women's liberation in socialist China was that it used the new state authority to replace the old patriarchal authority; this, for Li, was the main reason that Chinese women did not develop a feminist consciousness which women in many other countries did via spontaneous, independent feminist movements. So, Barlow's criticism of statism, again, did not address an obvious critique of the state from Li herself. Also, on a side note – but I do find it worthwhile to point out – it may be fair to speculate some connections between a scholar's academic views with her institutional affiliation and education background; however, we should be careful when making such speculations and avoid sliding into social determinist arguments and pronouncing moral agency dead. We should be specifically carefully for a case like China where all school education and higher education are government-funded and -regulated/controlled so we do not make sweeping judgments on an entire population. It would not be unfair to say that Chinese people are mostly "party educated" until today because that is how they access affordable education. Especially when we are positioned in North Atlantic academia, "the center," we do not want to risk suggesting homogeneity among those on "the

[69] See *Women's Way Out*. 63-4

periphery" and reproducing a colonial legacy that we have been wholeheartedly criticizing for decades.

### 4. Structure of the rest of the dissertation

The following chapters analyze Li's work roughly chronologically, with some overlaps. Chapter Two treats Li's early writing in the 1980s that invited the most criticism as I discussed above. I submit that her critics were based on strong textual evidence and reasonable reading. There were occasional omissions and errors in these critiques, but I do not intend my arguments to be based on a small-minded competition of who have read the texts more thoroughly. Drawing on a body of texts that Li's critics did not pay much attention to, I aim to advance an alternative reading of Li's essentialism and market feminism from the lens of her notion of "the awakening of women's subjective consciousness," – her central advice for Chinese women in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. Tracing influences of Marx's theory of human essence and from Nietzsche's Dionysian – Apollonian duality on her work, I show that her theory of women, from its nascent formulation, was structured by a necessity *versus* freedom dialectic. Comparing her discussion of women's literature and that of Elaine Showalter, from whom she drew extensively, I argue that Li's account of subjectivation moved beyond Showalter's account of internalization and contained the conceptual resource for a theory of transformative agency embedded in social construction. This would require her to abandon her essentialist concept of sex – a step that she had refused to take – I admit; yet I argue that her formulation of subjectivation as a synthesis of the Self and the society remained useful for Chinese women in their navigation of a way

out of the impediments inherited from the Maoist era. This also suggests, I argue, her call for Chinese women's self-improvement and independence need not be associated with market feminism and statism, as her critics argued.

Chapter Three then takes Li's formulation of a women's subjective consciousness into a different historical moment. This Chapter focuses on Li's work in the 1990s in debates over whether women should return home as the state decided that tenured employment, which used to be a promise of socialism under planned economy, was no longer fitting for economic development as its new priority. Also, in the 1990s, the aftermath of June 4th, liberalism's discourse of rights ironically became handy to depoliticize gendered layoffs in state-owned enterprises reforms. Scholars in favor of women returning to the home argued that given that the Chinese Constitution had already written that men and women have equal rights in employment, any additional state-sponsored assistance to women at work would be either a violation of either freedom of exchange of the market or efficiency of economic growth. Via reading "women to return home" debates from both sides, I argue that Li distinguished herself from other feminist scholars in that she rose above unproductive theoretical impasses of whether gender equality should take priority over freedom of exchange or efficiency of the market. She encouraged Chinese women to have the mental lucidity that contestations over whether gender equality should give way to other social values would be an ongoing struggle for them; so more important than winning these debates was to focus on building and maintaining a living public space for Chinese women to actively participate in these debates with various voices and perspectives. For her, the

latter was political action more meaningful than winning more formal rights in the Chinese law – which could be overturned arbitrarily under authoritarianism – whereas women's subjective capacity built in these debates would be handed down generation to generation.

Chapter Four finally treats Li's later writing from the mid-1990s onwards as the Chinese state tightened its surveillance of her after her open criticism of its handling of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. I first present a reading of Li estranging herself from Chinese academia due to political oppression and from Western academia which she found unwelcoming, and retreating to a pursuit of Truth, the scholar's vocation which she maintained must be strictly separated from politics. I then suggest an alternative reading of her apparent self-exile, that is, despite her strict identification of academia with Truth, which is anti-political from Western political theory's perspective, she nevertheless characterized Truth as unattainable and permanently open for contestations so, again, like in the 1980s and 1990s, an open space for public discussion was her central concern; and in this sense, she was looking for politics in China's worsening climate for freedom of speech and civil society. The chapter ends with a "post-utopian criticism" that she formulated in her literary criticism work of *Wolf Totem*, a contemporary Chinese fiction which Li found an illuminating site to explore how freedom and dominance intertwine with each other: the protagonist sought freedom by volunteering to be a sent-down youth on the Inner Mongolian grassland, his pursuit of freedom via negative withdrawal from politics failed but freedom unexpectedly emerged through positive struggle, manifested both in his

imprisonment of a wolf-cub by violent slaughtering of its family, and in the wolf-cub's unbending resistance eventually leading to ending its own life. I then reformulate Li's opaque concept of "post-utopian criticism" as a reminder for today's Chinese people living in the ruins of China's socialist experiments to be cautious of politicized freedom turning into tyranny and violence, whereas at the same time not to give up their aspiration of freedom as a perpetual, ineradicable human potential.

# Chapter Two

## The Beginning of the Journey:

## The Dialectic of Self and Society in Li's 1980s Writings

### 1. Sex in *the 1844 Manuscripts*: connecting necessity and freedom

I would first like to draw attention to Li's intellectual root in Marxism, the most salient theoretical resource in her 1980s work. In this sense, Barlow was right in Li's affinity to the Chinese Marxist humanists, in that they both drew much from Marx's early writings especially those discussing human essence in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. The male Marxist humanists found the notion of alienation the most useful for their de-Maoization project: if the ill of capitalism lies eventually in it alienating human beings from their human essence – the traits that make them truly human, or their "species being" in Marx's language – then Maoism is also flawed. That is, it is a distortion of Marxism because it made people political zealots and ideologues which alienated them from creative activities in accordance with their free will and consciousness – genuine, unique human activities in Marx's view.[1]

Li used similar sources from Marx on human essence, but instead of the concept of alienation itself, she found useful Marx's larger account of human essence being simultaneously natural and social. After all, her aim was not as much to criticize

[1] See Wang, Zheng. 1997. 136.

Maoism per se but to defend women's studies as a legitimate discipline and women's liberation as relevant social issue. In her earlier works "Human Progress and Women's Liberation" and *Eve's Exploration*, Li used Marx's statement "everyone who knows anything of history knows that great social changes are impossible without feminine ferment. Socials progress can be measured exactly by the social position of the fair sex (the ugly ones included)" largely as an authoritative slogan.[2] By the time she wrote *Sex Gap*, however, she started to explore the theoretical implication of Marx's discussion of human essence on her thesis of women. She repeatedly came back to the following obscure quote from the *1844 Manuscripts*:

> "In the approach to *woman* as the spoil and handmaid of communal lust is expressed the infinite degradation in which man exists for himself, for the secret of this approach has its *unambiguous*, decisive, *plain* and undisguised expression in the relation of *man* to *woman* and in the manner in which the *direct* and *natural* procreative relationship is conceived. The direct, natural, and necessary relation of person to person is *the relation of man and woman*. In the *natural* relationship of the sexes man's relation to nature is immediately his relation to man, just as his relation to man is immediately his relation to nature – his own *natural* function.…
>
> From this relationship one can therefore judge man's whole level of development. It follows from the character of this relationship how much *man* as a species being, as *man*, has come to be himself and to comprehend himself; the relation of man to woman is *the most natural* relation of human being to human being. It therefore reveals the extent to which man's *natural* behavior has become *human*, or the extent to which the *human* essence in him has become a *natural* essence – the extent to which this *human nature* has become a *nature to him*."[3]

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[2] *Eve's Exploration*. 64.
[3] Marx, Karl (with Engles, Friedrich) *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and The Communist Manifesto*. Trans Martin Milligan. New York: Prometheus Books. "Private property and Communism". 101-2. Emphasis original. Li's quoted this passage in *Sex Gap* at 8-9, 51,56.

For Li, these discussion of Marx were helpful to her case that human beings are, in their essence, organic beings of "three defining characteristics: i) humans are relatively independent biological beings, ii) humans are sexed beings, and iii) humans are products of their social relations."[4] Chinese scholars were dismissing the relevance of women's studies, she argued, because they failed to recognize sex as a defining characteristic of human beings. But this is a crucial omission, because, as she understood what Marx, sex is the link between the biological and the social dimensions of human existence. She wrote:

> "The social expression human sex and sexuality have long been discussed primarily with the categories of marriage and family. This, in effect, had excluded the natural determinations of human beings from the inquiries of social sciences. *However, human sex and sexuality neither entirely belong nature, nor are they purely social phenomena.* Rather, they are at an intermediate position between nature and society, connecting and encompassing human existence in its natural and social dimensions …Sexual characteristics of humans are grounded in nature. [But] they impact the society whereas at the same time are transformed in the course of social progress of humans…as relatively autonomous biological individual beings, human beings [nevertheless] always exist within the society as persons with particular sexed identities."[5]

Li's argument based on Marx was not particularly well executed, especially for her lack of contextualization of Marx's rather obscure words. She is, however, on the right direction citing Marx's discussion of human essence with reference to human race's

[4] *Sex Gap*. 51.
[5] *Sex Gap*. 53. Emphasis mine.

relation to nature. The *1844 Manuscripts* quote she used was part of Marx's discussion of communism. Simply to replace private ownership of property by universal ownership of property, like those in Fourier and Saint-Simon social experiments, Marx argued, would not solve capitalism's problem of alienated labor. As long as we work solely for the sake of ownership, Marx reasoned, work remains merely a means of physical survival, and we are in that sense still alienated from our human essence and differ little from animals. Humans are essentially different from animals because we relate to nature differently, Marx argued. Animals, because they are "immediately identical to their life-activity" to work for their physical survival, are themselves are nature. We human beings, though we also draw means of life from nature, so nature is our "organic body," we are ourselves not nature; instead, we express and realize our consciousness via our life-activity to change nature, so nature became part of our human-made world, a "humanized" nature, in which we contemplate ourselves.[6]

It is under such definition of human essence in terms of their relation to nature that Marx argued that how human beings treat women reveals their level of development *as human beings*. The procreative capacity of the female bodies, in Li's understanding of Marx, is the point where the biological (animal) and the social (human) aspects of human beings intersect.[7] If a society treats women merely as the mother lode to procreate future generations, then this society differ little from a flock of sheep; that is, this society are still alienated from their human essence. It is only, Marx wrote, when

[6] *Manuscripts of 1844*. 76-7.
[7] *Sex Gap*. 51

woman, "as a person [rather than an object in nature] become for [the man] a need – to the extent of which he in his individual existence is at the same time a social being" that his human essence comes to be present his existence being. This, as Li continued to cite Marx, is what a true communism –as opposed to a crude communism – would be able to realize. That is, "this communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution of… the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity."[8]

So, from the beginning of Li's theoretical reflection on the woman question, she framed women's issue in terms of a puzzle of necessity *versus* freedom inspired by the young Marx as a fundamental human condition. If we are to be true heirs of Marx – as the Chinese intellectuals of her time often invoked his authority to legitimize their arguments – then we must take sex seriously, because without properly addressing it we would remain trapped in estrangement from our human essence; then on what ground can we argue that our ultimate goal as a socialist country is to achieve communism? So, from a Marxist point of view, quite to the opposite to some of the make scholars who thought that a differentiation between men and women is only applicable to restrooms, sex and sexuality, which mediate between the biological and social dimensions of human existence, are not only relevant, but quintessential perspectives to consider for humanities and social sciences research.

[8] *Manuscripts* of 1844. 102-3. Li's citation at *Sex Gap*, 51-2.

Maybe Li's critics were carried away too soon from her focus on what women, rather than the society, should do to find a way-out from women's current predicaments in China's economic reform. Li's central advice to Chinese women was to awake their "women's subjective consciousness." It is a concept that she never gave an unequivocal definition. Given her otherwise explicit language preaching self-betterment of women in both their roles, it is reasonably for critics to quickly conclude that her feminism simply touted women to cultivate themselves into a womanhood compatible to capitalism – entrepreneurial and self-reliant, but at the same time good wives and mothers.

However, as I will now turn to show, instead of a concept of self-betterment into capitalist subjects, Li characterized her "awakening of women's subjective consciousness" as a navigation between biological and social constraints and inherent human desire for and capacity of agency, consistent with her earlier original formulation of the problem of sex as a tension between of necessity *versus* human emancipation. Probably to Li's own surprise, I will also show throughout this dissertation, this classic theoretical puzzle in political theory would continue to lurk in the background of her work shaping her theoretical moves in both feminism and in Chinese politics. This, for me, is the most important thread characterizing her thinking; and it is the one that continued to hold its value for feminism in China even when the issues Li addressed became oblivious in China's rapid social changes. For this purpose, I will now turn to Li's aesthetic theory that had rarely been considered in scholarly discussion of her.

## 2. Aesthetic pleasure in Zhu Guangqian: freedom emerged within necessity.

Of all six book-length works of Li in the 1980s, Barlow admitted that her analysis of Li did not address issues raised in *Inquiry into Women's Aesthetic Consciousness*.[9] It was indeed a peculiar work in comparison to the other five: it is did not show explicit intellectual lineage to Marxism, nor did it give clear positions regarding women's liberation or women's studies. From its surface, it is a series of inquiries in aesthetics and from perspectives of women's literature and has nothing to do with politics. I would argue, however, that *Aesthetics* is an important work to understand Li. From the perspective of Li's intellectual development, she did her graduate degree in West European literature and wrote a dissertation on *Wuthering Heights*. It was literary theories, rather than feminist theories nor Marxist theories that had first structured her thinking as she grew into a scholar and later a scholar of women's studies.[10] More important, on a more substantive level, *Aesthetics* was Li's most systematic formulation of women's subjective consciousness as a puzzle of social construction *versus* human agency.

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[9] Barlow. 1997. 540. Note.31. Also, Barlow. 2004. 269. Note. 34

[10] As Li recounted later, her plan was to continue her research in women's aesthetics because of her interest in philosophy, history, and literature after her 1983 debut essay which she thought would have ended the debates over the relevance of women's liberation. It only got delayed and took seven years to finish in a rush because, as we have already seen, such debate continued into the 1990s. See "Creating a Public Space." 145-50 and *Femin?ism*. 248.

It will take us some patience to see this, however. Li went to graduate school in 1979 at the age of 28; before that she only had eight years of school education due to interruptions of the Cultural Revolution.[11] When she was writing *Aesthetics*, she was young in her academic career in a Chinese academia recently standing back on its feet from a more than a decade long of self-destruction. It was a preliminary work both in its arguments and in its style, much like how she engaged Marx as we have just seen. It is, indeed, taxing on the reader's patience. No wonder that Barlow ignored this work and Gilmartin said she simply could not understand it.[12]

Maybe an easier entry point for us is to remember, again, that one of Li's central concerns in the 1980s was to argue that gender/sex is a legitimate analytical category like class. The book set out to pursue this argument at the beginning establishing that men and women experience differently in aesthetic activities. Li wrote:

> "We liked to refer to aesthetic activities as 'disinterested (*wuxie* 无邪)' and 'contemplative (*jingguan* 静观),' as if they are purely personal appreciations of beauty; yet in fact they have always already been permeated by aesthetic judgments that are far from purely personal but ladened with…a collective and relatively stable aesthetic consciousness [of a particular community] that diminishes differences in individual tastes… hence causing similar results in aesthetic contemplations in men and women. If we are to look beyond such apparent similarities so as to identify the differences in aesthetic experiences of men and women, we must probe into the deeper structure that have shaped aesthetics as a consciousness."[13]

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[11] See *Towards Woman*. 4
[12] *Femin?ism*. 248.
[13] Li, Xiaojiang. *Nüxing Shenmei Yishi Tanwei*. [*Inquiry into Women's Aesthetic Consciousness*]. Zhengzhou: Henan People's Press. 1989. 5.

Such "deeper structure," as she characterized it, is a struggle between two human needs: to survive we need to subject ourselves to rules of nature and of society, but that means to live a human life we inevitably need to actively resist these rules because we transcend our animal need for physical survival and pursue freedom and meaning. She cited the notion of beauty as Form – unchanging, uniform, and universal – in Plato's *Symposium*, and a similar understanding of beauty in *Mencius* as an absolute idea independent of opinions of particular persons; both moves to conceptualize beauty as universal rather than particular, she then analyzed, took place around the same historical period at the "mature period of slave societies" when laws and institutions gradually replaced kinship as society's main regulative mechanism. From this time onwards, she wrote, the "relatively autonomous, individual person" became a "social person," and "a conflict between the individual and the society came to be an enduring condition of human existence for each of us." Against this background, human aesthetic activities became "the most direct, profound, and comprehensive expression of the essence of human beings," which she defined as "a commitment to both necessity for survival (*shengcun zhi biran* 生存之必然) and freedom of life (*shengming zhi ziyou* 生命之自由)." The former was a "subjugation to the principle of physical survival," whereas the latter "a pursuits of life pleasure (*shengming kuaigan* 生命快感)."[14]

These arguments sound rather compressed. But like Barlow observed in how Li deployed Li Zehou, Li in her early writings did not always make proper citations for

[14] *Aesthetic*. 15-7.

notions she invoked from other theorists. In this case, she left out a clear reference to Zhu Guangqian 朱光潜 (1897-1986), an older generation Chinese scholar of aesthetics and art theories: without taking the notions of "*Wuxie* (disinterested)," "*jingguan* (contemplative)," and "*shengming kuaigan* (life pleasure)" back into their contexts in Zhu's aesthetic theories, Li made it hard for us – and to herself – to see her inquiry in women's questions in China coherent with a collective intellectual endeavor beyond the Chinese context on the enduring postmodern puzzle of social construction *versus* human agency.[15] If she had explored this line of thinking, she probably also would have reconsidered her essentialist arguments about sex and gender.

Now we need to make a brief detour to Zhu's aesthetic thought. Zhu already made his fame in China in the 1930s when studying his doctorate at University of Strasburg in France writing for Chinese audience to compensate for his living expenses. His success was partly due to the rigorous education in classical Chinese literature and philosophy that his father took great care to transmit to him which he was able to incorporate with ease and elegance to his Western education in developing his own aesthetic theory. *Wuxie* and *jingguan* – which Li used with quotation marks but without references – were key concepts Zhu evoked from Chinese classics in his *Psychology of Art and Literature* first published in 1936 in Republic of China.

As Zhu himself said, his literary critical studies started from Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce whose work then led him to other Western thinkers including Kant,

[15] Li also recounted that her original intention for her graduate studies was to study aesthetics with Zhu but only turned to literature because Zhu no longer accepted graduate students. So, it's safe to assume that she was somewhat familiar with Zhu's work. See Zhang, Yue. 2024.

Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche.[16] *Jingguan*, "to observe calmly and quietly," is part of Zhu's retelling of Kant's account of the aesthetic experience as an "disinterested contemplation" independent of practical necessities and its later expression in Croce's theory of art as "the intuition of pure form," a mental activity prior to, and independent of logical and conceptual thinking.[17] *Jingguan*, originally from Song Dynasty philosopher Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032-1085)'s poem, for Zhu, would portray this notion of appreciating the beauty of object itself for its own sake to his Chinese audience. The poem reads: "all [in nature] would be content when I look at them with a calm spirit; the joy of the four seasons will then be like that of me."[18] A moment of mental concentration on the object itself, an intuition not mediated by conceptualization, Zhu then wrote, is when an aesthetic experience is the most rewarding.[19]

*Wuxie*, "[thought] without distortions or perversions," came up in Zhu's criticism of traditions both in China and the West to evaluate art in terms their moral impact.[20] These positions were misguided, Zhu argued, if we look at Confucius' praise of *the*

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[16] For Italian Sinologist Mario Sabattini, Zhu's "aesthetic experience (*meigan jingyan*)" is not entirely the same as Croce's "intuition of form" because of some influence Zhu took form Taoism, but we don't need to go into that here. Sbattini's work on Zhu I consulted include "'Crocianism' in Chu Kuang-Ch'ien's Wen-i Hsin-Li-Hsüeh." *East and West*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1970, pp. 179–98. "Introduction: Zhu Guangqian and Croce." in *Zhu Guangqian and Benedetto Croce on Aesthetic Though: with a translation of Wenyi Xinli Xue (The Psychology of art and Literature)*. Edited by Elisa Levi Sabittini. London and Boston: BRILL. 1-17, 2021

[17] Zhu, Guangqian. *Beiju Xinlixue*. [*Psychology of tragedy*]. Chung Hwa Book Co. (*Zhonghua Shuju*) 2021. 238

[18] Zhu, Guangqian. *Wenyi Xinli Xue*. [*Psychology of Literature and Arts*]. Shanghai: Kaiming bookstore. 1936. 3. Sabittini 2021. 127

[19] *Psychology*. chapter one.

[20] For example, Zhu lamented, Plato's banishment of the poets from his ideal city, was the first case in the West to subject art under state control. Similarly, "regarding literature as the vehicle of the Way (*wenyi zaidao* 文以载道)" coined by Han Yu 韩愈 (768-824) of Tang Dynasty had taken many Chinese writers' work to be so superficial and vulgar that "passers-by would cover their noses." See *Psychology*, 117, 100-1. Sabattini. 2021. 120

*Book of Poetry*. "The three hundred poems from *Poetry*," Confucius said, "could be summed up in a single phrase: 'They never swerve from the path (*wuxie*).'" Poems in *Poetry* range from folksongs about love, courtship, homesickness, to worship songs to gods and ancestors for good harvest, and to ritual and sacrificial songs praising the rulers, most of which had little to do with moral teachings. Confucius, however, found the poets praiseworthy because they always expressed their emotions without excessiveness and pretentiousness.[21] Whether an art have negative moral impact, Zhu then suggested, depends not on the art itself but on the disposition of the person creating or appreciating the art; when a person's heart is not honest and sincere, he wrote, he can be temped by anything.[22]

*Wuxie*, in this sense, resembles the Kant-Crocian view on the autonomy of art independent of moral teachings, yet also criticizes it for its radical separation of aesthetics from other elements in human cognitive activities. "'Aesthetic man'," Zhu wrote, "is, in fact, at one and the same time, also 'scientific man' and 'moral man.'"[23] In other words, Zhu found himself aligning with the Germen Romanticism tradition that saw the highest human fulfillment in their expressive activities from a unity of human life; he rejected, on the other hand, the mainstream Enlightenment analytic science that saw human beings as mechanic combination of different elements, for example, those of mind and body, or of reason and feeling.[24] "Art, like language," he

[21] Confucius. *Analects*. Trans. Chin, Annping. New York: Penguin. 2014. Book 2. 12-3.
[22] *Psychology*. 116-7. Sabattini. 2021. 134-5
[23] *Psychology*. Sabattini. 2021. 138
[24] I learned this discussion from Taylor, *Charles. Hegel and Modern Society*. Cambridge University Press. 2015/1979. 1-6

wrote, "is a tool of communication. Language communicates thoughts, art communicates emotions."[25] The moral impact of art, Zhu then suggested, because it's where human beings practice freedom of emotion which, just like freedom of thought, "must not be stifled, and neither could be." The power of emotion in art is even stronger in its influence on human beings than the power of intellect, for unlike practical activities that are "interested" and hence limited by the demands of the ambience, artistic activities are "disinterested." That is, we pursue art not because of any demands from our environments, but for our own satisfactions. "When a man is 'interested,'" Zhu wrote, "he is a slave to environmental demands; when he is "disinterested", he is master of his soul."[26]

We can see this view of art as an expression and realization of human agency take root in Zhu's 1933 doctoral dissertation entitled *Psychology of Tragedy: A Critical Study of Various Theories of Tragic Pleasure*.[27] It is here that Li's notion of ***kuaigan*** (pleasure) finds its intellectual origin. The dissertation asks the question: why do people enjoy the dramatic art of Tragedy? For Zhu, the answer lies in an appropriate "physical distance" between the audience and the art made possible by certain dispositions in the audience and the characteristics in the dramatic art itself.[28] One example Zhu used in his dissertation was Nietzsche's analysis of the Greek Tragedy in terms of a struggle

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[25] *Psychology*, 109
[26] *Psychology*, 117, 129. Sabattini. 2021. 135, 145-6
[27] Translation in Chinese by Zhang Longxi (张隆溪) was first published by People's Literature Press (*Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe*) in China in 1983, the same time period when Li was writing *Aesthetics*. I read both the English version and the Chinese version from a reprint by Chung Hwa Book Co. (*Zhonghua Shuju*) in 2021. All page numbers I cite here are from this English version in this edition.
[28] Zhu referred to an English Psychologist Edward Bullough for this "Theory of Physical Distance." See *Psychology of tragedy*. 296-8.

between the Dionysian and the Apollonian spirit in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). The Dionysian spirit, the primordial drunkenness nature of humans, is the source of life and vitality but also chaos and suffering. The Apollonian spirit, the inclination to rational knowledge, brings back order to the Dionysian excess and formless flux but is an unattainable dream world. The tragic heroes and lyrical poetry of Greek Tragedy, for Nietzsche, steeped the necessity of Dionysian suffering in the Apollonian light, bringing consolation to the ancient Greeks. In this sense, Zhu wrote, tragic pleasure is an aesthetic experience where the painful reality is put at a distance by the format of the art. The mystical Olympian Gods, the legends from antiquity, the chorus reminding the audience that they are spectators, etc., Zhu suggested, create an objectification of irreconcilable subjective emotions of humans – the Dionysian drive for life but also destruction and the unattainable Apollonian dream for order. The painful world, as such, is put at a contemplative distance from the audience, and hence came to be tolerable in an aesthetic interpretation. The Greeks also were rescued from a negation of will that they may have longed for and were able to keep alive their vigorous, instinctual Dionysian energy that Nietzsche saw as vital to human life and excellence.[29]

In a later reflection in 1982, Zhu wrote that after rereading his *Psychology of Tragedy*, he realized that though he had been taken by his Chinese readers as a disciple of Croce, what had rooted in his heart was the Dionysian spirit and the Apollonian spirit described in *The Birth of Tragedy*.[30] Some argued Nietzsche faded out in Zhu's work after his

[29] *Psychology of tragedy*. 438-449.
[30] See Sabattini, Mario. *Zhu Guangqian's Life and Philosophy: An Introduction*. Edited by Elisa Levi Sabittini. London and Boston: BRILL. 2021. 33.

dissertation because he did not want to propagate pessimism in China especially in face of The War of Resistance against Japan (1931-1945). But I would agree with Mario Sabattini that this is difficult to believe given that Zhu read Nietzsche's theory of Tragedy as not merely a consolation but also reservoir of vitality in the face of painful realities.[31] Perhaps it was precisely when China was faced with military defeat and humiliation that Nietzsche's teaching came to be useful: freedom does not require the destruction or transcendence of life, even when we are trampled and enslaved by the Japanese military might; rather, the source of freedom is always already within life itself, and ready to emerge even in enduring suffering.

Now we are ready to overcome the hurdles in Li's dense and often elliptical writing. When she wrote that "we like to refer to aesthetic activities as '*wuxie*' and '*Jingguan*' as if they are purely personal appreciations of beauty…but they are always already shaped by the collective consciousness of the community one is embedded," she was arguing particularly with the Kant-Crocian side of Zhu that emphasized the aesthetics' autonomy from conceptual thinking. Our aesthetic experience is never disinterested or purely intuitive, Li wanted to argue, because our aesthetic consciousness is historically and socially constructed; men and women, for example, experience beauty differently because of they are differently constructed in history. However, when Li characterized how one's aesthetic consciousness is constructed by her social circumstances, she took the Nietzsche side of Zhu and suggested that aesthetic activity can be a liberating experience where a pleasure could emerge from life's painful realities. Li differentiated

[31] *Zhu Guangqian's Life and Philosophy: An Introduction*. 34. Note. 23.

herself from Zhu, however, in that she translated Nietzsche's conflicting psychological impulses into a tension between social and natural necessities and human agency:

> "The conflict between the individual and society as it is experienced within each person's life is an enduring condition of human existence…In order to survive, human beings must conform their actions to objective (the True) and social (the Good) principles. Yet, in order to experience the joy of being alive, they never relinquish their pursuit of freedom. The pleasure (*kuaigan*) of freedom is a spiritual experience transcending objective reality and social constraints imposed on life itself; it is an experience that becomes a concrete aesthetic experience via various modes [of art]. Hence, the essence of beauty is revealed in the essence of human life, expressing the [dual] inherent needs of human beings as subjects: survival and freedom. "[32]

Women, however, Li then argued, had long been deprived of the opportunity to experience aesthetic pleasure as human beings; Women had always been treated as "beauty" – the object of aesthetic experiences where men found freedom – but it was not until recent history that they came to be subjects capable of aesthetic experience themselves.[33] The rest of the book therefore set out to explore how women sought to reclaim this subjectivity through literary writing. As I will now turn to show, Li would then bring the necessity *versus* freedom to her formulation of an "awakening of women's subjective consciousness" as the central advice she gave to Chinese women. Reading her advice from this perspective will allow us to move beyond the familiar criticism that associates her work with market feminism and statism and pave the way

[32] *Aesthetic*. 17.
[33] *Aesthetic*. 39, 53-4.

to a more productive reading of her work in light of the challenges facing Chinese feminism today.

### 3. Beyond internalizing patriarchy: Li's self-contemplation

But first we need to make a detour again to another scholar whose work Li also owned a substantial debt that her critics did not pay enough attention. It may not surprise the reader that Li's discussion of women's literature drew heavily on American feminist literary critic Elaine Showalter (1941-). Dedicating her works on a women's literature with its own tradition and identity, Showalter belongs to a generation before feminism turned to challenge "women" as a unifying identity defined by a homogeneous experience. Unlike that of Zhu, Showalter's influence is more than obvious in *Aesthetic.* Li cited Showalter's major theoretical framework;[34] she praised her devotion to "rebuild a women's culture" amid a still misogynist academia via both her scholarly work and activism.[35] Showalter's influence on Li is also evident in the former's tendency to interpret literary texts through the lens of women's bodily experiences.[36]

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[34] Showalter argues that British women writers from the Brontë sisters to Virginia Woolf went through three major phases: first, the *feminine* phase where an internalization of male-centric standards and stereotypes that morphed into a tacit self-hatred in female writers' works; second, the *feminist* phase where a more assertive and organized confrontation with the male society in the Suffrage movement had led to a self-withdrawal from the realism into oversimplified glorification of female values or into sexual separatism of Amazon utopias; and third, a *female* phase a self-discovery of a woman's identity regretfully turned in a self-retreat to the private space and a self-annulment of the female narrative. See Showalter, Elaine. *A literature of Their Own: British Women and Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Expanded edition. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1999/1977. 13. Li cited this at *Aesthetic*. 112.

[35] *Aesthetic*. 246

[36] For example, the imagery of the red room in *Jane Eyre*, for Showalter, symbolizes the female body; she also read Bertha Mason's monthly attack as allusion to the menstrual cycle. Another example is when she linked Virginia Woolf's declining mental health to her not being able to give birth and entering menopause. See *A literature of Their Own*. 114-6, 120, 267.

One may simply see these as additional evidence for Li's essentialism and hence obsolescence in feminism's development.

Showalter's influence on Li, however, comes on a more substantial level, on an account of women writers' subject formation emerging from a tension between their desire for a creative Self in their vocation as writers and their consciousness of their status as women under a patriarchal society. For Showalter, despite their extraordinary achievements, the British women writers she analyzed never realized their full potential because they never resolved such a tension; rather, they had stuck in it, which had only led to death, literally or figuratively, of the female characters they created and the women writers themselves.

Such conflict between the Self and the society most directly reveals in women writers' usage of male pseudonyms – George Eliot, for example – but more compellingly in their works.[37] Take *Jane Eyre* (1847) as an example that is not exclusively well-known to literature scholars. For Jane to fully grow into her central consciousness, Showalter analyzed, Charlotte Brontë found it necessary to destroy the stereotypical Victorian feminine spirit of piety, self-denial, and obedience by the death of Jane's beloved friend Helen Burns at charity school. Brontë also purged the passionate, sexual, and angry side of Jane by putting to death Bertha Mason, the mad woman locked in the attic, before Jane could marry Rochester who nevertheless lost his hand and his sight and became helpless. They became each other's equal, Showalter added, not by allowing

[37] *A literature of Their Own*. 21.

each other mutual growth, but by having part of both of their selves destroyed.[38] The possibility that Jane and Bertha could run off together and leave Rochester, Showalter wrote, was yet to materialize until later generations of women writers like Doris Lessing.[39]

Another example where the woman writer opted for self-repression and self-limitation rather than self-growth is Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1928). For Showalter, Woolf's insistence that a woman must have a room of her own to write novels and that her mind must be androgynous is not as liberatory as it appears to be.[40] The private room does protect the female writer from the daily chores expected of her as woman and from the society's hostility towards her profession as writer. Yet, it is also a symbol of psychic withdrawal from her grievance over gender injustice, and an escape from her connection and responsibility to her fellow human beings.[41] Similarly, as Woolf preached an androgynous mind to protect the woman's integrity as a writer from her anger, fear, and bitterness associated to the oppression she may have experienced as a woman, she also performed – as Showalter vividly put – a psychological equivalent of lobotomy on the woman writer, denying rather than addressing her feelings.[42] The cautionary tale of the mad woman in the attic was still whispering in the background that she must die so the woman writer can live.

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[38] *A literature of Their Own*. 21, 118, 122, 124.
[39] *A literature of Their Own*. 224.
[40] Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. 1928/2004. Penguin Books. 61, 112-4, 120. *A literature of Their Own*. 284-5.
[41] *A literature of Their Own*. 286.
[42] *A literature of Their Own*. 285, 287.

Probably the most literal case is Showalter's comment on American novelist Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* (1899). The protagonist Edna Pontellier thinks "it is better to wake up after all, even to suffer, rather than to remain a dupe to illusions all one's life;" but when her lover abandons her, she drowns herself. When the woman is "awakened to an unbearable reality," Showalter wrote, "Even death is preferable to the pain of growth."[43] It looks like that these women writer's works, as an aesthetic experience, though inspired by an inherent human thriving for pleasure (*kuaigan*), did not come to be as life-affirming as Tragedy to the Greeks but turned out to be fatally destructive.

Li's *Aesthetic* roughly follows Showalter's formulation of a female consciousness developed from a struggle between the Self's aspiration for individuality and inevitable social constraints. Her choices of cases of literature largely overlapped with those discussed in *A Literature of Their Own*, though she added in Chinese women writer ranging from those of antiquity, the May Fourth period (c.1915-1927), and her contemporaries. [44] She probably took inspiration from *The Awakening* when formulating her notion of "an awakening (*juëxing* 觉醒) of women's subjective consciousness," given that the novel title was translated as *juëxing* despite other options available. She also shared Showalter's analysis that once Edna realized the fact her individuality could find no place in the roles of a wife and a mother that the society

[43] *A literature of Their Own*. 131.
[44] Euro-American writers include Jane Austen, George Eliot, George Sand, the Brontë sisters, Katherine Mansfield, and Virginia Woolf, and etc. Chinese writers include Li Qingzhao (李清照), Ding Ling (丁玲), Zhang Jie (张洁), Tie Ning (铁凝), Liu Suola (刘索拉), Zhang Xinxin (张辛欣), Zhang Manling (张曼菱) and others.

expected of her, she chose death as an ultimate retreat to the Self rather than to externalize her drive for self-fulfillment in making meaningful connections in the real society. Such resemblance is apparent in her treatment of other Western women writers as well.

However, Li did not intend a mere rewriting of Showalter or just sprinkling a few Chinese writers in it at best. Her ambition to add philosophical depth to her literary criticism is obvious, though her execution was not always optimal. But let us again allow her some patience not only because she wrote this work a relatively young age, but more importantly for the sake of our commitment for a reparative reading from the beginning. Take her analysis of Edna's choice of death, for example. She wrote:

> "If the call [for self-discovery of Edna] cannot find voice, it will never hear an echo – the initial desire is smothered; yet if it is voiced, it would lose its authenticity, because now it inevitably carries the voice of another person. The spiritual world can be as vast and infinite as the ocean, the sky, or even the universe; but it can also be so narrow that it cannot even hold space for anyone, including the Self. Hence, Edna chose death, scoffing at women's efforts to find their true selves with an eternal silence"[45]

This comment is rudimentary and opaque, but her ambition to give Showalter's Self *versus* society tension an additional layer is clear. For Showalter, Edna's yearning for emotional independence and sexual autonomy beyond marriage is simply at odds with social norms and hence led to her final retreat from reality. Yet for Li, such yearning is shaped by how it lands with the society but is not necessarily bound to be defeated. A

[45] *Aesthetic*. 86-7.

woman's desire for individuality beyond her assigned gender roles, as Li suggested above, once voiced to the world, immediately lost its autonomy and is subject to how it resonates with others in the society. But without making connections with the external world and to other human beings, such desire would never make an impact, not even to the woman herself. In this sense, Edna's pursuit of independence eventually became deadly not only because the society would not tolerate it, but because she could not tolerate that the "true" self that she wanted to pursue would inevitably lose its purity once it left her spiritual world. After all, she chose death not because the society wanted to persecute her infidelity, but because her lover – in whom she invested her pursuit of her "true" self – abandoned her.

That a woman's confrontation with patriarchal gender norms is not simply an antagonistic conflict but rather a generative process of subject formation became more salient in Li's later engaging with Hegel and her formulation of a "dilemma of the subject (*zhuti liangnan* 主体两难)" unique to women.[46] Her citations of Hegel were from Zhu's translation of *Lectures on Aesthetics Volume I* available since 1958; but the Hegelian idea she deployed is consistent with Hegel's notion that one becomes a subject only via recognition another person of in *Phenomenology*. In Hegel's theory, Li wrote, aesthetics is liberating to both its subject and its object: one becomes self-conscious via contemplating on an object; and because an aesthetic contemplation is an appreciation of the object itself, the object also achieved its independence in the

[46] *Aesthetic*. 127.

sense that it is no longer a mere means for a subject's use or consumption.[47] However, Li then argued, this posed a dilemma for women because their aesthetic activities happen in a world already made by men where women are seen as "beauty" but never those who appreciate and create beauty. So unlike men who come to their self-consciousness by objectifying aesthetic objects, women included, women's self-consciousness must first start from a transition from "being contemplated" to "contemplating."[48]

For most women writers, Li observed, this transition starts from a self-contemplation (*ziwo guanzhao* 自我观照), an objectification of the Self.[49] To use a Foucauldian language that only became popular later, both Li and Showalter were suggesting that when women enter the profession of writing, they also enter a discursive regime where women are subject to the male gaze; so, very likely they will put themselves under the male gaze too in their creative work. For Showalter, women writers internalized a patriarchal discourse and hence developed a deprecation of and a withdrawal from emotionality (vis-à-vis rationality) that was conventionally associated to femaleness. Li's Hegelian twist, however, would enable to her to transform Showalter's relatively passive notion of internalization into an active process of subjectivation. I do not think Li had fully developed the reading I am to give, but it is a reasonable reparative work filling in the gap in her arguments based on the materials she left us.

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[47] I cannot claim that I had grasped Hegel's arguments that Li cited from *Lectures on Aesthetics*, so my discussion here only represents the best I can speculate about Hegel from Li's characterization of him. Li's discussions of Hegel are at *Aesthetic*, 128-30.
[48] *Aesthetic*. 135.
[49] *Aesthetic*. 135. *Guanzhao* is how Zhu translated "contemplation."

Women's self-contemplation, Li could be suggesting, is itself a site of a lord-bonman dialectic. [50] That is, the woman struggles with herself for recognition, seeking dominance and superiority over the Self that she sees via the lens she inherited from a male-centric world. If she entirely adopts the patriarchal culture to look at herself, then she does achieve the status of the lord – this is how self-deprecation comes into being in Showalter's description. "I want to be better than a woman, so I want to be more rational, whereas the Self I see now is impeded by emotions." However, as Hegel wrote, the lord's dominance comes with a price, that is, the lord's independence sustains only on the bondsman's subordination. So, in this case, the woman's subjectivity depends on her permanently degrading (enslaving) the aspects of herself that the society stigmatizes on the basis of her gender. The mad woman needs to be permanently locked up in the attic or put to a slow death in a room of her own.

But as we all know, the mad woman eventually came out, burned the house down and annihilated herself. Permanently suppressing the aspect of the Self that the society would not tolerate is not the way to achieve subjectivity, or liberation. Li knew this very well due to her own experience of suppressing her femininity under Maoism. So, when she describes how a woman could avoid a denial or degradation of their social construction as women in her self-contemplation and come to "an awakening of her subjective consciousness", we almost hear an echo of Judith Butler's gender performativity. For Li, women's "lack of autonomy, (*fei zilüxing* 非自律性)" in

[50] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. B. IV. A.

aesthetic, i.e., their vulnerability to patriarchal culture's influence, can be a strength. She wrote:

> "[When the woman contemplates on herself], "she slowly ruminates and digests historical patriarchal culture and physiological sexual differences [that had shaped her], and then she creates. In aesthetic activities, indeed more broadly in social activities as well, we rarely see that the feminist consciousness directly transforms or subverts patriarchal traditions. More often, the feminist consciousness enters the existing order through 'participation (*canyu* 参与)' or 'joining in (*canjia* 参加),' positioning itself at the threshold between 'construction (*jianshe* 建设)' and 'reconstruction (*chongjian* 重建).'…From the standpoint of the individual woman, every act of 'participation' is an act of 'transformation (*gaizao* 改造).' Through lived, embodied practice (*shenti lixing* 身体力行), women reshape themselves; and in reconstructing their self-image, women also subvert (*dianfu* 颠覆) women's conventional aesthetic consciousness and men's aesthetic attitudes towards women. In this sense, women's collective participation in society becomes a subversive form itself: by appropriating power of the 'father,' they subvert the myth of feminine beauty in patriarchal culture."[51]

I provided the original words Li used to show that my translation is honest and that I did not force the Butler parallel by using her language in my translation; these were the language Li used herself. Such parallel should not be surprising, however, given the influence of Marxist and Hegelian dialectics on her thinking. For Butler, the language of internalization makes it impossible for us to envision that we do have transformative agency despite the social and discursive conditions that we are inevitably subjected to. Gender norm, she argues, would not be manufactured nor sustained without us repeatedly and actively performing the connections that heteronormative and

[51] *Aesthetic*. 144.

patriarchal gender norms stipulate between bodily acts and gestures and the gender identities they are supposed to express.[52] We are, indeed, hailed into being by the law, but it is also the scene of interpellation that had enabled us to make a different kind of turn to the law, or to turn to a different law.[53] In other words, we do not always *internalize* the law's punishment so it becomes part of our essence; we *perform* the law, and by so doing, there is always room that we can transform the law.

In this view, a woman's self-contemplation could result in a self-hatred through the internalization of patriarchal culture; it could also, however, initiate a transformation of that culture through the formation of women's subjective consciousness. It could thus suggest that women's path to emancipation need not be as agonizing as how Showalter implied. Woolf's androgyny, i.e., the ideal model of an artist who is unimpeded by emotional injuries inflicted by gender injustice, Showalter cautioned, "comes from timidity rather than strength" and discourages feminist engagement.[54] This, for her, is no way to live, as "[t]he ultimate room of one's own is the grave."[55] Androgyny, she then wrote, could be imagined in a different approach. That is, rather than "escaping from the confrontation with femaleness or maleness," it could mean "a total immersion in the individual experience with all its restrictions of sex and anger and fear and chaos…daring to face and express what is unique, even if unpleasant, or

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[52] Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge. 1990/1999, 183-6.
[53] Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 1997. 130.
[54] *A literature of Their Own*. 288-90. After Woolf established that "[i]t is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly," she immediately proposed a separation of politics and art: "[i]t is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman." See *A Room of One's Own*. 120.
[55] *A literature of Their Own*. 297.

taboo, or destructive, in one's own experience." In this way, she wrote, the women artist comes to gain "an understanding of what it means to be man" as she achieves "a thorough understanding of what it means to be a woman."[56]

Li's advice for women is also one about integrating the Self with the society. The awakening of women's subjective consciousness, she wrote, is an exploration of the Self. "The Self, in its essence…is an awareness of one's own existence," she wrote, "yet, to be aware of one's existence does not mean that one has discovered the self, [because] human existence is never purely self-contained, but the ensembles of its biological existence, social existence, the individual will. [To discover] "the Self" then, is a grasp of the interrelation of these three dimensions."[57] But a woman's synthesizing of her will for individuality and her biological and social conditions may not demand as much agony and sacrifice in a painful confrontation with these conditions as Showalter suggested. What if neither maleness nor femaleness is something to be feared about, nor is femininity or masculinity something that need to be confronted or escaped? What if emotionality, domesticity, and dependence are fearful not in themselves but because they are culturally attached to femaleness, and that assertiveness, aggression, and independence are intimidating not in themselves but because they are related maleness? What if the alien in the movie series *Alien* is fearful only because we see its resemblance to a penis? What would be liberating to women is to understand that the patterned connections between human characteristics and

[56] *A literature of Their Own*. 289.
[57] *Aesthetic*. 200.

experiences to genders are social fabrications that are humanly made in the first place; and we can, if we want, stop making those connections. One is not an angry woman; one is just angry, because all get angry when injustice happens. One is not a despicable, backward housewife; one just opts to prioritize their familial relationship, and it is reasonable and legitimate for all spouses to do so.

As a woman experiences life in its various aspects – personal and social, private and public – what she will gain is not the understanding of what it means to be a man or what it means to be a woman, but what it means to be a person. Femaleness and maleness, femininity and masculinity, are as real and as fabricated as the material world we have created as human beings, like the Great Wall or the Pyramid of Khufu; they do not need to be confronted if we stop feeding them with meanings that we fear. Or, as Butler put it, "gender can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity."[58] A detachment of gender and sex from their cultural meanings, hence, would make a woman's experience of coming out a room of one's own less scary. It could also make her self-contemplation more of a self-critique orienting on self-growth rather than a self-beratement suppressing vitality and life.

But as the reader may have already realized, for Li to come to these conclusions, she would need to abandon her essentialist conceptualization of women defined by biological sex. At the same time that she was writing *Aesthetic* and other works in the 1980s to explore how Chinese women could awaken their subjective consciousness,

[58] *Gender Trouble*. 186.

feminist theories elsewhere were beginning to scrutinize the conventional conceptual interrelations among the female body, the category of woman, and femininity. Thanks to them, gender/sex essentialism could no longer enjoy a status as Truth as its once had, at least not without significant qualifications. Li refused to abandon her essentialism, however, until the end of her life. She clearly wrote so.[59] So despite the potentials we have explored her work to come to a deconstruction the category of women grounded on the female body, this was not the route that she took herself.[60]

### 4. The matriarchal tyranny, responsibility, and "Growing up"

What remained useful, however, was Li's account of women's formation of subjectivity as a synthesis of the Self and the society. On this point, the criticism associating her to "market feminism" and statism, I would argue, did not have to be the only valid reading. Despite her language that women should better themselves and seize the opportunities provided by the market, Li's central advice to women is not as anti-feminist as it seems. Instead, as I now turn to show, her advice to women was one of growing up and responsibility, an advice that, in fact, democratic theorists also give for good practices of citizenship.

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[59] See Li, Xiaojiang. *The Gender of Historiography* [*Shixue de Xingbie*]. Xi'an: Shaanxi Normal University Press. 2024. 182

[60] Wang Lingzhen suggested that critics of Li's essentialism overlooked that Li's natural essentialism contains a profound understanding that natural differences can lead to radically different imaginings of society and ethics. So, while it is not unreasonable describe Li as an essentialist, such criticism fails to recognize how her natural essentialism interrogates of social determinism that perpetuates male dominance. I would agree with Wang, but I would say Li is still an essentialist given her biological definition of women. See Wang. 2013. 17-8.

On a rare occasion where Li gave a definition of "women's subjective consciousness," she was pressed by a woman colleague to differentiate it from "women's self-consciousness" so she could teach it to students. "Women's self-consciousness," she defined, "is directed primarily to those closest to women in their everyday life; it rejects the traditional injunction to 'follow one's father, then one's husband, then one's son.' Women's subjective consciousness, in contrast, is directed to society as a whole. Dependence on either the state or the society is no solution; we must rely on ourselves; whether it is earning a living or accomplishing what we set out to do, we must make our own decisions and depend on our own strength."[61] Her definition here, again, would easily confirm the label "market feminism" attached to her by scholars overseas. However, her call on women t learn to not depend on society or the state also drew criticism in China, if not even harsher one. Related to this prescription for independence is Li's diagnosis of the limitation of China's women's liberation. China's socialist revolution, Li argued, did establish "equality between men and women" legally and culturally since 1949; but because most Chinese women were "endowed (*enci* 恩赐)" with such liberation and its related privileges by the state, they never formed a subjective consciousness in spontaneously and actively struggling for their own liberation.[62]

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[61] Li, Xiaojiang. *Guanyu Nüren de Dawen [Answers and Questions on Women]*. Jiangsu People's Press. 1998. 99.

[62] *Eve*. 161-4, 185-6, *Women's Way Out*. 59-63. Women cadres from All China Women's Federation (ACWF) cadres were severely provoked by Li's endowment argument because it denied women's agency and contribution in China's socialist revolution. Invoking CPC's official historiography on women's leadership and participation in China's revolutionary legacy, they charged that Li's thesis of women was not only incorrect but also reactionary. For example, see Luo Qiong. "Let the History of

For Li, the fact that Chinese women acquired rights and equality as handouts from the state, is a constitutive part of their social construction that is no less important than the historical formation of gender through the division of productive and reproductive labor. For Chinese women to reclaim their subjectivity, she repeatedly emphasized, they must acknowledge and reflect on, rather than deny, how China's socialist legacy had shaped them as such.[63] Society should understand that "equality between men and women" does not mean completion of women's liberation. For women themselves, they must recognize that the "equality with men" enshrined in the Constitution guarantees no self-realization, nor freedom, nor happiness. Achieving these, Li told Chinese women with a stern face, is ultimately their own responsibility.

We have already read that the prescription Li issued for Chinese women to fulfill such responsibility was to better themselves, especially in managing their double roles made increasingly burdensome under market economy. However, the advice on responsibility itself remains compelling especially given China's history of totalitarianism where the state sought to regulate nearly every aspect of a person's life. Totalitarianism is commonly perceived as a masculine/paternal power of ruthless domination and exploitation, threatening violence as punishment for disobedience, for

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the Women's Movement in the New Democratic Period Speak to the present." in Luo, Qiong. *Funü Yanjiu Luncong*. [*Theses on Women's Liberation*]. Women's Press of China. 1990. 216-7.

Li's "domestic sciences classes" for women's self-betterment had also triggered immediate accusation that she was "turning back the wheel of history," a political charge have proved fatal in CPC's political movements over the years. See "Creating a Public Space." 145. Also see *Towards Women*. 22.

[63] For examples, see "A Marxist 'hat,' (*makesi zhuyi de 'maozi'* 马克思的'帽子'),"" and "Embarrassment over rootlessness (*wugen de nankan* 无根的难堪)," and "Searching for a spiritual home (*xunzhao jingshen jiayuan* 寻找精神家园)," in *Towards Women.*

example, the "Big Brother." However, we also imagine it as feminine/maternal power smothering her children in the name of care, for a lack of a better example, the "nanny state." Both a dictatorial father and a manipulative mother compromise the child's opportunity to grow into independent adults.

The matriarchal tyranny, as Hanna Pitkin pointed out, was the idea animating Hannah Arendt's imagining of "the social" in *The Human Condition*.[64] Arendt depicted "the social" as a Blob, Pitkin wrote, an evil monster from the outer space aggressively devouring and eventually destroying human beings; such an imaginary, Pitkin argued, however, was ironically counterproductive to Arendt's central teaching of action and freedom. Using gendered language, Pitkin argued, Arendt described the social as if it is a "bad mother," "an evil, destructive matriarch constantly seeking to expand her power, to control and infantilize her children, to render them docile and make them behave, until she finally extinguishes their independence altogether, destroying all boundaries and merging the 'children' back into the single mass – herself."[65] By describing "the social" as Blob-like power in front of whom human beings are simply hopeless – leaving it means a threat to their physical life like leaving a mother's breasts – Pitkin argued, Arendt ended pronouncing action dead when it is the most needed.[66] After all, "the social" – its institutional manifestation of markets and bureaucracies, its characterological expression in our conformism and resentful victimhood, and the

[64] Pitkin, Hanna. *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt's Concept of the Social*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. 1998. 168-75.
[65] *Attack of the Blob*. 271.
[66] *Attack of the Blob*. 3-5.

ideational support it drew from our cynicism and hopelessness – is really our own doing.[67]

Our way out for Pitkin, however, is not to denigrate femininity and turn to machoism as some critics took Arendt to imply. The kind of courage we need to penetrate the thicket of the social, she suggested, is not reckless boldness, but a sense of responsibility towards other people and the world that is part of "growing up" as human beings.[68] To grow up in this sense, Pitkin suggested in an earlier writing, is a synthesis of both femininity and masculinity. In "Food and Freedom in *the Flounder*," Pitkin suggested a reading of the novel by German writer Günter Grass beyond its common interpretation as a critique of masculinity. Idealism and history-making that the fictional flounder persuaded men into pursuing, according to this prevalent reading, turned out to be destructive or even murderous in human history despite the ideals like freedom, justice, and self-determination it held out as lures. What is truly life-sustaining, this reading goes, is the making of food – rather than the making of history – that is, the ethos of care and nurture associated to women and femininity. Pitkin, however, suggested an alternative reading: women taking over of power is not the antidote for patriarchal domination and violence, for the manipulative, infantilizing matriarchal dominance is just as dangerous.[69]

The antidote to the murderous history animated the warrior virtue of conquest and subjugation, Pitkin then suggested, was "a third alternative," not as in a "third" sex in

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[67] *Attack of the Blob.* 279-80.
[68] *Attack of the Blob.* 263-7.
[69] Pitkin, Hanna. "Food and Freedom in *the Flounder*." In *Political Theory*. vol. 12, no.4. 1984. 480-1.

addition men and women, but a new way of treating gender. That is; to be a mature human being, one must reconcile femininity and masculinity, or to put it differently, to integrate the capacities and dispositions conventionally associated with both. Taking masculinity to its extreme turns into destructive megalomania and cruelness; but one does need the drive for excellence and self-realization, and to do that would require to let go of one's dependence on the ever-caring mother. Life cannot be sustained without practical, everyday activities, for example, making food; but one would not want to spend her entire life in the household as the selfless mother forever nurturing her children and husband, like the three-breasted Awa in the novel suckled by men eternally. Doing so would eventually turn her into a manipulative maternal tyrant who wields victimhood as a means of control.[70]

This "third alternative," Pitkin also suggests, also shed light on how we can think about our ethical responsibility for the society and others in a world where situations of things and of ourselves could never be entirely determined by our choice and creation. We all have no choice but grow up being shaped by gender norms and stereotypes; from such experience we come to develop the forbidden aspects of ourselves, which if we do not address them, we later project them onto "the Other," or we turn the aggression toward to self.[71] This explains why some men have difficulty with showing vulnerability and asking for help. This explains transphobia and homophobia sentiments. This also explains why Showalter's women writers had to kill

[70] "Food and Freedom". 481-2.
[71] "Food and Freedom". 481.

the mad woman in attic, the passionate, sexual, and dark aspect of themselves that they could not accept nor tolerate. Our way out, as she also wrote elsewhere, is to come to understand our social construction in terms of the human experience of growing up. That is, to become an adult, one must forgive her parents for having exercised arbitrary authority over her when she was a vulnerable and helpless child, for without the parents she would not be who she is; it is then up to the adult that she has become to decide what to make of the legacy of her upbringing. When we come to terms with the past, we can then live in the now where action and agency can occur, including those to transform the fearful, rigid gender norms that had scarred us in the past.[72]

Now we come all the way back to Li's early Hegelian inspired concept of self-contemplation, that is, a self-critique of one's past social construction of the male-centered society without turning its inherent misogyny into a self-beratement. For Li, this also holds true to Chinese women's historical construction from China's Maoist past. Urban women of her generation growing up after the founding of the People's Republic were born into a discourse of equality of between men and women that is also underwritten by the law. They were also born into a state socialism that promised them benefits like tenured employment and affordable childcare (on the condition that they do not end up on the wrong side politically of course), but at the same time also controlled almost every aspect of their lives. For Li, this state, while it did have punitive and violent side of a patriarchal authoritarianism, it is also like the matriarchal tyrant

[72] Pitkin, Hanna. *Fortune is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolò Machiavelli*. University of California Press. 1984. 296-7. Also see *Attack of the Blob*. 268, for the notion of living entirely in the present.

that Pitkin and Arendt described; it destroyed all boundaries merging the people into a single mass – the Maoist class subject – and it stifled their opportunities to grow into independent, competent adults so they forever stayed overgrown infants, never dare to or capable to defy their motherland. And I would say that this was not an unfair critique of how China's past socialist experiments had shaped its people.

Would the Chinese state in the 1980s prefer its people to become less like infants forever suckling at its breasts, as its own body became depleted and, with the ideological failure of Maoism, its legitimacy now depended on how much it could materially provide? Would the state also prefer its people to cultivate themselves into self-reliant, competitive market subjects as it decided to transform into a market economy so as to save its legitimacy? I think the answer is Yes. But I also do not think this makes Li's thesis on woman straightforwardly an accomplice to the state and the market. As I will show in next chapter, Li's calling for Chinese women to improve their subjective capacities would acquire its particular insightfulness in the. This would be the time when a new group of pro-market male intellectuals, using liberalism's language of rights that they newly acquired, to argue that Chinese women should be satisfied for the formal equality between genders enshrined in the Chinese law and should not ask for additional social assistance based on their gender. Remember the letter from the Chinese Adam we read in Chapter one where Adam also indicated an uncomfortable question. "Look," he was saying, "now you women already have the same right as men to work, but you are having a hard time meeting the expectation of men at the workplace, why don't you do something that you are good at instead, for

example, housework and taking care of children? Wouldn't you be better off that way?" Adam sounded ridiculous and offensive from the surface, but it would be hard to respond if we put aside ideals like egalitarianism and feminism that we on the radical/liberal Left today take as undisputable. Ultimately, why being a feminist person if it does not do you any good? Gender equality for equality's sake would only end up an abstract, empty idea when it is not related to other values, just like the making of history is impoverished and lifeless if not sustained by the making of food. Then what do women really want out of their equal rights? As we will see in the chapter that follows, these are the questions that Chinese feminist scholars struggled to answer in their debates with the pro-market, efficiency prioritizing male intellectuals. We will also see that Li, with the concept of women's subjective consciousness she began developing in the 1980s, came to be better equipped to intervene in these debates that would carry profound consequences to Chinese women in the 1990s.

# Chapter Three

## Breaking a Way Out:

## the 1990s Debates on "Women Return to the Home"

### 1. From iron girl to women returning home: a changing social landscape

Existing scholarship of Li has focused almost exclusively on the first decade of her intellectual development despite her long career of writing and research spanning over forty years. But this was probably due to the fact that the interpretations associating her to market feminism and statism would acquire particular plausibility in the 1990s as China's entered a deeper and more consequential phase of economic reform. After Deng Xiaoping's "Southern Tour" in 1992, the state became more certain than ever on its market-oriented reform. Right after Deng's tour, CPC's 14th Congress decided that China would establish a "a socialist market economy," i.e., an economy of predominating public ownership for the sake of socialism and a competing market for efficiency. Women would then become one of the first groups that the state would ask to bear the pain of social transformation. This would be most saliently crystalized in mass gendered layoffs of the reforms of state-owned enterprises (SOEs).

With the blessing from the highest party leadership, reforms of SOEs, though started in 1984, now began to accelerate and expand in scope. For most women working in

those enterprises, however, this would be ominous news, and it was to take some of them until today to cope. SOEs before the reforms were established in the early years of the People's Republic to replace the labor market as part of the socialist reform. Each SOE is a work-unit (*danwei* 单位).[1] Employees of a work-unit were assigned by the state for which full-employment was its goal for the ideal of socialism. A work-unit is also the state's regulatory agent at the very local level, making sure that the state's policies to be effectively implemented in each work-unit member. These included struggle sessions during the "take class struggle as the key link" years, mandatory intrauterine devices for women under the "one-child" policy, and recently compulsory COVID-19 testing and quarantines.

Hence, as a work-unit, an SOE was not a profit-seeking organization like businesses under market economy. It was not concerned with their cost of labor, nor did they have much autonomy in administrating their labors, either in recruitment or in dismissals. As a work-unit, it was also responsible for provisions of social goods – which a business is not responsible for – including housing, medical care, pensions, recreational facilities, communal canteens, daycares, and school education, with affordable cost or no cost. So admittedly, women employees of SOEs were shielded from many hazards they would have encountered a capitalist labor market: they had relatively easy access to affordable support from the work-unit on the reproductive labor that were expected

[1] The work-units are – until today – also China's most basic administrative unit in its urban areas. It could be an SOE, as well as a police station, a school, a university, a sports team, or a department store.

based on their gender, and they had state-sponsored security of employment that could have been interrupted in a market economy because of their needs for maternal leaves.

All these benefits were to be significantly cut or simply terminated in the reforms of SOEs. The reform gave the SOEs much more autonomy in their management, but also more pressure to produce profits; the result was massive lay-off of SOE employees, as well as drastic decrease of the social goods they used to provide. Small wonder that women would suffer disproportionately in the pains of these social transitions. Before the reform, women were mostly assigned to non-technical and service jobs in SOEs to start with; they soon became the first to be deemed redundant, as the SOEs, now transforming into profit-seeking entities, were first and foremost to cut their social functions so as to lower their cost, like any business would logically want to do. Now that the SOEs became much less generous in providing reproductive service such as day-care and catering, stereotypical expectation for women to perform such work resurfaced to justify gender disparity in layoffs or pressured women to give up their positions or retire early. In addition, reformers and enterprise leaderships also assumed that laid-off men were more likely to take collective action to the street whereas women were less likely to do so – though such stereotype were not always supported by empirical evidence.[2]

[2] For example, in Zhong Rongpeng. *A Turn of the Century Problem: Who is to make the rice bowl for Chinese people?* Beijing: China Economic Publishing Houswe [*zhongguo jingji chubanshe*]. 1998. 240. Zhong wrote: "if we let me return home…it will cause social instability. For example, they may gather to petition, protest, or stage disturbance. If we let women return home and make vacancies, then men can generally find suitable positions…This way, we can stabilize the society's unstable element – men."

Accompanied with these social transitions were discursive shifts in the society's discussions of women and gender; and now our protagonist Li were to encounter some new interlocutors in the 1990s. In the 1980s, arguing with both male humanist Marxists and female cadres from All China Women's Federation, Li's main goal was to defend the autonomy of women's liberation as a social movement and women's studies as an academic discipline. For this purpose, I have discussed in Chapter Two, her main theoretical move was to make a distinction between women's questions and questions of women's liberation. Now in the 1990s, with the effect of the reform felt more extensively in the society, it became difficult to deny that the old Marxist theories of women could barely help to understand and address issues emerged because of the transitions the state took on post Mao, including the massive, gendered layoffs of the SOEs.

As early as 1983, there had been debates over whether women should retreat from workforce and become full-time housewives.[3] However, unlike discussions in the 80s when both proponents and critics argued from a standpoint of utility and practicality, advocates of women to return home in the 90s came to assume more theoretical sophistication thanks to a growing number of non-Marxist theories that were gradually introduced to the Chinese Mainland. The crust of the debate was no longer whether women remaining at or retreating from their work positions was beneficial to the society, or to the nuclear family, or to women themselves; rather, it was elevated to a

[3] See Lin Songle. "a few rounds of debates on gender roles." In *Sociological Research*, 1995. 106-7.

dispute over more abstract notions or principles, for example, of equality, fairness, justice, and freedom, and should there be clashes between them, what should be done.

The next section will discuss this new intellectual ecology that Li and her fellow defenders of women had to navigate in the 1990s. Before that, however, let me say a few words on why it matters in the first place to political theory and feminist theories to study these conversations, given that its central question – whether women should return to home – soon became moot. As China went onto its transition into a market economy, the laid-off SOE workers who could not adapt were eventually left out in miseries and became sacrifices placed on the altar of China's Reform and Opening, a project to save the state's legitimacy. As universities ceased to be responsible to assign jobs to its graduates in 1993, later generations of Chinese women never expected guaranteed life-long employment sponsored by the state. Full-time housewife also soon became a choice of a person with little moral or political meanings attached to it.

However, with the benefit of hindsight of today not only of where China is at but also of the development of global feminist theories and movements, these debates and conversations between Li Xiaojiang and her fellow Chinese intellectuals are useful to us. They are useful to those who want to understand China, indeed. But for me, they are useful because they put issues of fairness *versus* efficiency, of gender roles, of the public spheres into a historical site.

In these discussions over "women returning home," we see that post-Mao China's academic/intellectual scene where the intellectuals had not yet grasped the different "schools" and "traditions" outside party-approved Marx-Leninist theories. But the

issue they were facing was nevertheless urgent and did not seem to allow time and space to sort these ideas out, so they simply took whatever was available in their theoretical/intellectual repertoire to defend their positions. This is not to say that their discussion is any less valuable because of its lack of academic depth. On the contrary, it is precisely because the discussion is so oriented to prominent, practical issues that Chinese people (including these scholars) must address and respond in their rapidly changing society, that these discussions are still valuable to us today. The raw conflicts precisely show us the stakes for us today to think through these issues seriously, as they are never just philosophical questions but political questions affecting lives of each of us.

## 2. From the Chinese Adam to Zheng Yefu: a changing intellectual ecology

I now turn to describe the new intellectual ecology that Li and her associates found themselves in in the 1990s. First is the rise of structural functionalism – which started to decline in the West from the 1980s – due to the Chinese state's decision to recover its research capacity in social sciences for the sake of its modernization. Second is the introduction and popularization of liberalism and neoliberalism since the Reform and Opening, which became more accessible to Chinese scholars.

### *Sociology and structural functionalism*

In 1994, *Sociological Research (shehuixue yanjiu)*, one the most prestigious academic journal in social sciences in the Chinese Mainland until today, carried an article by Zheng Yefu 郑也夫(1950- ) entitled "a sociological reflection on equality of

men and women".[4] Zheng's article immediately provoked intense discussions, most of which fierce oppositions. He argued: "equality of men and women" had more cons than pros under China's changing social situation; the state should extensively cut its intervention in the labor market to ensure women's employment. Women who lacked capacity or desire to stay in the work force should return to the household. From 1994 to 1995, *Sociological Research* published more than 20 articles in its subsequent issues, all but one of them were rebuttals to Zheng, including a few using strong languages to express grievances. Li Xiaojiang was also one of the responses.

Zheng's proposal was not new – we have already read the Chinese Adam in the previous Chapter. However, the eight-year gap between the two articles did make differences between the flavors of the two. As outrageous as Adam's suggestion that women should find positions suitable to their genders in the society, his advice seemed to come from some genuine care of women's wellbeing: his main concern throughout the essay was that the labor market may be too much stress for women, and that such stress would negatively affect marital relationships. Adam also did not shy away from his position as a man. His gesture was one of curiosity: as a man, I'm confused why women would want to compete with me in the labor market at the price of hurting themselves – and hurting me too because the stress gave them bad temper at home and negatively affected my sex life![5]

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[4] Zheng, Yefu. "nanü pingdeng de shehuixue sikao [a sociological reflection on equality of men and women]." *Shehuixue Yanjiu* [*Sociological Research*]. 1994 (2). 108-113.
[5] "Adam's Confusion." In Li, Xiaojiang. *Eve's Exploration*. 221-9.

Eight years later in Zheng Yefu's article, such gesture of care and curiosity, along with its recognition of one's positionality, gave way to a language of neutrality, predicating arguments on freedom of exchange as a moral principle of the market and on the efficiency of economic growth as an *a priori* Good. Zheng shared with Adam's concern that "equality of men and women" intensified marital conflicts; however, whereas Adam recognized gender equality as a worthwhile social value despite also a burden to women and to families, Zheng elevated this concern to a critique of "equality of men and women" as an "ideology (*yishi xingtai*)" that can be in tension other values that a society may want to prioritize. Unlike Adam whose critique of gender equality was limited in a concrete issue within the household – which can potentially be resolved locally by each party adjusting their behaviors – Zheng globalized this critique to an unresolvable tension that requires the sacrifice of one to keep another.

The first important value sacrificed for gender equality, in Zheng's view, was the efficiency of the society's division of labor. Citing Émile Durkheim, Zheng argued that patriarchal gender norms, despite being tyrannical and rigid, served an important function to a society when an organic solidarity was not yet formed. Conventional gender roles in which men participate in social production whereas women are responsible for reproductive and domestic labor, he argued, brought the society security and order, because they provide each individual with a set of approaches to life based on gender, so they do not have to take pains to choose what to do in each circumstance. "Women's liberation in China," he wrote, "pushed women to the society…but never successfully established new patterns of division of labor in place of the old patriarchal

one". "Who should do the housework?" he wrote, "Chinese people had lost guidance from social culture, and are left to choose, fumble, and collide on themselves. As a result, family conflicts proliferate, with role conflicts manifesting in all kinds of forms possible." [6]

To some of us who are familiar with and devoted to feminist movements, to say that patriarchy is conducive to social efficiency and order may sound offensive, if not idiotic. However, if we take a step back from our critique of patriarchy – which we almost take as a Truth – we may be able to have the mental lucidity to recognize that Zheng's functionalist argument for patriarchy could gain purchase if we take gender equity down from its throne of the Good, a throne that was a hard-won achievement of generations of feminist movements.

This small argumentative move of Zheng revealed to us an important piece of puzzle of the intellectual background over which Li and her fellow advocates of gender equity fought their battle. From the surface, the popularization of structural functionalism in Chinese academia of social sciences in its Reform Era was a historical coincidence. In 1979, the Chinese state decided to recover social sciences in higher education and other research institutes. The party state turned around and claimed that research in social sciences, which was previously considered counter-revolutionary, was now what a "Chinese socialism" needed.[7] However, years of political turmoil had almost destroyed

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[6] Zheng. "a sociological reflection on equality of men and women". 108.

[7] For example, the then Chinese Vice Premier Yao Yilin stated on the national television: "China's modernization effort needed professional educated researchers in the discipline of objective recording and analyzing facts and that for this reason sociological training was important." In Tang, Wenfang and Holzner, Burkart. *Social change in contemporary China: C.K. Yang and the concept of institutional diffusion*. University of Pittsburgh Press. 2007. 22

the field of social sciences in China. The country barely cultivated any new talents; those who survived were of old age and had been cut off from the global developments of their fields for decades. Fei Xiaotong 费孝通(or Fei Hsiao-tung, 1910-2005) was one of the latter and soon, at the age of 70, became the state's top candidate to lead the restoration of Chinese sociology.[8] Already internationally known for his work before the founding of the PRC, he then reached out his good friend back in college Yang Ch'ing-k'un 杨庆堃(known as C.K. Yang in the West, 1911-1999), a professor of sociology at the University of Pittsburgh at the time.[9] With Yang's help, in 1980 Fei was able to invite Yang and his American colleagues to Beijing. In a two-month summer school held at Chinese Academy of Social Science, these scholars helped a small group of younger Chinese scholars to catch up with the developments happened in the discipline in the past 30 years when China cut itself away from most of the rest of the world. Similar to Li's experience of learning feminist theories, from Fei's memoir I again found a profoundly touching moment when Chinese scholars, young and old, worked together to rebuild social sciences with bare hands and limited resources. For example, as Fei recorded, because of the students' limited skills in English language, Yang had to introduce scholars from The Chinese University of Hong Kong, the

[8] He was asked personally by Hu Qiaomu, one of the highest party leaders to do this job. See Fei, Xiaotong. "Reflections on Social Investigation" in *Academic Self-Narration Reflection: A collection of Fei Xiaotong's Scholarly Writings*. Beijing: SDX Joint Publishing (*Sanlian Shudian*).1996. 77-78.

[9] Fei obtained his doctorate from London School of Economics under anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski, published works overseas, and had connections with scholars in sociology overseas. He published his first work *Peasant Life in China: A Field Study of Country Life in Yangtze Valley* based on his PhD thesis in 1939, and later in 1953 *China's Gentry: Essays in Rural Urban Relations* by University of Chicago Press. From Malinowski, Fei learned to examine the functional interrelationships among various "parts" of a community and to understand culture from the perspective of its members.

sociology department of which also received ample assistance from Yang, to teach in "Cantonese-accented Mandarin."

I could not find first-hand records of what was taught at this summer school. This is, however, such a critical moment when Chinese scholars had their first taste of non-Marxist Western social theories.[10] I could make some speculations from a commemorative article of Professor Yang by Burkart Holzner, one of the Pittsburgh scholars invited to teach in the program. The teaching team included Holzner, Yang, Wesley Posvar, and Jiri Nehnevajsa. They decided to name their lecture series "The Sociology *for* Modernization" specifically to differentiate it from "sociology *of* Modernization." The latter, Holzner wrote, was a "descriptive enterprise," whereas the focus of their lectures was "applications of sociology and the field's usefulness in modernization."[11] In the end, Holzner commented that their project to reestablish sociology in China reflected Yang's sociological vision. That is, "[s]ociology for the modernization of China, while built on the experience of sociology in the West, would become an endogenous enterprise in China and would help to master the difficulties of the social transformation that needed to be addressed."[12]

Such instrumental approach to research in social sciences, i.e., research in social issues to make policy suggestions for society/state goals rather than to expose and criticize flaws in society and politics, would later become an undertone of social sciences research throughout the 1990s in Chinese academia. This may look like a

[10] Fei. "Reflections on Social Investigation". 78.
[11] Tang and Holzner. 2007. 28, 22
[12] *ibid.*

coincidence, given that the scholar available to lead happened to be from the functionalism school and so was the resources he was able to access. Yet, that the Chinese academia found appeal in this way of thinking also made sense given the historical juncture they were at. We can see this in the intriguing ambivalence and caution toward structural functionalism in the first post-Mao sociology textbook authored by Fei and some of the graduates of the 1980 summer school.[13] The textbook presented in its appendix a short historical account of sociology's development in the West where it criticized all non-Marxist Western sociology as inherently "in service of capitalism and bourgeoise." Structural functionalism as the most influential tradition post-war, stated the authors, ultimately privileges maintaining social equilibrium whereas opposes social change and revolutions.[14] But such critique only seemed to be a camouflage of the textbook's functionalist core revealed at its opening when it gave sociology a definition. "Sociology takes the society as a holistic changing system," it wrote, "it [sociology] studies the society's structures, functions, origins, and its laws of development via analyzing people's social relations and behaviors."[15]

Chinese scholars in early years of the Reform Era were cautious in their critique of how communist ideas were misused into dysfunction of society and blatant assault of basic human dignity. For those who stayed in the mainland, they probably had learned from history that they needed to negotiate carefully with the state-endorsed ideology to keep their newly gained space for research. The state continued to hold onto "Social

[13] Fei, Xiaotong, et al. *Shehuixue Gailun* [*Introduction to Sociology*]. Tianjin People's Press. 1983.
[14] *Introduction to Sociology*. 1983. 389, 400.
[15] *Introduction to Sociology*. 5

sciences in China must be directed by Marxism" as its official discourse until today. Such constraint was to be explained away by a younger scholar Zheng Hangsheng 郑杭生(1936-2014), who also worked closely with Fei, three years later. At various places – including the *Guangming Daily* 光明日报[16]– argued that a sociology directed by Marxism could be both critical/revolutionary and maintaining/constructive, the latter used to be the nature of non-Marxist Western social theories only. Citing Engels' "Anti-Duhring," where he defined a communist society as "a society reasonably coordinated" where "humanity's leap from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom" takes place,[17] Zheng argued that a sociology focusing on maintaining social functioning rather than criticizing social ills and flaws could be one that is properly "socialist," rather than serving interests of the capitalist class.[18]

Like this, China's post-Mao sociologists were able to reach a coherence between a Marxist ideology and a research approach that focus on resolving social conflicts rather than mobilizing it. Social issues newly emerging from China's social transitions – including the tension between the socialist ideal of gender equity and the state's urgent need for economic growth – rather than irreconcilable class conflicts that can only be resolved by radical revolutions, can now be analyzed as temporary, partial malfunctions

[16] Also known as the *Enlightenment Daily*. It is one of the major national newspapers directly under supervised by The Central Propaganda Department of CPC.
[17] Engels, Friedrich. *Anti-Dühring*. Lawrence and Wishart. 311.
[18] Also see Zheng, Hangsheng. "*Shehuixue yanjiu duixiang xintan* [A new exploration of sociology's research object.]" In *Sociological Research*. 1986 (1) .68-75. And in *Introduction to Sociology: A New Edition* [*Shehuixue Gailun Xinbian*], Beijing: Renmin University Press, a textbook first published in 1987. This textbook became one of the most popular textbooks in China's higher education. It went through several reprints and revisions; the latest edition was published in 2019.

of the social machine that can be fixed by local adjustments. One conventional wisdom from Western philosophy to counterargue teleological arguments as such was to set some deontological boundaries, that is, there are moral limits of means that can used regardless how good the outcome is. However, Zheng Yefu in the 1990s obviously was freed from the ideological grip of Maoist "women can hold up half of the sky," so he would feel comfortable to propose that a patriarchal division of labor could be the antidote to fix China's problem in its slow economic growth and surplus labor. In fact, he took a step further to find a new deontological base – those that earlier advocates of women to return to the home did not get their hands on – to compete with the socialist ideal of gender equity. This is the point I will now turn to.

***Liberalism's discourse of rights: an ineffective rescue***

In the 1980s, discussions over women returning home had not yet utilized the language of rights. Advocates of women returning home mainly predicated their arguments on practical, contingent concerns: women returning home to take care of housework and childcare is a more efficient division of labor for the nuclear family. Those who disagreed argued that leaving professional life hinders women's personal development, or that staying at home is not productive to women being good mothers and wives. None of these discussions interpreted the notion of "equality of men and women" as a "right" of women. At best, defenders invoked "women's liberation" as having intrinsic value regardless of social or historical circumstances.

This was to change in Zheng's article and the criticisms he received. Aside from "disturbance of order with the division of labor within the family," a more sinister vice of "equality of men and women," Zheng argued, was that it interfered with "free and fair exchange of the market".[19] Driven by "administrative intervention," he wrote, "women's liberation" in China "aids the weak but suppresses the strong".[20] That is, "Equality of men and women" was taken to an extreme to a pursuit of a complete equality (*wanquan de pingdeng*),[21] the result of which was a violation of free and fair trade of the market, and an exploitation of the strong by the weak, which, as Zheng lamented, is "a ridiculous form of inequality".[22]

Zheng then wrote:

> "What is women's liberation (or to put it differently, feminism) in its genuine sense? How to achieve women's liberation without social chaos and disorder, and without exploitation of men? The answer is to recognize that equality is a right, not an outcome. A woman has the right to have education, to choose employment, to run business, and to take office. But whether she will get a certain position should be a result of fair competition, not a handout from the society. The principle of social competition should be equality without favoritism (*yishi tongren*), without prejudice based on ideologies. For women, this means 'from the top there's no ceiling' – a successful woman can become a scholar, a professor, a businesswoman, a minister, or the president, the society should not put any human-caused (*renwei de*) constraints on her; at the same time, it also means "from the bottom there's no minimum guarantee," – if she does not have competence nor desire to work in the society, or if she willingly wants to be a housewife, the society should never hand out human-caused assistance to ensure that she has a certain occupation. In my understanding, physical strength, money, and

[19] Zheng. "a sociological reflection on equality of men and women". 112.
[20] Zheng. "a sociological reflection on equality of men and women". 110.
[21] I translate this term literally from his choice of language in Chinese instead of translating into "substantive equality" or "egalitarian" because of some complexities I shall discuss later.
[22] Zheng. "a sociological reflection on equality of men and women". 113.

> knowledge constitute the foundation of power and productive forces in different stages of human history. Today, although knowledge became more important, but physical strength and money are by no means insignificant. Hence, under such social reality today, it is still difficult for women to gain the same social power (*shehui quanli*)[23] and social position as men have. But in personal development, social participation, and in pursuing of achievements, she has the same rights as men do."[24]

His language of "the weak" and "the strong" is disturbing indeed because of its lack of critical distance to inequality in social powers. At the end of the paragraph, he even suggested that unequal social power is simply a necessity which justifies unequal prospects of success. For him, fairness is to follow such necessity, i.e., the strong should have more whereas the weak should have less. Using "human-caused" assistance (read: against the "natural" rule of the market) to aid the weak, on the flip side, was unfairness. Like Thrasymachus' "justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger" in Plato's *Republic*, Zheng struck our intuition and conscience as so profoundly wrong, yet we do not quite know how to give a rebuttal that immediately works.

We may be tempted to debate with Zheng from a perspective of Truth. That is, we imitate Socrates' rebuttal to Thrasymachus, and argue that Zheng's opinions on equality, fairness, and justice are corrupted and false, whereas we propose alternatives that are moral and true. In fact, this was what most Chinese scholars did in response to Zheng. Li Yinhe 李银河(1952-), for example, wrote bluntly that the question of "women returning to home" should simply be dismissed because it is a violation of women's

[23] I translate the term "social power" literally from his original writing in Chinese *shehui quanli*. I doubt that this was a reference of Foucault, because if it was, he would not take unequal social power as a necessity without any critical distance.
[24] Zheng. "a sociological reflection on equality of men and women". 113.

right to work which is both a universal human right and a constitutional right for Chinese citizens.[25] Jin Yihong 金一虹(1947-), pivoted to challenge Zheng's understanding of equality. Citing American sociologist Daniel Bell's different dimensions of equality, i.e., equality of conditions, of means, and of outcomes,[26] Jin argued that the right to work is an equality of conditions, a legal right of each citizen regardless of gender identities. She also invoked John Rawls and Arthur Okun and argued that the old socialist practice to reserve quotas for women in working positions are appropriate aid to women because women are the "disadvantaged," "less well-off" of the society.[27] Liu Bohong 刘伯红(1950-) first cited a United Nations document stating that economic development itself does not respond to all needs to human beings;[28] she then suggested that Zheng's "rational and efficient" division of labor between wife and husband, though might be helpful to economic growth, fell short of respecting women's right. Unlike Li and Jin who understood women's right to work as a formal/legal right, however, Liu associated women's rights to their self-realizations.[29]

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[25] In an almost accusatory tone – it was obvious that she was really annoyed by Zheng – she then wrote that prioritizing efficiency over all other values would only lead a society to evil, just like Hitler's Germany who sent people with mental illness to gas chambers. See Li, Yinhe. "*'Nüren huijia' wenti zhi wojian*'[My view on the question of 'women to return to the home']" in *Sociological Research*. 1994 (6). 71-2.

[26] Bell, Daniel. *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Basic Book. 1976. 262.

[27] Jin, Yihong. "*Yetan nanü pingdeng de shouhuo yu daijia* [Also to discuss gains and losses of equality of men and women.]" in *Sociological Research*. 1995 (1). 98-9.

[28] World Summit for Social Development. "Draft Declaration of the World Summit of Social Development." 1994.

[29] "In modern society," she wrote, "work and employment are means for living, at the same time, it is also the source of personal development, as well as a prerequisite of one's health, dignity, and social participation…we should not treat women as a mere reserve pool of labor and a means to realize a certain goal of the society [economic growth]" (70). See Liu, Bohong. "*Dui 'nannü pingdeng de shehuixue sikao' de sikao*. [Reflections on 'a sociological reflection on equality of men and women']". in *Sociological Research*. 1994 (6). 68-71.

All three responses emphasized that women's right to work was by its definition a non-negotiable, especially when it comes into conflicts with other social values. Li, Jin, and Liu were China's younger generation of feminist scholars at the time.[30] Their writings here were part of the Chinese intellectuals' much needed reflection on the disastrous consequences of destruction of rule of law under Cultural Revolution. However, we can see from Zheng's response to them, such arguments based on legal rights and reparative justice were not the most productive, even without aid from criticism of liberalism that we have access today as a benefit of hindsight:

Li Yinhe's appeal to constitutionalism invited attack from Zheng that read unpleasantly sophist. Her language of rights immediately gave leverage to Zheng to compare superiorities of different kinds of rights. He ridiculed – if not deliberately misrepresented – her comment that there should be no space for discussion on whether women return to the home, accusing her for challenging "the freedom of discussion." He wrote: "As for whether opinions that do not align with the Constitution can be discussed, my response is a firm Yes…freedom of discussion and its relationship to the Constitution is a much more important question than gender equality."[31] When Jin Yihong drew on Rawls to require correction of inequalities in social backgrounds to achieve fair competition especially his language to identify women as the "less well-

[30] Li Yinhe gained her doctorate in sociology at the University of Pittsburgh in 1988. She then returned to China and worked at Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. She continued to be a household name to the Chinese public today, especially the younger generation, as a sexologist and a LGBT rights activist. Liu Bohong was a research associate at All China Women's Federation at the time. Li, Liu, and Jin were all in their forties when they wrote their responses to Zheng.

[31] "Freedom of discussion" also almost gave him a moral calling, as he ended his comments on Li saying, "I cannot stay silent on this." See Zheng, Yefu. "*Quanli, ziyou, chulu: dui jiwei tongren de dafu*. [Right, freedom, way-out: response to my colleagues.]" In *Sociological Research*. 1995 (3). 97.

off" or "the disadvantaged," she also took on the assumption that women are indeed less talented in their natural endowment. But precisely, this is Zheng's logic: the weak (the less talented in strength and money) should own less whereas the strong more; for the strong to let go of their strength is indeed a loss to them.[32]

When Liu Bohong pitted women's right against development, the very thing that the Chinese state was pursuing with unprecedented assertiveness, she put herself in impasses of efficiency versus fairness, market value versus social values, and common good versus identity-based interest. We are tempted overcome such impasses from the following two approaches. We could either define gender equity as a sweeping notion that comprises all good things in life that we would like equal access for all genders; but at the same time, we would make it an ideal so porous that could be interpreted in any way. Or, we could follow a strict definition of what gender equality is, like how Isaiah Berlin defines liberty: "Everything is what it is: liberty is liberty, not equality, fairness, justice, or culture, or human happiness, or a quiet conscience… [the loss of liberty] may be compensated for by a gain in justice, or in happiness or in peace, but the loss remains."[33] Similarly, women's right is women's right, the loss of it is the loss of it. But this also indicates that the loss of it may be justified, for example by economic efficiency that the state desperately needed like the gendered layoffs of SOEs, or by a

[32] Small wonder that in Zheng's response to Jin he simply reiterated that his principle is that "equal pay for equal work" which strictly means equal pay for work of same quantity and quality; for women who do not produce the same quantity and quality of work but receives equal pay is to "take advantage of men" Zheng, 1995. 98.

[33] Berlin, Isaiah. "Two Concepts of Liberty." 1958. in Berlin, Isaiah. *Liberty: Incorporating "Four Essays on Liberty"* ed. Hardy, Henry. Oxford University Press, 2002. 172.

"common prosperity" that had inherent legitimacy in a culture of collectivism over individualism.

By describing women's right and economic development as two competing values, Liu also precisely presented a visualization of gender equality like Berlin's negative liberty, the sacredness and untouchable-ness of which is guarded by an imaginary wall. It encourages an imagination of legal equality as substantive equality of a lesser extent, as if equality could be "protected" at its essence that even when equality's "extras" is so limited that it barely exists, some value of equality is still secured. Characterizing women's right to work as such, however, would only trap those who oppose "women to return home" in an endless tug-of-war with those who support it in the name of economic efficiency. Where should the line be drawn between the amount of gender equality to be appropriately sacrificed for other things that are equally important and urgent? Where to set the limit of the society's pursuit for substantive equality so it does not affect these latter values? In fact, Zheng simply ignored Liu in his response essay; maybe he knew that it would be a deadlock.

Contemporary criticism of liberalism's discourse of rights would tell us that we simply are not able to navigate these impasses via philosophical reasoning. If we, again, take reference of Plato's *Republic*, the realm of philosophy would leave only two way-outs: we follow Socrates to take a leap of faith to accept a Truth that can only be approximated by the philosopher or be taught to the lay people; or we side with Thrasymachus – and Zheng – to embrace justice as a notion of "the strong should earn more." Theorists of deliberative/antagonistic democracy today would argue, instead,

that how substantive equality should be interpreted when applied to state policies is a perpetually debatable question that needs to be constantly negotiated and contested in the political sphere.

Interestingly and ironically, Zheng's own account of "fair competition" would precisely invite a democratic solution. His proposal of what a "fair competition" should be is *yishi tongren* 一视同仁: *yi* means one, *shi* means to view, *tong* means equal, and *ren* is the Confucianist notion of care, compassion, and love to others. The question then goes: for the issue of equality of men and women, what are the things to be admitted to the category that deserve care, compassion, and love? Apparently, for Zheng, unequal distribution of social power across genders – "strength, money, and knowledge" as necessities – do not qualify. By such exclusion, Zheng was able to differentiate his *yishi tongren* from more substantive sense of gender equality. But such exclusion is a dangerous move. In *yishi tongren*, we hear echoes of the notion of "equal consideration," a term that animal right theorist Peter Singer used to differentiate from "equal treatment." "Equal consideration" of human and non-human animals, his argument goes, requires that we consider the interests of animals in not suffering because we share with animals this interest; Ergo, meat-eating is unethical. But this does not require that we treat animals as equals because us and animals have different interests. With this distinction, Singer was able to explain away the difference between humans and animals – a moral difference that many of us feel strongly – so he can make his case against speciesism. However, the problem with such distinction is its assumption that there are at least some material differences between humans and

animals. Once such difference is hailed to justify different treatment; it opens a logical pathway to justify differentiated treatment of human beings too. This, as some reader already known, is a dangerous move, as

later follows this logic to very unfortunately indicate that a person with a disability has a similar interest as a cow in their level of sensitivity to pain.[34] It is such an ironic coincidence that Singer titled his book *Animal Liberation*. Singer – a human – assumes the position to stipulate what animals' interests are, and which of those interests should be taken into consideration in human's treatment of animals, whereas in the meantime claiming this is for the *liberation* of animals. Similarly, Zheng – a man – assumes the position to prescribe how the society should treat women with equal *ren*, that is, such equal care and love should not be extended to corrections of unequal social powers in "strength, money, and knowledge," whereas calling such equal consideration women's *liberation* "in its genuine sense."

When Singer draws our attention to the fact that humans and animals share an interest in not suffering, he precisely echoed Aristotle's account of the difference between humans and animals. "[M]an alone among the animals has speech," wrote Aristotle, "The voice indeed indicates the painful or pleasant, and hence is present in other animals as well…but speech serves to reveal the advantageous and the harmful, and hence also the just and the unjust…"[35] Animals indeed can suffer and they scream when they feel pain, but they are not capable of using speech to tell Singer that the way that

[34] Singer, Peter. *Animal Liberation*, chapter one.
[35] Aristotle and Carnes Lord. *Aristotle's Politics*. Second edition. The University of Chicago Press, 2014. 4.

they treated by some humans, not just the way that human beings eat their flesh as food, maybe harmful and unjust. Aristotle is right: it is human beings' capacity of speech to reveal the just and the unjust that makes them by nature political animals, whereas animals, by lacking this capacity, are not capable of politics. Animals cannot debate with Singer on where to draw the lines between equal consideration and equal treatment; otherwise, for example, they might have argued that they also have an interest in having autonomy so there should be no leash.

However, for those who disagree with Zheng in his proposal of what should be taken into consideration for *ren* in the society's treatment of women, a rebuttal must be organized. This rebuttal should start from reclaiming space and gathering power in the political sphere to participate in those questions that Zheng attempted to settle for women. The three scholars I mentioned above – Li, Jin, and Liu – missed this point despite all other merits in their arguments. Jumping right into the debate over Truth, e.g., what women's liberation and gender equality *are*, whether women's right to work *is* untouchable, or which one *is* more important, fairness or efficiency, they forfeited what should have been their most powerful ground to defend women. That is, how the society should write into its legislation on how it should treat women is a *political* question before it is a *philosophical* one. Before Chinese women give alternative answers to compete with those given by Zheng on what gender equality *is*, they need

to first fight for grounds in the public space to discover, to speak, and to build political movements to struggle for what they *want*.[36]

### 3. Li's intervention: the awakening of women's subjective consciousness

As structural functionalism and rights discourse of liberalism became the most prominent paradigms to think about social issues which cornered Chinese feminist scholars into the theoretical impasses we discussed above, the 1990s also witnessed a more ominous environment for Chinese women and feminism in China than the 1980s. Chinese women came be exposed more capitalism and its inherent patriarchy; the limited ideological and policy protection from "equality of men and women" also started to fade. The Marxist verdict of women's liberation being a quintessential part of the proletarian revolution lost its inherent authority thanks to Li and her male humanist colleagues; but Chinese feminist scholars immediately found themselves confronted an alternative authority that is equally powerful, i.e., the state's ambition for economic development with its predatory gaze upon women's unpaid reproductive labor. Chinese women and Chinese feminism urgently needed new theoretical resources.

For me, Li's work in the 1990s is a thoughtful project to find a way out of such conundrum. I characterize her work as two theoretical moves: i) moving beyond rights discourse and prioritizing subject formation, and ii) moving beyond structural functionalism's binary understanding Marxism's legacy in China's modern history.

[36] Also see Wendy Brown. "Postmodern Exposures, Feminist Hesitations." in *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Later Modernity*. Princeton University Press. 1995.51.

These moves, consistent with her account of the awakening of women's subjective consciousness, I argue, differentiated her from her colleagues we discussed above, and would provide more effective antidotes to the predicaments Chinese feminism faced in the Reform era.

***Liberation as jiefang: a triumph of equality over freedom***

As we have seen earlier, Li's almost stubborn resistance against being identified with "feminism" later became a major point criticized by her diasporic colleagues, as well as a major point to celebrate by domestic commentaries affirming her position as an indigenous scholar. Both sides, however, missed the point, for Li's refusal of "feminism" has less to do with emphasizing a difference between China and the West than a concern with the efficiency of the language of "feminism" in promoting the society's consciousness of the importance of women's liberation.

Li's critique of "feminism" started in *Eve's Exploration* (1987). Identifying feminist movements to those took place in "the West," for which she meant those happened in Europe and North America, she wrote that the achievements of these movements were a "beguiling deception."[37] Guided by women demanding equal rights to men, she argued, these movements only led women into a world that was already constructed to prioritize men's values and interests, so women came to be pressured to live up to standards of men.[38] In the 1990s, she revised this critique of liberal feminism (and an

[37] *Eve's Exploration*. 219.
[38] *Eve's Exploration*. 215-221.

erroneous identification of it to feminism at large), and elevated it from a diagnosis of the limitation of legal equality to an orientation to the future. She started to ask the question that Adam was once asking: if equal right is not sufficient, then what is genuine women's liberation? What do women want in addition to their constitutional right of "equality between men and women" ?

"Feminism" is commonly translated into Chinese in two forms: *nüquan zhuyi* (*Nü* 女 women, *quan* 权 rights, *zhuyi* 主义-ism) or *nüxing zhuyi* (*Nü* 女 women, *xing* 性 sex, *zhuyi* 主义-ism). Either way, Li wrote, the term "feminism" in the Chinese context was attached to three principles: 1) its reference point is men, 2) it aims for equality, and 3) it's from a perspective of rights.[39] The problem with these principles, she argued, was not that they are inherently unfit to Chinese women, but rather that feminism framed as a request for equal rights to men was not the most productive for Chinese women of her time. Her resistance of "feminism," she wrote, was not to "draw clear boundaries from the West," nor was due to "fear to be put on a 'political hat'". [40] Rather, it was because "the law in China had already given Chinese women equal rights, so it put us in a difficult position to ask for any special rights [for women] …Written codes in law have already established equality of men and women," she reasoned, "if you bring up women's rights, people do not understand what your requests are."[41]

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[39] Li, Xiaojiang. "*Dong, xifang zhijian*. [Between the East and the West.]" in *Towards Woman*. 1995. 97.

[40] "Gains and Losses of China's Women's Liberation." A talk she gave at Center of Women's Studies, MIT in 1992. See *Challenge and Response.*1996. 152

[41] "Women's Studies and its role in the social development of China." a talk she gave at School of East Asian Studies, Freie Universität Berlin in 1991. See *Challenge and Response.* 1996. 133

Li's criticism of using the language of right came to assume more theoretical importance in her response to Zheng Yefu, where she elevated her critique to liberalism's misplacement of politics in the state rather than in the civil society. In that response, we see one of the rare moments in her writing where she directly used a tone critical of the party-state, accusing that state-led women's liberation program was not to liberate women for its own sake but to deepen its social control mechanism. She wrote: "it was via 'liberating women' that the state accomplished its complete control (*kongzhi* 控制) of women…One direct result of the state liberating women is that women turned their dependence on and identification of men to that of state-society….Via pushing women to work, the state integrated women to the 'employment – work unit (*danwei*) – state' model, accomplished its reform of traditional families, and hence realized its control of the entire society (including every single person in the family)."[42]

That China's women's liberation movement was more part of the state's agenda of social control than for women's happiness and wellbeing is not an innovative point; yet it is an important theoretical breakthrough in Li's intellectual journey. Her analysis of the limitation of women's liberation from now on moved beyond a critique of the "iron girl" per se but pointed out a conceptual root making the discursive pathway to make the "iron girl." The "iron girl" had lost its appeal in China's economic reform; however,

[42] Li, Xiaojiang. " '*Nannü pingdeng:' zai zhongguo shehui shijian zhong de shi yu de*. [Equality between men and women:' losses and gains in China's social practices.]" In *Sociological Research*. 1995 (1). 95-6.

Li wanted to remind us, this mistake was still haunting Chinese women as shown in Zheng's blunt attack of gender equality in the name of economic efficiency.

The issue, Li discussed with more clarity in her later works, was that the notion of "women's liberation" in China was more conceptually closer to "equality" rather than to "liberty."[43] "Women's liberation" used in "Western languages," she wrote, has important differences from how the term is commonly translated in the Chinese Mainland as *funü jiefang* 妇女解放. "As a keyword to the socialism's discourse," she wrote, "*jiefang* can be used with all groups that are 'oppressed.'" For example, class liberation and national liberation (examples Li presented) both indicate a requirement of equal status, that is, for proletariats and the people of the colonies to achieve the equal status of their previous oppressors, e.g., the capitalists and the imperialists. So unlike "women's liberation" which from the root of the word naturally connotates "liberty," *jiefang* has more to do with equality but does not necessarily imply a pursuit of freedom.[44]

She is right on this point. *Jiefang* does mean to be freed from ball and chain of some kind from its literal sense, *jie* 解 to untie, *fang* 放 to set loose. Yet, because in the socialist discourse it is commonly used with reference to an oppressor, its weight lands on a desire to have the status of the oppressor rather than on the freedom of the subjects who are liberated. This assumption of a dyadic, antagonist relationship between a master and a slave then narrows our imagination of liberation as the slave's

[43] Li Xiaojiang. *Questions and Answers on Women*. 1997.
[44] *Questions and Answers on Women.* 82

achievement of what their previous master has, be it self-determination, rights, dominance, or luxury. For example, a synonym of *jiefang* in China's socialist discourse, *fanshen* (*fan* 翻 to turn over, *shen* 身 body), is commonly used in the expression "[the proletariats, the working class, the surfs, or the Chinese people] turning over their bodies to be masters (*fanshen* 翻身, *zuo* 作 to be, *zhuren* 主人 master)." Little insights, however, does it provide to answer what precisely is desired for in mastery itself.

One important result of *jiefang*'s closer relationship to equality than freedom, Li then argued, was that Chinese people tend to think of "liberation" as something that has already been achieved.[45] Li is quite right on this point as well. Especially in CPC's official accounts where it credited itself to lead the Chinese people to achieve national liberation from Western powers and the proletarians to achieve class liberation from the landlord class and the capitalist class, *jiefang* indicated a status of a group of people already "being liberated." For example, as Mao proclaimed on the Tiananmen Rostrum at the Founding Ceremony of the People's Republic, "from this day on, Chinese people have stood up and taken their place among the nations of the world!" In both official and ordinary language, people in the Chinese Mainland refer to the historical period after 1949 as the "post-liberation (*jiefang hou*)" era. Liberation in this sense indicates a linear process of struggle, the end of which is the achievement of equal status of the Chinese nation with other nations. It is more about a removal of relationship of

[45] *Questions and Answers on Women.* 83

subjugation with an oppressor – the imperialists, the colonialists, etc. – whereas there is less to say about the establishment of the "liberated" nation looking into the future.

***Equality as Plato's form coming into being in a human soul***

For Li, liberation understood in such a way became a conceptual hinderance for Chinese feminism of her time. Her new project in the 1990s was to urge Chinese women to think about women's liberation more in line with "freedom" – what it means, why it is desirable and worthwhile, and how to work for it – than with a struggle for an "equality" to men. This notion of freedom, however, must be differentiated from the concept of freedom that Zheng privileged as a notion of freedom that competes with equality.

In her response to Zheng, Li wrote:

> "What is 'equality?' Is it merely an ideal, a principle, [or] a marker of progression? [I argue that the answer is No.] While Western feminists still hold the flag of 'equality' to demand equal rights of men and women, Chinese women have started to conduct a critical examination on the concept of 'equality.' Once the idea of equality descends into the human world, it must face the entire reality that this world and this age have to provide. During wars, equality means to shed blood equally with men (Chinese women had tasted equality of this flavor in China's military turmoil of over half a century); during famines, equality means to equally drink soup[46] in [the collective] "big pot" (for example in "the Three Years of Natural Disasters)[47]; In political turmoil for example the Cultural Revolution, equality means to equally wear tall hats and to be

[46] To "drink soup" in Chinese means to have food barely enough to keep one not hungry. Generally, when a family does not have enough food, they put what they have in a soup, a form of dish that makes one feel full faster and feeds more people than solid food. Unlike soup in some other cuisines, Chinese soup is often clear, light, and watery.

[47] This an official euphemism for the Great Chinese Famine (1959-1961) in the wake of the Great Leap Forward.

> shaved bald,[48] dignity of being a human and being a woman equally trampled …Chinese women had learned from their experience of 'equality of men and women' that 'men's world' is not heaven. [It is from here] that they came to be able to look at the society, rather than at men only, when they throw critical perspective to the notion of equality. It is from gains and losses of 'equality of men and women' that they [Chinese women] came to be able to reevaluate the contents of 'equality.'
>
> What, then, is 'equality?'
>
> 'Equality' is a fundamental human right; from the beginning it should not be a question of 'who gives to whom [equality]' or 'who should get how much [of it].' It was because part of human beings (women, and slaves) used to have been deprived of [equality] that it became a historical goal they had to fight for. However, it [equality] is not an ultimate goal, nor should it be a means [to other ends]: it should not be a means for an individual to ask for what she needs from others or from the society, this way it becomes an excuse for parasitism; nor should it be a means for the society to force a unification among all people, this way it becomes an accomplice of totalitarianism. *Essentially, equality is subjugated only to the purpose of freedom, it is the foundation of freedom of choice.* When there's no freedom of choice, equality becomes meaningless. Chinese men were 'deprived' is not because of women's liberation, [as Zheng claimed] – as Chinese women were endowed with equality as a right, they were also equally 'deprived.' One important mission of China's women's studies and women's movement is precisely to restore such previously 'deprived' subjectivity on the foundation of their endowed (*enci*) rights [by the state]."[49]

For us situated in today's discipline of political theory in Anglo-American context, this passage may confuse us. Specifically, Li's language of "human right" and "freedom of choice" may disappoint those of us feminists holding critical distance from liberalism's discourse of rights and its tendency to understand freedom as negative freedom.

[48] Common forms of public humiliation rituals to mark political disgrace during the Cultural Revolution.
[49] Li, Xiaojiang. "'Equality between men and women:' losses and gains in China's social practices." Emphasis mine.

However, if we acknowledge the fact we have only became sensitive to these terms because we are currently situated in post-modern criticism of liberalism in Euro-American academia – which was not where she was situated – we would have a bit more patience to turn off the false alarms set off by these terminologies and to really feel the pulse of her thinking

First, notice that although she names equality as a "fundamental human right," she nevertheless gave a description of the term resembling Plato's notion of *eidos* in *The Republic*. Her account of equality "descending into the human world," and that such equality would necessarily take what the material worlds has to offer at concrete historical circumstances as the content of equality, reveals a sense that equality has a perfect Form that is outside of this world. In other words, when she wrote that equality is a "right," it does not have the connotation of a formal equality which requires equal status before the law only. Rather, as Marx would say, if equality is a "heavenly" idea coming down to human society, then its content and requirements corresponds to the "earthly life" of human beings in the civil society vis-à-vis the state, that is, where one's "birth, rank, education and occupation" do make a difference to her experience regardless of the formal rights that the state grants her as an abstract human being.[50]

Li's imagery of equality as an idea fallen from heaven also hears echoes from Plato's Allegory of the Sun where Socrates uses the Sun's relationship to the eyesight as a metaphor to describe how human beings come to knowledge. Just as the Sun, with its

[50] Marx, Karl. "On the Jewish Question." In *The Portable Marx*. Ed. Eugene Kamenka. New York: Viking Penguin. Inc. 1983.101-2.

light, makes sight possible in the human eyes, Socrates said, knowledge come into being in the human souls with the Truth which can only be provided by the Good.[51] This metaphor suggests that, unlike how knowledge was understood after the rise of modern science, knowledge is not ethically neutral but a Truth that is enlightened in the human soul only by the Good. What's helpful to us about Plato's Allegory of the Sun, however, is not how it is conventionally understood by Enlightenment thinkers; that is, it is an evidence of Plato being an idealist for whom the justice is a transcendent idea, a disembodied notion that is to be strictly detached from the material world and concrete, particular experiences. Instead, this metaphor, because of its analogy of knowing to viewing, indicates that the acquirement of knowledge is an embodied practice where Truth comes into being in human souls like sights in human eyes – each pair of human eyes that can see inhabit in a human body. A similar metaphor of knowledge to vision is in Donna Haraway's "situated knowledge" where she differentiates a feminist epistemology – a vision embodied in the human sensory system – from a God's view disguising its positionality, though Haraway would disagree with Plato that each is rational alike so the knowledge they attain will be the one, pure Truth.[52]

Now we come to read Li's characterization of equality not from the surface of the writing as a "human right," a moral status of an abstract human being or a legal status

[51] Plato. *The Republic of Plato*. Translated by Allan Bloom, Paperback third edition., Basic Books, 2016. 506d-509a.
[52] Haraway, Donna. "Situated Knowledge." In *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*. Sandra. Harding ed. Routledge. 2004. 81-102.

applicable to all who have the laws' recognition. Rather, we come to understand that her emphasis was that equality – its meaning, content, and extent, etc. – is like knowledge in Plato's Allegory of Sun that is acquired by concrete human beings living on earth. Equality as an *eidos* is indeed heavenly; yet for this heavenly idea to have an earthly life in human society, it must ultimately land within each human soul (not human mind) of us knowers who intellect necessarily within our concrete positionalities. For Li and her contemporary Chinese women, the *eidos* of equality landed with their souls when their bodies were hungry and their hearts broken, given the period they lived in PRC history. This experience, however, as Li wrote, has a silver lining in the sense it compelled her generation of Chinese women to think what was about equality that is valuable and worth pursuing. Obviously, "equality of men and women" written in the Constitution does not exhaust such value.

Reading Li's notion of equality as such also put us in a better position to approach her account of equality in relation to freedom which from its appearance is puzzling. Li wrote: "Essentially, equality is subjugated only to the purpose of freedom; it is the foundation of freedom of choice. When there's no freedom of choice, equality is meaningless." This comment puzzled Zheng too. In his response, Zheng suggested that Li's notion of how equality related to freedom fails to see that on many occasions equality is not compatible to freedom; and hence he bluntly criticized her for being incomprehensible, if not entirely flawed. Of course, he would raise examples of China's Pre-Reform era where freedom was given away for more equality, which was now reversed: "the Chinese society now," he wrote, "eagers to give up some of its

aspirations for equality so as to gain more freedom."[53] Apparently, like his response to other three scholars discussed above, Zheng again followed liberalism's understanding of equality *versus* freedom such as those of Rawls and Berlin. If freedom is not in strict "lexical priority" to egalitarian values as Rawls stipulated his principles of justice, when it is traded for other human aspirations, for example, equality, we should at least be clear that it is indeed sacrificed, as Berlin would argue. This position of his was more clearly revealed in his later almost accusatory tone to Li. "Li Xiaojiang said: 'for Chinese women…equality is more valuable than gold; because it is the foundation for us to be humans,'" he wrote, "'but I only want to ask: if I ask you to trade freedom for equality, would you trade? If I ask everybody to trade their freedom of moving, freedom of choosing jobs, and freedom of speech for equality, would you want that? [Li wrote that] 'equality is the foundation for us to be humans;' reading this sends shiver down my spine."[54]

But this only shows Zheng's incapability to think about equality and freedom beyond the trope of liberalism that pits the two against each other. He also, like most liberal thinkers, immediately attached normativity to both notions and established them as worthwhile human values, which makes the tension – which could have been generative – into an impasse. These limitations would not constrain Li, however, given her description of equality as a heavenly idea descending onto the human society. If for one person, the *eidos* of equality comes into being in her soul via her humanly vision,

[53] Zheng, Yefu. "Right, freedom, way-out" 1995. 99.
[54] Zheng, Yefu. "Right, freedom, way-out" 1995. 100.

what equality means to a society's social policies would be an ongoing question to be answered collectively, whether via majoritarian voting, public deliberation, competition of social power, or struggle of sheer force. Either way, equality is neither an abstract human right nor as a perfect form of egalitarianism. As she wrote, equality is neither an ideal, a principle, nor an indicator of progression.[55] From what she had experienced under China's "equality of men and women" politics, equality being an ideal (as an ideological requirement of socialism) or a principle (as a legal right written in the Chinese Constitution) does give equality a normative name and some normative power. Yet, without Chinese women actively participating in defining what concept of equality they desire and see fit, such equality only hand them from the control of their families to the control of the party state.

***A calling for women's subjective consciousness***

In response to Zheng's claim that the loss of gender equality (inefficient division of labor) outweighed the gains, Li wrote: "In fact, she [Chinese women] never lost anything… the subjective consciousness as women that we have been calling for is a higher aspiration emerged on the foundation of us "being liberated;" it is not a loss of ours, because we have never had that."[56] Formal equality had provided Chinese women with the legal ground to participate in social life as men's equals, rather than dependents of their fathers and husbands. Yet, they needed to first know what they *want* to strive

[55] Li, Xiaojiang. "'Equality between men and women" 1995. 96.
[56] Li, Xiaojiang. "'Equality between men and women" 1995. 97.

for in the social life newly opened to them. Without a capacity of subjectivity – which Chinese men were also deprived of under Maoism – formal equality only ended up being empty, or to use her language, "meaningless (*haowu yiyi*)." This is what Li meant when she wrote that "equality is subjugated only to the purpose of freedom," that equality is "the foundation of freedom of choice".

To defend a "public space (*gonggong kongjian* 公共空间)" for women became an important theme in Li's thinking in the 1990s.[57] In 1993, she encouraged her fellow Chinese feminist scholars that now it is time to "say goodbye to the past:" whereas in the 1980s women's studies' main achievement in China was to "separate" women's studies from social sciences generally, and to establish autonomous status of women's issues as a legitimate research subject, she said, now it was time to move beyond that achievement and to "integrate back to the society."[58] And indeed, essentialist emphasis of gender differences started to fade from her writings since the 1990s; she continued, however, with her injunction of the importance of women's subjective consciousness being awakened, and more concretely associate it with women actively participating in the China's deepening and expanding social reforms.

[57] She may have borrowed this notion from Habermas who began to gain popularity among Chinese intellectuals in the 1990s. But I'm not go into discussions over whether or not her concept of "public space" has substantial intellectual ties with Habermas' "public sphere," especially given that her writing did not engage with him directly.

[58] Li, Xiaojiang. "Looking back on women's movement in the New Era," a talk she gave at "Chinese women and development – social positions, health, and employment," a workshop partly funded by The Ford Foundation at Tianjin Normal University in 1993. See *Gaobie zuotian: xinshiqi funü yundong huigu*. [*Saying Goodbye to Yesterday: Looking back on Women's Movement in the New Era*]. Hennan People's Press. 1995. 19-20.

Her new emphasis of a "public space" may be related to the declined political climates in the Chinese at the turn of the1990s that had led to a sudden deterioration of environment for research in humanities and social sciences. That is, it might be a strategic retreat from a more progressive activism to a defense of space for survival.[59] I will more substantively discuss how events in 1989 had affective Li's thinking in the next chapter. However, if we looked at this shift in light of the debates over women's rights versus economic efficiency that we discussed above, her "public space" comes to assume more theoretical importance regardless of whether or not it was a strategic protection of the field under hostile political situations. When Li accounted for her hesitation to use the term "feminism (*nüquan zhuyi*, women's rights-ism)" in the Chinese context, she made the following comments on what politics is:

> "women's studies [in PRC] at its beginning seemed to have depoliticized itself [because of its avoidance of using the word *nüquan* (women's right)], [however,] when women's studies became a kind of power and formed a public sphere, *this is precisely politics*.[60] [On the

[59] In 1991 at a Q&A session at the Department of East Asian Studies, Harvard University, she said: "in the aftermath of 1989 [The Tiananmen Protests] … whereas almost all fields in social sciences have been severely undermined [in China], we were able to preserve women's studies…the first reason was because of its low politicization…as long as we do not mention 'feminism (*nüquan zhuyi*, women's rights-ism),' that we do not mention women's movement, we will be able to do many things. The reason that we call our field 'women's studies' is to depoliticize it." See *Tiaozhan yu huiying: xinshiqi funü yanjiu jiangxuelu* [*Challenges and Responses: Talks on Women's Studies in the New Era*]. Henan People's Press. 1996. 61

On a different occasion when she was questioned on her appearing at a government approved meeting which many others refused to attend as a protest of China's human rights issues, Li answered: "this is a question about personal choice. If I also protest, then I would not be able to stay in China. But had I left, I would not be able have done as much as I managed to do [for Chinese women]." See "On the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women" A talk she gave at Ontario Institute of Studies of Education, University of Toronto. March 1994. *Challenges and Responses.*1996. 157

[60] It's worthwhile to note that the notions of right and power are easily confused for Chinese people because both pronounce as *quanli*, but rights as 权利 and power as 权力. Both has the root of *quan*

> flip side], women's studies and women movement in the 1920s looked political at face value; but because women were objects while men were subjects [of these movements and research], this precisely depoliticized women's studies, making it a science."[61]

Rather than a language of rights which in the Chinese context was political because it was potentially confrontational to the state, for Li, a public sphere that allows women's issues to be spoken by women and to be heard by the public – with constraints, yes – was a politics more useful to Chinese women because that is where women's social power would grow. Once that social power has taken its root, it became harder to be taken away than the discourse of rights. And on a side note, two decades later in 2017, "civil rights" indeed came to be listed one of "Seven Don't Mentions" that the party required college teachers to avoid in their teachings.

When her colleagues were taking pains arguing with those who prioritize freedom of exchange to gender equality, Li rose above these philosophical and moral impasses and reminded them that these are not questions for us theorists to give determinate answers, but instead, political questions to be debated in the public sphere; and it is by taking part in that debate that Chinese women will come to accumulate their social and political power. "Freedom" and "equality" in this light, are not ahistorical values that

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which originally meant the weight used on a balanced scale and later came to mean "to measure and to evaluate." In "power," a concept indigenous to Chinese, 力 *li* means strength. This makes sense because when a person has power, it means she is in the position to hold the scale and decide the balance. In "right," an imported concept from the West in late Qing, 利 *li* means interest. It is a common mistake among ordinary Chinese people to confuse the two. In college political sciences majors, this would be one of the first things that a professor clarifies to the students. This makes it more important for Li Xiaojiang to clarify that for her power is closer to politics than rights.

[61] "Women's Studies and its role in the social development of China." a talk she gave at School of East Asian Studies, Freie Universität Berlin in 1991. See *Challenges and Responses.* 1996. 133. Emphasis mine.

need clear definitional boundaries when applied to social policies, but conceptual containers that all of us constantly fill with meanings. The political significance of these notions, however, does not lie in each of us defining them via careful reasoning, but that although we are bound to take from containers that have already been filled by our peers to live our live, but we are also able to pour new meaning to them. In this light, Li reminded her fellow Chinese feminists, what they should do is not to involve in arguments in what "freedom" and "equality" are. Rather, the political life of women's movement lies in us firmly defending women's positions, in helping them grow their powers, and in creating contents for notions like "freedom" and "equality," just as men have always been doing.

***The "Marxist hat:" growing up means to come to term with the past***

Understanding women's movements' political efficacy beyond a discourse for rights also opened conceptual pathway for Li to think about women's liberation's Marxist heritage in China beyond either abandoning it completely (as required by some of her diasporic feminist colleagues) or abandoning Marxism's critical edge for pro-market arguments (like the newly emerging functional structuralist sociologists). Either approach, for Li, did not address how Marxism had shaped Chinese feminism and Chinese women; instead, for her, to term with China's socialist legacy is crucial for Chinese women to develop a subjective consciousness and reclaim their agency as humans.

In "the Marxism's hat," (1993) Li again used her figurative language to guide us beyond binary categorizations via the dialectical lens she started to develop in the 1980s. Responding the criticism that she still put so much weight on Marxism – both its theoretical framework and its significance to understand feminism in China – after more non-Marxist theories and materials became available to Chinese scholars, she wrote:

> "Marxism changed China; China also changed Marxism. When my generation of women gradually came of age and started to think, we came to find ourselves inhabiting this changed China and this China-nized (*zhongguohua de*) Marxism. Born from such a mother's womb, attached to a umbilical cord that is still dripping blood, how can we join the global family [of women's movement] without cleaning and healing [of the wound]? If we are still attached to the umbilical cord, how can we grow healthily in this family with autonomy, confidence, and strength? …My "cleaning (*qingli* 清理)" is not to seek the true orthodox of Marxism…but to free ourselves [Chinese women] from fetters of those theories that have been imposed on our minds as Truth…I'm currently on this project of cleaning, but it is a different project than critiquing [Marxism]."[62]

Her metaphor of an unbilicacord takes us back the notion of self-contemplation she developed in *Aesthetic*, that is, a concept of subjectivity that is enabled, rather than hindered, by social construction, where we also heard resonance in Pitkin's account of "growing up". Li was reminding us that being born inevitably is connected to a wound. It is a wound that becomes a permanent mark on each of our bodies – the belly button – that signifies our undeniable status of dependence in the past. It is also a wound,

[62] Li, Xiaojiang. "The Marxism's hat". in *Towards Woman*. 17.

however, that must occur for the infant to come to gain her independence from the mother; and if we do not clean and tend this wound properly, and give it time to heal, we would not be able to grow up healthily, not to mention self-development and -realization. Women's liberation in China, in her view, was given this wound by China's communist past. Chinese women must eventually outgrow these traumas, but that requires more than just cutting off the umbilical cord without proper care for it to heal, not even to mention pretending that it never existed, because without it we would not grow into who we were today. So, unlike her functional structuralist colleagues in sociology who used Marxism as a mere textual resource they can appropriate to make their points, for Li, it is a living discourse. And unlike her colleagues who were eager to break with the Marxist tradition, for Li, it was living discourse that used to give women's liberation in China resources, if not life. Like the Yellow River shaping the Chinese land, giving Chinese people life-sustaining resources but also deadly floods, Marxism in Li's account, while it had brought hardship that her generation of Chinese women had endured, also gave life to women's liberation of China. Now that Chinese women were opened up to more resources other than Marxism to think about their liberation, their project should be one of "cleaning (*qingli*)," that is, to recognize that they have shaped by China's past socialist practices, as in their self-contemplation on how they have shaped by patriarchal culture, and from there to decide where their future should land and how to get there. And this, again, is an expression of her formulation of women's subjective consciousness.

At the end of the article, she wrote: "criticism from my friends is sensible. Women's research is women's research, it is for women, and for the entire humanity, it should integrate all kinds of schools of thought, there's no need for it to wear any hat…I should say farewell to the past too. *Eve's Exploration* [where her arguments engaged mainly with Marxist theories] surely will not stay relevant for later generations. And I have no regret".[63] As we will now turn to see in the next chapter, from mid-1990s onwards, Li did move on from her Marxism's hat as she was to encounter some new interlocutors she felt compelled to respond to, and as the Chinese state eventually found her positions beyond toleration and regulated by direct force. However, as I will show in the next chapter, her original formation of subject formation as a synthesis of the Self and society would continue to underpin her new intellectual journey.

[63] Li, Xiaojiang. "The Marxism's hat". in *Towards Woman*. 18-9.

# Chapter Four

## Philosophy *versus* Politics:

## Finding Freedom in Post-Utopian Ruins beyond the 1990s

### 1. A theorist's choice: self-exile from politics?

Li was turning forty in 1990. Ordinary Chinese people like to quote Confucius that by the age of 40 one should "no longer be perplexed," especially when they want to patronize a younger person to be more responsible for his or her life. In *Analects*, however, this is part of Confucius' review of his life which takes place right after he establishes that the king should rule the people by virtue and propriety vis-à-vis laws and punishments.[1] Some thus argue that Confucius meant specifically that he became politically mature at the age of forty. Li's life and career post 1990, however, turned out to be trying years when political maturity was mostly needed precisely because how perplexing politics was.

This section tells a story of Li's 1990s as decade of self-estrangement. There is ample evidence to support this narrative. Apparently, she voluntarily distanced and marginalized herself from various scenes where she could have played important roles. As Li recollected in 2014, in the 90s, she chose to "raise reins and steer the horse onto

[1] The full quote is "At fifteen, I set my heart on learning; at thirty, I stood firm; at forty, I came to be free from doubts; at fifty, I understood the Decree of Heaven; At sixty my ear was attuned; at seventy I follow my heart's desire without overstepping the line." *Analects.* Book 2.

a different path (*fendao yangbiao* 分道扬镳)" with her many of her fellow Chinese scholars,[2] specifically parting ways with those who directly used concepts in "Western feminism" – which she meant Euro-American Gender Studies – to analyze Chinese women and assumed that it could directly speak to Chinese women's lived experiences.[3] She decided to "abandon her arms, step away from the battlefield, and return to her rural home (*qijia guitian* 弃甲归田)."[4] That is, like many other Chinese scholars of her time, she became excited about theoretical possibilities introduced to China from Western academia – which she meant mostly postmodern/post-structural theories – but eventually she was disappointed and decided to retreat to field research in grassroot China. Her two major non-theoretical projects "20th century Oral History Chinese Women" and "the Women's Museum" took shape in early 1990s and materialized in early 2000s. In both these projects, she collected firsthand narratives from ordinary women, from those working in the Women's Federation to some of her fellow academics, from CPC women cadres – high ranking to street level – to illiterate women peasants. Indeed, she retreated from the battlefield of academic debates – in which she used to be active in 1980s – and returned to her rural home.

***Rejecting state intervention and nationalism***

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[2] Li, Xiaojiang. *Duihua Wang Hui: Guankui zhongguo dalu xueshu fengxiang yu jingxiang 1990-2011*. [*Dialogue with Wang Hui: a case study of scholarism in mainland China (1990/2011)*.] Beijing: *Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe*. (Social Sciences Academic Press). 2014. 9-10

[3] We know that she referred to this specifically because of the reference entry she pointed us to when describing her "raising reins and steer the horse onto a different path" at *Femin?ism*: *the Clash of Cultures and Recognition of Identities.* ed. Li Xiaojiang. Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Press. 2000. 1-5

[4] *Post-utopian Critique*. 2013. 547

The first scene from which she exiled herself was the non-government organizations (NGOs) on women starting to burgeon since the state's decision to hold the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women and its parallel NGO Forum. For many Chinese feminist scholars and activists, The UN Conferences were a turning point for feminism in China, because since the start of their preparations in 1992, they only introduced concepts of feminism, gender, and non-government organizations (NGOs) to China, but also involved an unprecedently number of Chinese women, giving them opportunities to visit overseas and building connections with global feminist movements that could never have happened if it was not for these conferences. The UN women's conferences turned out to be a turning point for Li personally as well – but apparently not with the same bright prospectus. Because of her open criticism of the Chinese government's handlings of these conferences, and her open withdrawal from preparation work for and rejection to attend these meetings, she lost her tenured professorship at Zhengzhou University and in the rest of her life lived under government surveillance and unstable working conditions for women's studies that she cherished to her heart.

Li was not the only Chinese scholar who approached the UN conference with skepticism. Most Chinese women participants were aware that the government held these meetings for political expediency. That is, after the state's international image was severely undermined by how they treated protestors in the Tiananmen demonstrations in 1989, hosting the UC Conference on women would be a good opportunity showcase to the world that China was still committed to progression and

openness, and more important, to integrate in global capitalism.[5] For Chinese scholars and activists, government endorsement might bring public attention and support to women's issues; but to the opposite to how those in liberal democracies would commonly see it, for Chinese feminists, public attention also meant more state monitoring of their activities.[6]

Their worry was prescient. Both UN Conference and the NGO Forum were eventually held in China in September 1995, the Government's growing paranoia as the meetings approached had widely documented and received many criticisms. The most internationally faulted move of the state was its hastily arranged relocation of the NGO forum, which was set to take place in downtown Beijing, to Huairou, an obscure town 40 miles north of Beijing. As Susan Magarey – an Australian historian – recalled, this relocation was so rushed

some of the meeting venues in Huairou were roofless, unfinished buildings and temporary tents. Such infrastructure situation later became an issue when an untimely torrential rain later collapsed some of the tents washed sideways of the concrete blocks connecting the tents – which then invited more criticism from disability advocates groups because it made movement difficult for wheelchairs.[7]

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[5] Wang Zheng. "Maoism, Feminism, and the UN Conference on Women: Women's Studies Research in Cotemporary China" *Journal of Women's History*. 1997. 142. Also see Wang Zheng "A historic Turning Point for the Women's Movement in China." *Signs*. 1996. 193.
[6] Wang. 1997. 143
[7] Magarey, Susan. 1995. "Looking at the World through Women's Eyes: One Experience of the Ngo Forum on Women Beijing, 30 August – 8 September 1995." *Australian Feminist Studies* 10 (22). 139, 149.

Sub-standard infrastructure was out of character for the Chinese government which until this date cared the most how it presented itself to the outside world. But this indicated how important the other side of the trade-off was to Beijing at the time. It was not about the overseas women attendees who triggered uneasiness – which the state claimed to be[8] – but having local non-government affiliated(monitored) activists gathering already disturbed a lot of nerves, not to mention having them gathering at the center of the capital city. The one-hour distance between Huairou and Beijing made it difficult for NGO Forum participants to travel to the UN Conference, but foreigners were less affected than locals. Professor Magarey reported being able to share taxies with other NGO delegates to travel to Beijing to meet foreign government representatives they wished to lobby – unbothered by the Chinese authority – but the fare was obviously beyond affordable for the Chinese back then.[9] Foreign NGO delegates were also able to hold their panels at the Forum free from interference and restrictions; but this did not apply for the local Chinese participants. First, they were not allowed to hold panels jointly with foreign women; then all 47 panels held by Chinese women were impelled to undergo strict screening beforehand to make sure they focus on displaying Chinese women's achievement rather than discussing

[8] Rumors about foreign women planning to protest naked.
[9] See Magarey, 1995. 148. One-way cost of taxi, she reported, of was roughly 100 Chinese *yuan* (approx. 14.5 USD today). For Professor Magarey this was a reasonable 16 Australian dollars, but the average monthly salary of an ordinary Chinese living in urban area was only around 460 to 480 *yuan* in 1995. See Website of National Bureau of Statistics of China. See https://www.stats.gov.cn/sj/tjgb/ndtjgb/qgndtjgb/202302/t20230206_1901939.html.

problems. At the time that the forum took place, all Chinese woman participants read line by line according to pre-approved scripts rehearsed many times.[10]

For many Chinese women participants back then, their cooperation with the government was a worthwhile tradeoff to keep the space open for their work, no matter how limited the space was. As Wang recounted, her Chinese friends who were part of the NGO forum told her, "just keep a low profile and wait for the paranoia to pass." "They sound like seasoned farmers," Wang wrote, "who knew all too well how to contend with bad weather: in this kind of unfavorable political climate, one should just do some fixing and repair work, preparing for a warmer, more productive season." [11] We might expect Li to agree with them because we heard similar perspectives from her in 1991 and 1994 in last chapter. That is, to "depoliticize" women's movement – specifically to refrain from invoking the concept of human right – was precisely the politics that Chinese women needed because it helps to keep a public space for feminist activism under the authoritarianism. We remembered her saying that "when women's studies became a kind of power and formed a public sphere," she said, "this is precisely politics."[12] However, only a year later in the fall of 1995, she decided to openly criticize the Chinese government in Chinese on Hong Kong-based journal *Ming Pao Monthly* and explained her withdrawal from both the UN Conference and the NGO Forum.[13] In

[10] Wang Zheng. 1997. 145.
[11] Wang Zheng. 1997. 145.
[12] Women's Studies and its role in the social development of China." a talk she gave at School of East Asian Studies, Freie Universität Berlin in 1991. See *Challenges and Responses.* 1996. 133.
[13] Until March 1994, it looked like she was still positive about the Women's Conference and thought that despite the state's interference, the meeting would still benefit Chinese women. See "On the 1995 Fourth

this statement, she criticized the Chinese government for turning the two conferences into a "patriotic and nationalist movement mobilized by the state," and that she did wish to participate in "any kind of quasi-militarized exercise of presenting a united front to the outside world."[14] She then revealed the sanctions she received because her disagreement with the government's handling with the conferences. Journals across the Chinese mainland received instructed to not to publish her articles or photographs; book exhibitions during the Women's Conference were not allowed to display her works or volumes she had exhibited. Research projects under her direction also suffered serious setbacks. What angered her the most, she wrote, was that "President of Zhengzhou University accused us for 'promoting bourgeois feminism' and dissolved overnight the Women's College that I had founded".[15]

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World Conference on Women" A talk she gave at Ontario Institute of Studies of Education, University of Toronto. March 1994. *Challenges and Responses.*1996. 157.

In July 1994, in an interview with Chang Xiangqun, a then PhD student at the City University of London, Li mentioned that she refused to be part of the preparation for the UN women's conference because she received a lot of political pressure since late 1993. I did not find any certain information on what precisely such pressure was, but it definitely had something to do with her disagreement with the government silencing voices of women that beg to differ from the government proved script. As she said, "The entire 95 Conference became a meeting of the state; all women's issues became political issues...everyone just repeats what the state says. The state issued a White Paper, everybody needs follow what it instructs, all can only say the same thing, and do the same thing". See *Challenges and Responses.*1996. 350.

[14] Li, Xiaojiang. "*Nüquan zhuyi de jueze – zhongguo dalu shoujian nüzi xueyuan chuanbanren jujue chuxi shifuhui* [A feminist's choice: the founder of the first women's college in China refused to attend UN Women's Conference]" *Ming Pao Monthly*. 1995. 83. She also revealed that for this reason, she decided to apply to a visiting scholar program at Harvard University to "disappear" and remain silent on the issues that the government forbade her from having a different voice.

[15] *Ming Pao Monthly*. 1995. 83. In this statement, Li also revealed that she was working on a book entitled *Women and Nation: A Memorandum of 1995* in which she planned to analyze the intricate dynamics between the state and women's movements via the narratives of the conferences from Chinese participants. This book was never published, but some similar efforts were seen in a later edited volume Li, Xiaojiang. (ed.) *Shenlin "Qi"jing* [*Entering a "Wonderous" Realm*.] Nanjing: Jiangsu People's Press. 2000.

Her women's college was dismissed in March 1995. See Li, Xiaojiang. 2024. *Huaren Jiaguo yu Tianxia: Zhi "Yangwang Xingkong, Xinxiang Yuanfang" de Nianqin Xuezi* [*Chinese People: Family,*

This open statement would change Li's stable life as a tenured professor at the age of 46. Official accounts of her life since 1995 remain deliberately ambiguous, recording only roughly her teaching experiences in various universities. We can only indicate from scattered evidence her life of this period. Since 1993 She was on the visiting scholar program at Harvard University and was still in Massachusetts at the New Year of 1995.[16] Despite obvious political pressure she sensed that the Chinese state put on her since late 1993, she was back to Zhengzhou in April 1995 the latest.[17] Her *Ming Pao* statement was out in October 1995. In 1997 she was pressured to leave Zhengzhou University because the university stopped issuing her salaries. In the same year, she started teaching at Dalian University where she later founded a center for gender studies. Her experience in Dalian did not seem promising either, because for some reason the gender studies center stopped functioning in 2008.[18]

In 1997, she started establishing some working relationships with Shaanxi Normal University in Xi'an, including taking with her 471 items she had collected since 1990 for a "women's museum" which eventually came into being in 2002.[19] In 2010, she donated over 4000 volumes of books and reference materials, as well as recordings collected from her women's oral history project to Women's Studies Center at Shaanxi

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*Nation, and the World – Letters to Young Scholars Who "Gaze at the Stars and Aspire to Distant Horizons"]*. 2024. London: Global Century Press. ISBN 978-1-913522-90-2 (paperback, in Chinese). 126

[16] See Li, Xiaojiang. "Creating a public space." 175.

[17] *Challenges and Responses.*1996. 350. Interview with Chang Xiangqun.

[18] *Chinese People*, 126

[19] See http://bwg1.snnu.edu.cn/index.htm. Website of Shaanxi Normal University Museum. The "women's museum" is now part of the University Museum. Exhibits include Jiangyong women's scripts (a script invented and used by Yao women in Jiangyong, Hunan to write to each other), reproductive culture, needle work, and wedding costumes. Also see https://wsc.snnu.edu.cn/zxgk/zxdsj.htm. Website of Shaanxi Normal University, Women's Studies Center.

Normal University, but it was not until 2019 that she was hired as honorary professor there.[20] I cannot find much information from open resources of precisely what sorts of political harassment she received throughout these years, but from her own account, it sounded like intense state surveillance. "For over 20 years," she wrote, "I had lived a life like a fish in a glass tank, with my entire private life transparent."[21]

***Estranging from Western academia and overseas China Studies***

Many of Li's contemporaries opted to move overseas when political climate at home went ominous. Li did consider that option, but eventually she decided not to go to any of her immigration interviews with the United States nor with Canada. "I am not afraid of being chased away [by the Chinese state], I am more afraid not being able to come back," she wrote.[22] She was already an established, internationally known scholar at the time, it would be easy for her to leave China; but once she did so, she might never be allowed back to the country.

Li's cherishment of her work on Women's Studies in China was beyond doubt; yet she also left us with ample writings to ponder that her uneasiness with overseas academia had also contributed to this decision. The early 1990s was a disheartening time for scholarly inquiries in Chinese politics generally; It was the aftermath of the Chinese state turned its guns to its young student protesters asking for democratization

[20] See https://wsc.snnu.edu.cn/zxgk/zxdsj.htm. Website of Shaanxi Normal University, Women's Studies Center.
[21] *Chinese People*, 58
[22] *Chinese People*, 58

and of the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc. As Li recounted, Chinese scholars overseas like her were mostly met with "half suspicion, and half pity."[23] Some frowned without a second thought and challenged that feminism was simply logically incompatible to exist in China because of the authoritarian nature of the Chinese state. Others were almost certain that China would follow the path of Soviet Union.[24]

No wonder when a 27-year-old Tang Ling wrote to Li in 2019 expressing her frustration with having to "spend 90% of [her] time listening to 'China is the head of all evils'" at Oxford University – where Tang was studying her doctorate in sociology – Li decided to write back to this young student she had no prior acquaintance a series of five letters.[25] It looks like that thirty years had passed, Chinese scholars' experiences in Western academia of humanities and social sciences had nevertheless not changed much, despite the fact that China has not collapsed, at least not yet. The issue, unlike some would frame it, was not whether Chinese scholars agree that China will follow the Soviet Union, that China is the head of all evils, or whether feminism is possible under China's authoritarianism. Both of Li and Tang knew the criticisms of China and why such criticisms.[26] What wrenched their hearts, suggested by writings of them both, was something else.

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[23] *Chinese People*, 5

[24] *Chinese People*, 5. Also see "Open letter to Su Shaozhi." 277

[25] Tang wrote to Li originally to invite her to a China Studies event at Oxford. Li was not able to attend at last, but this initial correspondence grew into a series of exchanges of letters which later published in *Chinese People.*

[26] We have already learned political and personal trauma Li had experienced during the Cultural Revolution and her positions on that from her work. Tang received her undergraduate education in Hong Kong early 2010s when criticism of the Chinese regime had unfortunately morphed into explicit hostility and discrimination against immigrants from the Chinese Mainland. Tang raised the example of a

In Tang's letter to Li, she did describe everyday blatant racist harassment she experienced from ordinary Oxfordians which was unfortunately also exacerbated by her gender noncompliance appearance. She also highlighted her disappointment with academia which she used to romanticize. It was at Oxford University, the jewel in the crown of academia, that she found the parochialism and biases in their worst forms. Maybe those centuries' old chandeliers and stained-glass windows give so much dilutional light refractions that self-entitled arrogance and inability of self-retrospection could pass as literati refinement? But if all of these were just a young person getting to know the real world, the end of the letter revealed the issue specific to her situation as a Chinese scholar in Western academia:

> "Oxford had entirely shattered the idealism that I once held about academia…I believe I must return to China…though I know that there will be more and greater problems awaiting me if I return.[27] But at least these problems will not *be like empty air which I cannot even strike a blow*, because at least [back in China] *my anger and tears will find some echoes there.*"[28]

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derogatory song went viral in 2011 on the Hong Kong Internet adapted from Hongkong-ese singer Eason Chan's "under the Fuji mountain," "Locusts' takeover:"

> "The insect-state, alia 'Shina' [a derogatory term of China originated in Japan's invasion], long being disgraced across East Asia. One sentence of Mandarin a day to assimilate me. You come to Hong Kong to break into my borders; a love of encroaching [others'] territories is your very nature, parasitizing your way in, until finally to secure your identities [permanent residencies]."

See *Chinese People*. 81-2

[27] By which she meant lack of political right, academic freedom, rule of law, and etc.
[28] *Chinese Nation*. 96. My emphasis.

It may surprise the reader, but these sentences strike me with a resonance in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. With poignant, moving language, Fanon described the black man coming to total disillusionment of the radical freedom and human agency celebrated in existentialism that his French education once taught him:

> "I wanted, quite simply to be a man among men. I would have liked to enter our world *young and sleek*, a world we could built together…[But] *my body was returned to me* spread-eagled, disjointed, redone, draped in mourning on this white winter's day…[w]hereas I was prepared to forget, to forgive, to love, *my message was flung back at me like a slap in the face*..."[29]

By no means do I intend to suggest that Tang's experience at Oxford is the same as that of a black man from the French colony of Martinique in Paris, but the similarity in image of having one's pure heart desirous to engage, to contribute, and create only flung back at oneself, of having one's enthusiasm only amputated is hard to miss. The lived experience of colonialism for the black man is not misrecognition, as Charles Taylor had it, a demeaning image of himself mirrored back to him by the society; nor is an internalization of such images encroaching his understanding of himself as some feminist theorists argued.[30] What was unbearable to the Black man's heart, Fanon wrote, was not "a feeling of inferiority," but "a feeling of not existing."[31] Tang was the same age as Fanon at the time they wrote the passages above, both 27-year-old. In fact,

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[29] Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Philcox, Richard. (1952/2008). New York: Grave Press. 92-4. Emphasis mine.
[30] See for example Taylor, Charles. "Politics of Recognition." in Taylor, Charles, and Amy Gutmann. *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Princeton University Press, 1994. And Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and Politics of Difference*. Princeton University Press, 1990.
[31] Fanon. 2008. 118.

Fanon's language of entering the world "young and sleek" also hears an echo in the a well-known concept in Confucianist classic *The Mencius* where Mencius argued that a truly virtuous person would not lose his "heart of a naked child" (*chizi zhixin* 赤子之心). I do not know if Tang was thinking either of Fanon or Mencius at the time she wrote to Li, but the idea that the perfect form of human virtue lies in a person's moral sincerity being intact from worldly experience like a newborn infant – unlike in Aristotle where virtue comes into its full potential in worldly activates – has been very well stored in Chinese society until today.

Tang and Fanon's first-person narrative draw our attention to the psychological burden that colonial subjects experience in colonialism's legacy. For me, this seems to be an aspect that does not get talked about enough in critiques in the criticism of Eurocentrism of political theory. Emerging from the 1990s, such endogenous critique of political theory challenging the discipline's long tradition to revolve around the "canon" of Westen political thought has been raised from various angles. It could be a question of methodology: Is a "Eurocentric" academic discipline sufficient to address world-wide political issues, especially that now such issues easily spilt over nation borders? Or it could be a concern with philosophical coherence: if political theory defines itself as the study of foundational, if not universal, political questions such as the legitimacy of political authority, nature of the state, principles of justice, and etc., does it not necessitate a prescription for it to enrich itself by incorporating perspectives from non-Western societies on these issues? Otherwise, it should have changed its name to Euro-American political thought. It could also be an argument of reparative

justice: non-Western political thoughts have been ignored and marginalized in mainstream academia because of the West's domination of the world established via settler colonialism and military invasion, so now a decolonization of political theory should be down the line to rectify such historical injustices.[32]

None of these perspectives gives satisfactory answers as to why it is intrinsically problematic to use resources from the Western "canon" to analyze issues in non-Euro-American contexts.[33] Postcolonial historians come to rescue with a perspective of knowledge production. For example, Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests that categories and concepts originating from European traditions became necessary structures to understand the phenomenon of political modernity anywhere in the world thanks to a "historicist" notion of time that the colonial powers carried to the non-European peoples with their gunboats and cannons in the nineteenth century.[34] Time that is single, homogeneous, linear, and secular, is a historical construction of modern Europe; but it became a way for the European powers to put the colonize people in an imaginary "waiting room of history," telling them "not yet" in their search for political

[32] See Jenco, Leigh, Idris, Murad, Thomas, Megan. "Comparison, Connectivity, and Disconnection." In *The Oxford Handbook of Comparative Political Theory*. Leigh K. Jenco, (ed.) et al. 2019. 1-14.
[33] For example, the critique of political theory for being Eurocentric cannot merely be framed as a concern with the diversity or pluralism which are values cherished by liberalism in the first place. It is also a stretch of argument so say that the people from non-Western cultures are necessarily in any way "oppressed" by having to use non-native languages and conceptual frameworks to theorize about their situations. Do these people really feel oppressed? Is it of necessity that a people/person's subjectivity is undermined if the theorist does not use a discourse indigenous to the people he theorizes about? Are we, who write in English about non-English-speaking populations not respecting these people's subjectivity? Are we oppressed too, because Western academia left us with no choice but to write in a foreign language? Maybe we are, but then what? Are "oppression" and "subjectivity" Western concepts too?
[34] Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference.* Princeton University Press. 2000. 4, 7.

modernity.[35] Such historicism, Chakrabarty suggests, is well alive in today's discipline of history, where global political thoughts are categorized as those to be historicized and those that historicize. Thoughts that are not compatible to historicist understanding of time, for example, Indian peasant rebels' narrative of supernatural beings exercising agency to aid their movements, are "pasts that resist historization" which need to be reorganized or reduced to accounts that these rebels have primordial superstitions, which eventually need to be modernized and secularized.[36]

The distinction between those who historicize and those who are historicized was depicted as a psychological burden of the colonial subjects in Fanon. Even when blackness was allowed to be asserted and celebrated, he lamented, it came to be deemed a historical phase of human history; regardless of how much positive color is assigned to it, it is seen as a primitive civilizational stage of human history, which is to be overcome eventually under the universal scheme of modernization. "And there you have it;" he wrote, "I did not create meaning for myself; the meaning was already there, waiting."[37] Having nowhere to go but to be prisoned in a European narrative of modernization, the black man felt that his subjectivity to author his own story – a sense of personal autonomy that is valued so deeply in modernity – was perpetually taken away from him.

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[35] Chakrabarty, 2000. 8

[36] Chakrabarty, 2000. 106. To clarify, Chakrabarty does not suggest that political narratives of non-Western contexts should be taken in its original, pure form without any mediation of academic disciplinary standards. The best that historians can do, he wrote, is to let go their desire for common grounds of what can be counted as "workable truth," but just to sit with the multiplicity of ways of being in the world. See Chakrabarty, 2000. 99, 101.

[37] Fanon. 2008. 113.

"I hailed the world, and the world amputated my enthusiasm."[38] Such is how both Tang and Li felt when they were abroad as Chinese scholars. The first time Li went outside the Chinese Mainland to Hong Kong towards the end of year 1989, a woman lawyer from Taiwan said to her: "there's not even human rights in the Chinese Mainland. What's there to talk about women's rights? what's there to talk about women's studies?" So carelessly, all the work to which Li had devoted herself for almost a decade, to address concrete and mostly painful lived experiences of Chinese women under Maoism, to defend room for Women's Studies in China painstakingly against stubborn male scholars and politically privileged Women's Federation cadres, got casually waved away as irrelevant by one way-too-abstract concept of human rights of liberalism. Her dejection was reflected in her defensive response out of instinct. She said: "There're 600 million women in China," she replied, "think about this number. Is this not a question of humanity? They are human beings, and they are living their lives, have you thought about that? I want to know why they cry and why they laugh, and I want to know what they are thinking and what they are doing. This is my women's studies."[39]

Unlike the 27-year-old Tang, however, 40-year-old Li went further and indicated a conceptual issue within overseas China studies more generally that had contributed to such shared emotional strain Chinese scholars experienced overseas. As she reflected later on this exchange with the Taiwanese lawyer, she said: "By saying this [to her], my

[38] Fanon. 2008. 94.
[39] See *Towards Women*. 1995. 53.

point was that we should first learn the conditions of Chinese women, looking at what Chinese women want rather than what the [Chinese] government currently wants them to do. These are two completely different perspectives."[40] Of course, that feminism is impossible under authoritarianism is simply a flawed perspective: to the contrary, it is precisely because that authoritarian state suppresses political and civil liberty that feminism as a democratic social energy is felt and needed the most. This unexamined prejudice, however, Li showed us, reflected a conflation of Chinese people with the Chinese state; the latter is a conceptual flaw.

For us political theorists/scientists, this is not a remarkable point to make. We all learn to distinguish concepts of "state," "country," "nation," and "regime" in our college Political Science 101 classes. An anecdote that Li once shared at a talk of hers, however, shows us that well-intentional people would miss this point because they are not always aware of their positionalities in geopolitical power dynamics. She recollected:

> "Before I visited overseas, many women's studies scholars from the West came to China. Almost all of them would ask me the same question: 'what is the most major problem for Chinese women?' … I found this question very difficult to answer, so stayed silent… They told me, [however:] 'you should not stay silent, [because] if you go abroad, whether in the US or in Canada, you will encounter the same question.' So, when I went to Canada, I asked [Canadian scholars]: "what is the most major problem for women in Canada?" They said they didn't know how to answer. When I went to Washington and Boston, I asked [American scholars]: "what is the most major women's problem in the US?" They also said they could not answer, because it is too complicated

[40] "Making a public space – women's studies in China in the 1980s." A talk she gave at Center for China Studies, UC Berkeley. October 1991. See *Challenge and Response.*1996. 13-4.

> a question. So, I ask them: 'then why you ask *me* this question?' (The entire room burst into laughter.)"[41]

With her tongue on the cheek, Li flipped the question posed from the "center" back to "center," and thus helped scholars like us positioned in the Euro-American center see that if we imagine all societies as necessarily diverse, with each of their members as agentic, full persons – each of whom has concrete and distinct characters, experiences, and thinking – then maybe we need to think twice about research approaches that treat people from any society – for example, China – as unifying population from which they generate knowledge. And alas, the latter is still the case today.

## 2. A pursuit of truth: necessarily anti-politics?

Turning away from a disappointing western academia to live with a repressing authoritarian regime, Li's academic trajectory from mid-1995 onwards looks like one of retreating. Indeed, since then, she had marginalized herself from the center of debates in Chinese academia. We were not to see any new academic work from her until 2010. In this over-a-decade silence, Li focused instead on fulfilling her aspiration to "leave Beijing to gain China," as she wrote in her letter to Su,[42] committing to her oral history project and her "women's museum" which materialized in 2003 and 2011 respectively.

Since 2010s, there emerged in her work a new emphasis of a pursuit of truth as the appropriate orientation of academic research, and that such a pursuit of truth is

[41] "Women's problems in China's social reform in the 1980s." a talk she gave at the School of Humanities at Heidelberg University, Germany. December 1991. See *Challenges and Responses*. 84.
[42] Li, Xiaojiang. "Open Letter to Su Shaozhi". *Positions*. 1. February 1993. 271.

incompatible with "politics." We have discussed in the previous Chapter that in the 1980s, she already invoked an "objective fact" in her insistence of an essentialized notion of woman. But it was until her 2014 book-length critique of Wang Hui (1959-), a male Chinese scholar who rose to fame as Li faded out, that Li explicitly used the language of "truth (*zhen*)" and "a pursuit of truth (*qiuzhen*)" as the most essential criteria to define academia vis-à-vis politics. Such distinction continued in her letter series with Tang in 1990 and ended at a note advising young Chinese woman scholars like Tang to prioritize doing well in one's own profession to participating in collective movements. The latter, she cautions, oftentimes turned to be abused by those who pursue private interests in the masquerade various leftist formations.[43]

A reading of her as retreating from the political sphere to personal ethics is valid; there is also strong textual evidence to support this view as I will show below. In the rest of the chapter, however, I would like to advance an alternative reading, suggesting that the distance she insisted to put between politics and academia indicate, ironically, a political potential where politics looks impossible but is mostly needed.

***Rescuing Truth from politics: Li's Platonic move?***

In the previous chapter, we have discussed China's new generation of sociologists who learned from Western structural functionalism, and reformulated Marxism into a project for modernization rather than a critical project to expose social ills. We have witnessed how modernism and its cherished value of personal liberty, rights, and

[43] *Chinese People*. 76-7.

rationalism, in Li's debate with Zheng Yefu, could create conceptual pathways to utilitarian weighing of efficiency of the market and other social values. Such views did not only receive criticism from feminism. In fact, it also became the center of criticism of a newly emerging group of scholars – often called the New Left – who focus on social issues emerged in China's integration into global capitalism but at the same time express a nostalgia to China's communist past. Wang Hui 汪晖(1959-), hailed as the leading figure of the New Left, would provoke Li from her long-time "hibernation" and came back to the theory scene.

By no means is Li the only critic of Wang who had been in spotlight of fierce debates with many other Chinese intellectuals. Criticism of him mainly surround his praise of some of CPC's experiment of socialism which he also suggests may offer solutions to a problem of depoliticization of party politics.[44] Critics challenged this view on two issues. First is his praise of the CPC's tradition of "theoretical debates and political struggle" as an important "corrective mechanism" that also helps to maintain the party's political vitality.[45] Cultural Revolution, to Wang, started with Mao Zedong using this tradition to combat the revolutionary party's tendency of statification – the problem of depoliticization in his words.[46] Tragedies happened in later years of the Cultural Revolution, he argued, because of a "depoliticization" where political debates became means of fractional struggles whose binarism eliminated autonomous social struggles

[44] Wang, Hui. "Depoliticized politics, multiple components of hegemony, and eclipse of the sixties." Translated by Christopher Connery. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*. 2006. 686.
[45] Wang. 2006. 687.
[46] Wang. 2006. 684.

and transformed the concept of "class" from a political concept into an essentialized identitarian concept.[47] Second is his commendation CPC's tactics mobilizing peasants movement in its land reforms in the rural areas. Mass politics – or "people's war" to use CPC's language – Wang argued, had increased political participation of the peasantry class, and had produced a new political subjectivity by uniting the peasants to the party.[48]

Li's criticism of Wang, like most of his other critics, do share the same trope: first a scholar's intuitive discomfort with academic work maintaining no critical distance from rhetorics of those who are currently in power, and then rebuttals via disputing historical facts Wang cited to support his theoretical points. Wang's proposal to reclaim CPC's revolutionary legacies, to many of his critics, first came across as rhetorical tools to legitimize party's actions, which in and of itself is problematic and off-putting.[49] Wang's 2010 article "The Rise of China: It's Experiences and Challenges," aroused anger in Li and others by its "gesture of a state leader," and a language "exactly the same as mainstream official newspapers."[50]

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[47] Wang. 2006, 690.
[48] Wang, Hui. "The Crisis of Representation of Post Party Politics." in *China's Twentieth Century: Revolution Retreat and the Road to Equality*. Ed. Saul Thomas. Verso. 2016. 170.
[49] For example, see Rong, Jian. "Wang Hui's 'Heidegger Moment?" Translated by David Ownby. *Reading the China Dream*. 2020 https:// www.readingthechinadream.com/rong-jian-wang-huis-heideggermoment.html Also Rong, Jian. *Shiji de Qilu: Zuoyi Gongtongti Pipan Shangjuan Er*. [A Century of Divergence: A Critique of Left-Wing Communities, vol. I, Part II]. New York: Bouden House. 2023. I would also like to acknowledge that I learned the debates surrounding Wang Hui's theory of party politics that I quote here mainly from Luo, Simon Sihang. "Reawakening a revolutionary party: the ancient and modern princes in Wang Hui's political theory." *American Political Science Review*. 2024.
[50] *Conversation with Wang Hui*. 46. Also see Kang, Zhengguo. "Towards a political liberation of civil rights and civic virtue – a critique of Wang Hui's recent work: Whose sovereignty? What equality?" 2010. https://blog.wenxuecity.com/myblog/80638/202503/18064.html

More substantive criticism then debates with Wang on the historical evidence he cites. Exiled scholar Kang Zhengguo 康正果 (1944-), for example, condemned both Wang's assessments of CPC's legacy of "theoretical debates" and "people's war" for turning a blind eye to historical facts where such tactics most of the time ended up bringing material hardship and psychological trauma to Chinese people.[51] Historian Yang Kuisong 杨奎松(1953-), for another example, pointed out archival mistakes in Wang's references to Mao that would seriously undermine his arguments.[52] Similar to Kang and Yang, Li counterargued Wang's praise of "theoretical debate" by raising that such debates in history always happened in the aftermath of bitter and costly lessons: for example, in 1935, Zunyi Conference happened after the Red Army's defeat at Jinggangshan, and in 1978, Truth Criterion Discussion happened in the aftermath of Cultural Revolution's ten-year turmoil. Rather than a corrective tool of the party's mistakes, Li argued, CPC's theoretical debates were excuses to justify these mistakes.[53]

Li then lamented:

> "Scholarship is an exacting endeavor: any superfluous identity or obligation [other than those of a scholar] may become an impediment to the pursuit of truth. "A scientist in search of truth is inwardly bound by a discipline akin to that of a Puritan: he cannot indulge himself or yield to emotion," [wrote Albert Einstein.] The humanities are no exception: scientific spirit must also take priority. Entangled in identities and

[51] Kang. 2010. I have to point out Kang's article is also problematic in that it used effeminizing language to criticize Wang, describing his writing like little girls playing elastic rope jumping games – an obviously gendered game coded as a "girls' game" in China.
[52] Yang, Kuisong. 2014. "Ye tan 'quzhengzhihua' wenti." [Also on the Problem of "Depoliticization"]. *Dongfang Zaobao*. January 19. https://www.aisixiang.com/data/71721.html In this article Yang points out that Wang mistaken the writing time of one of Mao's essays and attributed an essay to Mao that had proved to be not Mao's writing but was published in Mao's name without his approval. Both mistakes, Yang suggests, undermine the praise Wang conferred to Mao.
[53] *Conversation with Wang Hui*. 45-46.

> standpoints, a commitment to truth requires "a self-discipline even in solitude (*shendu* 慎独)."[54] Otherwise, [scholars may be] misled into conclusions in the name of "righteousness" or "justice." Academia's responsibility is to disclose what is concealed: whether in the face of "rise [of China]" or "decline [of China]," its task remains the same: to look at the truth and to speak it."[55]

Li's unequivocal distinction between academia and politics predicated on whether a pursuit of truth takes absolute priority would unsurprisingly remind us of Plato's theoretical reorientation of Socrates in *The Republic*. Moving away from Socrate's search for knowledge in the overlaps of opinions, Plato's solution to Athen's declining civic virtue and political ethics was to separate knowledge from public opinions, given that the latter is already beyond help in the corrupted political sphere where lust for power override all commitment to justice. This parallel reading could be especially compelling given Li's scathing lament of the Chinese Mainland post 1989 for "a public at large (*baixing dazhong* 百姓大众)" that is "spiritually empty, amoral, demoralized, degraded to the lowest level of what is human."[56] This, in combination with Li's repeated emphasis that "academia can have one and only one aim, that is, *truth* – grounded in the pursuit of truth, bringing truth to light and standing by it,"[57] could attempt us into the conclusion that Li indeed, like Plato, opted for a cleansing project

[54] *Shendu* is a term originated from *the Book of Rites*, one of Confucianist classics. The original quote is "The superior man is watchful over himself, when he is alone."
[55] *Conversation with Wang Hui*. 49
[56] Li, Xiaojiang. *Wolf Totem and the Post-Mao Utopian: A Chinese Perspective on Contemporary Western Scholarship*, trans. Gunn, Edward Mansfield, Jr. Leiden and Boston: BRILL, 2018. 558.
[57] *Conversation with Wang Hui*. 7.

of "the city" guided by a pristine philosopher class insulated from power and committed to Truth and Truth only.

***Pitkin's dilemma in China studies***

However, like there are potentials in Plato's *Republic* to read his theory of knowledge beyond a strict separation of the realm of transcendental ideals from worldly opinions and conventions contingent to social circumstances, similar ambivalences also characterize Li's writing that could dissuade us from a conclusive, and disheartening, reading of retreating to philosophy from politics. After all, the kind of knowledge that both Li and Plato cared to protect from politics were not those that can be secured by discoveries of science: "what justice is," as Pitkin pointed out, requires a different kind of discovery than that of "the evening star is really the planet Venus".[58] We can quite unproblematically know the meaning of "the evening star" as well as "the morning star" in Gottlob Frege's example, by linking it to its reference "the planet Venus." But this is not the case in determining the meaning of "justice."

By way of later Wittgenstein's theory of language as activity vis-à-vis language as reference, Pitkin argued, we should not simply explain away Socrates and Thrasymachus' quarrel over justice by a distinction between what justice is and what justice ought to be. Rather, the creative openness of language, as later Wittgenstein sees it, allows us to see that both are actively giving meaning to what justice *is*.[59] Moving

[58] Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought*. University of California Press, 1993/1972. 192.
[59] *Wittgenstein and Justice*. 177-80.

the activity of defining justice – the knowledge to guide the ordering of the *polis* – to the realm of *eidos* guarded by philosopher-kings' true love of and commitment to Truth, Plato evaded Socrates from a political battle he must fight with Thrasymachus: the latter's action to assign meaning to justice, no matter offensive-sounding it is, must be fought back by another action to assign an alternative meanings.

Pitkin would not, however, merely follow an easy criticism of Plato for being totalitarian by eliminating politics to address competing meaning of justice, a political issue. Instead, she pointed out, Plato's theoretical move in *The Republic* is one of the many manifestations a dilemma in the theorizing itself. Though most of canon of political theory we value today share commitments in egalitarianism and democracy – however loosely defined – "there seems to be something of the enterprise of theorizing itself," Pitkin wrote, "that makes the resulting system seem totalitarian and, in that sense, nonpolitical." That is, "[t]he theorist stands outside the political system about which he speculates and writes; of necessity he deploys and manipulates its citizens without consulting their wishes and opinions".[60]

Interestingly enough, Li also liked to invoke from philosophy of language to make her points in politics, though she did not do so as systematically as Pitkin did and sometimes, she might not manage to cite concepts in linguistics accurately. For one, her critique of Wang Hui in fact went beyond a challenge of the facticity the latter's account of China's revolutionary history, but pointed out such account was animated

[60] *Wittgenstein and Justice*. 326-7. This problem was called "Pitkin's dilemma" by Ruth Lane. "Pitkin's Dilemma: The Wider Shores of Political Theory and Political Science," *Perspectives on Politics*. 2004 (2). 459.

by an anxiety shared by Wang and some of his Chinese peers – that is, an anxiety to defend the legitimacy of the Chinese state to the rest of the world as China became one of the few remaining socialist regimes after the Soviet Union's disintegration. One could easily see that anxiety is unnecessary, Li however pointed out, if they could see that "China is a proper name, and is also a common name."[61] She cited these terms from *Leviathan* where Hobbes wrote that whereas "a proper name bringeth to mind one thing only," common names "recall any one of those many [things for their similarity in some quality],"[62] which is an uncommon reference for this distinction; it may also be inappropriate from a linguist's point of view to say that "China" can also be a common name. But by borrowing these concepts from philosophy of language, Li provided us with a different perspective to see how a unifying concept of China identified with its current political regime – the same critique that she raised in her response to her overseas audience of feminism in China – could also mislead Chinese scholars like Wang to judgements that are political dangerous.

As a proper name, Li wrote, China is the China the country with its territory, population, and history[63] – as a teacher will teach to school kids. If a student pointed to Australia in the middle of the Pacific Ocean or referred to the 1776 Declaration of Independence as China or Chinese history, the teacher would tell them that they made a mistake. "No, that is not China," the teacher would say. China in such sense – a proper

[61] *Conversation with Wang Hui*. 52.
[62] Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*, (ed.) Edwin Curley. Hackett Publishing Company., inc. 1994. Book 1, chapter 4, paragraph 7. p.17.
[63] *Conversation with Wang Hui*. 52

name – does not need a justification. It just is, just like "the evening/morning star" is planet Venus. Justification is needed, however, when one treats China as a common name, making a "conceptual China," to use Li's language.[64] In Wang's case, as he felt impelled to give the "China" a definition of which its current political authority is an essential part, he needs to justify both the legitimacy of the party state and his identification of China with it. It is for the sake of making these justifications, Li then suggested, that Wang made his painstaking effort to integrate China's revolutionary legacy, including the Cultural Revolution and Land Reforms into a historical account of a unifying concept of China; and because he felt impelled to make these justifications in front of a Western audience, he made it a story of this unifying China moving forward in its endeavor of modernization. Then the Cultural Revolution and other mistakes made in contemporary Chinese history – regardless of the damage they had brought to the Chinese society – must be part of this process of modernization.

However, as Li indicated, Wang's "conceptual China" – which identified China with its revolutionary past and its socialist regime – is only one of many possibilities to define China. In response to Wang's praise of "China's experience" in being able to overcome the 1989 incidents which he claimed as "China's biggest crisis in the three decades after "Reform and Opening Up,"[65] Li asked sharply:

> "When he [Wang] talks about 'China's crisis' in 1989, it has nothing to do with collapse of the nation and annihilation of the people (*wangguo*

[64] *Conversation with Wang Hui*. 53
[65] Wang, Hui. "*Zhongguo jueqi de jingyan jiqi minalin de tiaozhan* [The rise of China: its experiences and challenges.]" in *Wenhua Zongheng*. No.2 April 2010. 24.

> *miezu* 亡国灭族); there was no foreign invasion (*waidi ruqin* 外敌入侵), nor were ordinary people left without means of substance (*minbuliaosheng* 民不聊生): *whence the crisis?*"[66]

1989 was indeed a crisis to China's socialist regime, but is it really a crisis of China the country and the people? As Li wrote, "the end of the socialist bloc is not the same as a national crisis".[67] In other word, it would be a "crisis of China" only when China is defined by its socialist regime. But for Li, "China" the socialist regime is only one of the many possible representations of "China" as a common name. Conflating his "conceptual China" with "China" the proper name, she indicated, Wang gives the former normative power over our conceptualizing of "China" that only belongs to the latter. Simply put, Li wanted to point out that China is not Beijing, and neither is Beijing China. To her disappointment, however, many China scholars did not seem to see this. In a letter she wrote to Su Shaozhi, an exiled Chinese intellectual, she criticized China studies overseas for committing a mistake of "Big Beijing, Small China."[68] When she left Harvard University in 1992, she told Su, she was disheartened by the fact that the Fairbank Center[69] fellows were most interested in how the rank structure of the "Party of the Princes" would influence on China's future: was China going to collapse, or was political democratization still a possibility?[70] Such narrow focus on the state power,

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[66] *Conversation with Wang Hui*. 44. Emphasis mine.
[67] *Conversation with Wang Hui*. 44.
[68] "Letter to Su Shaozhi". 269, 271
[69] The Fairbank Center for Eastern Asian Studies at Harvard University. It changed its name to Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies since 2007.
[70] "Letter to Su" 277. "The party of the princes," or "the Princelings," a more common equivalent today, was the slang for the children of high-ranking CPC officials.

she suggested, overshadowed the wider Chinese society – the "China" that she asserted that one must "leave Beijing to gain"[71] – and led to a mistaken political despair.

She wrote:

> "China is China; it has a population of more than 1,200,000,000 people…and a history of 5,000 years of civilization. Could one government, one 'June 4th,' [and] a few government officials represent her? Yes, the government has its will and its own needs. But can that be completely equal to the will and the needs of the [Chinese] society? …When we merely search the government and upper echelons of the power structure to find China's way out, we end up regarding the actions of a few officials as if they really were helmsmen controlling China's fate. That is why we often feel disappointed, as though there is no way out."[72]

Moreover, it saddened her even more, when such mistaken judgement led to an almost cruel, dehumanizing attitude towards Chinese people. Exiled Chinese intellectuals post June 4th, she indicated, had let their disillusionment and anger with the Chinese government morph into a wish for a political collapse of the country, which she thought would come with the price of people losing their livelihood.[73] This, for her, is not only ethically cruel, but also an anti-democratic position to take, ironically, when pursuing democracy. Here, we come to see in a real-life example of Pitkin's caution of a tyrannical tendency of theorizing when the theorist places himself outside the political system that he writes and speculates. Li wrote:

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[71] "Letter to Su". 271.
[72] "Letter to Su". 277
[73] Whether this judgement was valid or not, I really don't know. I think we need rather complicated empirical data to make predictions as much, and we need to define what livelihood is. But all these do not affect my analysis of her theorizing.

> "If they [some Chinese exiled intellectuals] claim it is necessary to die for democracy and indicate that others [Chinese people living in China] must do the dying, then they have gotten 'democracy' at a very great discount…If we fix our gaze exclusively on the government and power, and neglect the public and society, *we are in fact acceding to totalitarianism within our very selves*. Then it matters not that we politically oppose totalitarianism and advocate democracy; *we have already unconsciously adopted totalitarian methods* in our academic positions."[74]

Though driven by an aspiration to democracy, the theorist ended up with totalitarian conclusions. As Pitkin would say, this happens when the theorist falls short of the democratic spirit of *isegoria*, that is, to respect each citizen's equality in speaking to the assembly. That is, instead of addressing from one citizen to other citizens, the theorist treated himself as a professional making his skills available to the ignorant laymen, or as a prophet claiming more attention in the name of higher powers. One of Pitkin's antidotes to theory's seemingly inherent tyrannical tendency, again, lies in language. That is, to carefully attend to our style of speaking, to speak about the political situation of "we: as an invitation for other citizens to think along with us, rather than "you" or "they," and definitely not to anoint oneself as the royal "we," commanding others to follow one's lead.[75]

***The unattainable Truth, the fallible knowledge, and the scholar's vocation***

[74] "Letter to Su" 276-7 (emphasis mine, and I changed some of the translations as I see productive from the original Chinese version *Qiushui Magzine*.1993)
[75] *Wittgenstein and Justice*. 328

For Li, Wang and overseas China Studies scholars – though the former is a Maoist whereas the latter liberals – have all spoken in the royal "we" by identifying their standpoints with the state power vis-à-vis the Chinese people, letting the big Beijing overshadow China the land, society, and people. However, it is in the latter, Li suggested, where they should search for China's way-out or China's "political dignity." China, when taken as a common name, is open for definitions and creation by ordinary Chinese people; and it is in their speech and action that we can avoid deadening pessimism of China's politics. Back to 1995 in Li's open statement of her withdrawal from the UN conference on women, she wrote:

> "Through my absence, I have in fact participated in the Forum by making clear that many Chinese women's voices remain outside the Forum…I know that such a gesture is powerless; yet I think it is necessary. In today's China, people everywhere long for human dignity and social fairness (*gongzheng* 公正). I do not think these will descend from the sky; [instead,] they should come into being through the choices each of us makes. For this reason, I chose refusal [to attend the conference]."[76]

Notice her choice of language of social "fairness ( *gongzheng* 公正)," instead of social "justice (*zhengyi* 正义)". It looks like she was indeed aware of a subtle but important distinction between the notion of "justice" and its common Chinese translation *Zhengyi*. Like "justice" in Plato's *Republic*, *zhengyi* also aligns better with the Greek word *dikē*

[76] *Ming Pao Monthly*. 1995. 83

rather than the English word justice.[77] Whereas "justice" is more of the legal notion clearly denoting a public in modern English, *Zhengyi* – where *zheng* 正 means upright and correct, and *yi* 义 means moral rightness and appropriateness – starts as a personal ethical integrity practiced in local scenarios and later finds its manifestation in political institutions. Chinese children learn their first elementary school lessons that one should write characters upright (*zheng*) as if they have spines – meaning to follow a copybook – and so should be one's character. An ordinary Chinese person would quote "the noble person understands things in terms of what is right (*yi*) whereas the petty person in terms of profit" from Confucius when opting to uphold moral principles at the price of personal interests.[78] In this sense, justice as *zhengyi* has a normative connotation that things should be done in certain ways following standards that are not subject to change to personal opinions. In contrast, fairness (*gongzheng*), where *gong* 公 means public, indicates whether an issue is handled correctly depends on how a collective of people think. For example, the republican revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen took the political ideal of *tianxiaweigong* 天下为公 ("all under the heaven belongs to the public") from the Confucian classic *Book of Rites*, and made it a powerful moral slogan to challenge the Qing monarchy as a private rule. (And today we can see this slogan in almost every single overseas Chinatown inscribed on its gate). For Li, it is fairness (*gongzheng*), not justice (*Zhengyi*), that Chinese people yearned for their society. More important, as she

[77] See a discussion of the translation of *dikē* in Plato's *Republic* in *Wittgenstein and Justice*. 1972. 306-7.
[78] *Analects*. Book 4.

wrote, fairness is not an ideal coming from heaven but depends on each Chinese person's choices in concrete life scenarios for it to come into being.

What does come from the heaven, however, is *dikē,* or *zhengyi* – the master virtue not to be found in the humanly world but in the realm of forms, the purely just as a Truth that cannot be possessed but only approximated by any mortals. Two decades after Pitkin's prompt of theory's tyrannical tendency exemplified in *The Republic*, Wendy Brown came to invite us to see that the Plato's formulation of knowledge and knowing nevertheless opens a possibility that the division he sets between Truth and politics may not be as rigid as his critics think today and that theory may not be necessarily tyrannical. That is, though Plato did characterize *dikē* in terms of an absolute, ahistorical Truth, he did not describe the acquirement of such Truth as a purely disembodied, rationalist inquiry. Rather, as Brown showed, in their inquiry of what the truly just is, Socrates in *The Republic* would break off from the dialectical mode of inquiry when he and his companions reached an impasse; he would pivot to myths or allegories, so as to call his comrades back to their concrete, local experiential knowledge of the world,[79] that is, to take a break from their preoccupation with a universally applicable answer to what justice is. Brown then went on to point our attention to Plato's rather peculiar language to depict Truth as a woman that men can only court and please with a love of wisdom that is speechless, erotic, and even mad,

[79] Brown, Wendy. "'Supposing Truth Were a Woman...:' Plato's Subversion of Masculine Discourse." *Political Theory*. Vol. 16, No. 4. 1988. 602-3.

but not take possession of via reason only, and definitely not sophistic speech – reason in its corruptive version.[80]

If Truth can only be approximated with appropriate attitudes and virtues whereas cannot be owned by a seeker striving for recognition or power, then a theorist's enterprise to come up with a somewhat coherent political order in light of such Truth would not necessarily be totalitarian. If the tyrannical, and hence anti-political tendency of political theory comes from the latter's habit of deriving the Good from the True as Brown later suggested, what if Truth is something ultimately unfathomable and inaccessible? Truth itself as Plato suggested is indeed in the realm of *eidos* – absolute, unchanging, and undebatable– but because by its definition Truth can only be approximated by but not fully revealed to humans, then maybe a pursuit of Truth is not necessarily anti-political, though Truth itself is an "extra-political term".[81]

That Truth is beyond the human reach was precisely Li's point when she maintained that a scholar should always practice "self-discipline even in solitude (*shendu*)" to not let politics interrupt her responsibility to pursue Truth. This became salient in her 2019 letter series to Tang Ling. In these letters where she could have been a tyrannical theorist in Pitkin's sense – after all, these are letters started from a position of power of an older scholar giving advice to the confounded younger – Li repeatedly emphasize that Truth as the yardstick to differentiate a scholar from a politician is nevertheless

[80] "Supposing Truth were a woman," 605-9. Brown also quoted *Phaedrus* and *Symposiu*m aside from *The Republic* for this point.
[81] Brown, Wendy. *States of Injury*. 37

unreachable; and it was because Truth was unreachable, that academia was the place that freedom and hope can find refuge in bad times.

The letters started from a tone of sorrow to China's current political situation. (How timely it was on the eve of the COVID-19 outbreak.) "Regrettably," she wrote, "on this homeland and native place of Chinese people, the place where I live and work, though the New Year is approaching, spring feels distant." "Yet," she turned to write, "in academia, a spiritual spring resides only in the heart, untethered by the changing seasons…like a gentle rain silently nourishing all things."[82] This is a reference of Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu (712-770) 's household classic "Spring Night Rain:" "Good rain knows its season, coming right in spring. It enters the night with the wind, silently moistening things." I will come back in the next section to the natural imaginary of rain, water, and river signifying flux and fluidity that Li frequently invoked; but let me just flag this for now. She then presented an extremely Platonic sounding description of Truth, both in terms of its transcendence of earthly life and of the almost erotic personification of it:

> "The Truth that scholars jointly seek, in effect, is a utopia that is invisible, boundless, but precisely for this reason it holds an infinite allure: in the imagination of each of us, such Truth embodied 'the True, the Good, and the Beautiful (*zhenshanmei* 真善美)' in one; it is a dream that all who hold sincere devotion to learning and life itself are willing to spend their entire lives pursuing."[83]

[82] *Chinese People*. 2.
[83] *Chinese People*. 2.

However, to her dismay, such pursuit of Truth had become difficult for scholars in China. So, despite her validation and empathy of Tang's despondency with being a Chinese scholar in Western academia, Li urged her to not to return to China because of it lacked academic freedom. Indeed, in the year of 2019, any person with a sane mind would agree that "though China has many universities, but none of them would tolerate academic spirit of independence;" yet it was still fair to say that Western academia, "despite its cognitive biases, does not attempt to silence dissenting voices."[84] But notice how she made a distinction between scholarly outputs and Truth, and that the spirit to pursue the latter is only possible where there is freedom. In response to Tang's invitation of her to Oxford so as to "introduce voices of truly outstanding Chinese scholars to the West," Li wrote:

> "My response may disappoint you: west-centrism and China-centrism are equally harmful…Categories such as nation, gender, and class are indeed cognitive tools and senses of identity important to the pursuit of knowledge and scholarship; yet the attainment of knowledge depends precisely on transcending them [these categories] …[In this sense,] *scholarly outputs are cold and dispassionate, [because] they are beyond good and evil, grounded in objective perceptions. Yet, academic spirit has life and warmth, only taking root and growing in souls that are free*, and [hence, it] is not about science but a matter of faith; it is a religious spirit that transcends utility. What is called "Truth" resembles a utopia in the sense of *eidos* (*linian* 理念):[85] it exists only in the heaven, beyond the reach of those in the mortal world."[86]

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[84] *Chinese People*. 12

[85] *Linian* (理念) – Li's language – is a customary translation of the Greek word *eidos*, so I translate it back to it.

[86] *Chinese People*. 7, 10 (emphasis mine)

So, in Li's conceptual universe, scholarly outputs/knowledge, which is beyond good and evil, are not Truth which is Good itself. Whereas knowledge is a (temporary) output of scholarly inquiry, such inquiry is to be guided by spirit to pursue Truth which the scholar nevertheless knows it is out of her reach. Comparing to Donna Haraway's "situated knowledge" where knowledge is necessarily positioned on concrete standpoint of the knower, one could say that for Li, it is "pursuing Truth (*qiuzhen*)" that is situated. As the vocation of a scholar, seeking Truth takes place only it is situated in a free soul, which predicates on the seeker practicing constant self-discipline to not to be led on by desires for things other than Truth despite knowing that Truth is ultimately unreachable. So, it looks like we eventually still came back to a depiction of a solitary scholar; but unlike Pitkin's theorist who stands outside the world and commands, Li's lone scholar does not even invite others to her quest to Truth.[87] After all, she again and again returned to the image of Don Quixote tilting at windmills – the archetype of the lone, mad, and tragic hero – as how she imagined herself to be and had been a scholar.[88] Maybe like Plato who were no longer able to hold out any hope to Athenian democracy in the aftermath of Socrates' sentence to death, in the year of 2019, Li felt a similar sense of despair with Chinese politics where a decade of tightening of space for civil society and freedom of speech saw no sign of taking a turn, whereas politics as the state's monopoly of power and fractional struggles became more and more apparent. The "public space" she was hoping for Chinese women to develop their subjective

[87] Again, refer to *Wittgenstein and Justice*. 328
[88] *Chinese People*, 2, 10, 73.

capacity – which she said "was precisely politics" in the 1990s despite a lack language of "rights"– now look like a land of ruins under a prolonged bad weather for which even an extremely seasoned farmer like Li would feel pessimistic. So, if we understand politics as by its definition a collective human activity – as politics is formulated by Aristotle, Hannah Arendt, Pitkin, and Brown – then yes, for those aspiring more political agency in the Chinese society, Li was indeed giving a gesture to retreat to the private, and in that sense, she was anti-politics.

Yet, as Li depicted Truth as unreachable – also similar to our previous reading of Plato's depiction of knowledge can only be approximated but not owned – she also took away the lone theorist's capacity to command in the name Truth, and in this sense, she was also anti-tyranny and hence allows room for politics. And for that room to survive, she urged her younger scholar comrades nevertheless to stay away from political power, so as to take care of their soul and to tend their freedom within. In the final section below, I will end my analysis of Li with her account of freedom, and by so doing as I shall show, we can avoid concluding our analysis of her on an anticlimax note that she simply understood politics differently from Western democratic theorists do. And this would require us again to invoke her dialectic and the Self and society.

### 3. "Freedom does not have the other shore"

We have discussed Li's analysis that "liberation" (*jiefang* 解放) in the Chinese context is conceptually closer to the notion of "equality" rather than "freedom." Women's liberation in China's socialist discourse, she argued, was clear about its prescription in

women's being "equal to men" in rights, standards, and benefits that the society conventionally confers to men; yet such rigid and limited understanding of equality also hollow out Chinese women's understanding of liberation of its essence which, Li emphasized, should be freedom. "Liberation" in the Chinese context as such was characterized by Lin Chun 林春 – a scholar of Li's generation – as an "intrinsically contradictory character of a communist feminism."[89] Starting from as part of a communist revolution which by its definition was a struggle for human emancipation, Lin suggested, feminism in communist China ended up incompatible with freedom precisely because the revolution's politicization process.

***"Personal is political" in Maoist China***

In an autobiographical-style essay,[90] Lin reflected on her formative years under Maoism as a youth who was on the "right" side. With both her parents being veteran Communist rank and files, Lin did not become targets of humiliation and violence in various post-1949 political movements like Li did. Her family background also allowed her to be one of the first students in her school to put up a rebellious "big character poster" criticizing school authorities and teachers, though later she realized that this

[89] Lin, Chun. "Towards a Chinese feminism: a personal story." *Dissent*. Vol. 42. 1995. 63. This article does not have an original PDF version from the library database, so I'm not able to provide page numbers for the information and quotes I cite here. For now, I mark page numbers from the Chinese translation of this article in *Women's Research Movement*. Li, Xiaojiang, ed. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press. 1997

Lin Chun received a doctorate from the University of Cambridge in history and political science and has taught at the London School of Economics and Political Science since 1993. She's now emeritus professor in comparative politics there.

was part of the massive and blind process of persecution in the Cultural Revolution.[91] It was not until she returned from her "reeducation by the peasants" – which she signed herself up voluntarily at the age of 16 – in northern Shanxi at the age of 21, that her socialist idealism started to falter. Having witnessed poverty and backwardness in the rural areas, Lin wrote, she the first time realized the hard fact that her sustained, naïve devotion to the collective ideal of socialism was predicated on her privilege as an urban student. It was this privilege that had protected her from, for example, early and undesired marriages that rural women had to accept and hence gave congruence of her conviction that her personal feelings and aspirations were ultimately unimportant in the greater collective struggle.[92]

Socialism for her and her peers, Lin wrote, was an entirely abstract concept, in the sense that freedom and happiness, which was supposed to be two key notions tied to the very idea of liberation, was lacking in their understanding of why socialism – the goal of proletariats' liberation movement – is desirable. Socialism was defended for the sake of socialism.[93] "The feminist thesis that 'the personal is political' was no novelty for the Chinese," she wrote.[94] What she meant was that unlike in the Second Wave feminist movement where the slogan is a request to politicize matters in the private sphere and to subject these matters to social and legal interventions, for the Chinese living state socialism, private matters were always already politicized, in the sense that

[91] Lin, 66
[92] Lin, 71
[93] Lin, 71-2.
[94] Lin, 68.

any private desire getting in the way of the ideological correctness of socialism is seen as politically offensive and hence subject to political intervention. In the case of women's liberation, "personal is political" meant that state power came in to replace patriarchal power – as Li had shown us in the previous chapter in her debate with Zheng Yefu. For example, in the notorious "one-child policy," this means that the state used political force to suppress patrilineality's preference of sons to daughters. Women did benefit from such intervention for having state-enforced protection from being pressured to repetitively getting pregnant until a son comes along, though indeed they were also subjected to forced abortion and sterilization. It also meant, at the same time, women like Lin, and Li, were compelled into a self-repression mechanism to work against "bourgeois" individualism of which the state thought expressing a certain kind of femininity was an important part.

Now we come to understand that when Li gestured towards a retreat to the free soul under China's declining political climate – as she suggested in her letters to Tang – her imagination of politics was probably more constrained by her experience of state intervention with personal life in the name of higher, collective ends, but less animated by the democratic promises in public sharing of power and collective participation in public affairs anchored in Western democratic theories. For Chinese women of her generation, it looks like to achieve freedom, and happiness, what they needed was not to make the personal more political, but for politics – which in the Chinese context is a right exclusive to the state only – to retreat from the personal.

But this also means that we, again, find ourselves back to our original analysis of Li holding a notion of politics different from that in Western democratic theories. This would be an anti-climax conclusion because we started our journey from wanting to tell a story about Li's work beyond a disappointing and disheartening trope of a theorist giving up hopes in democratic possibilities in politics and retreating to philosophy and Truth. But I would rather hold out my hope that Li would not leave us on this note, that like her idol Don Quixote the mad man, she would require a leap of faith from us and take us onto her knight-errant's adventure. In this last section, I shall advance a reading of Li as such; but rather than to the windmills plain, we are to follow her to the grasslands of Inner Mongolia. There, I shall argue, she was to show us a hope for political agency in an environment where politics looks impossible; and such hope is made possible via a rumination of the ambivalences surrounding the concept of freedom which, interestingly, we can find echoes in Western political theory as well.

***Arendt's puzzle of freedom, liberation, and politics***

Before we press on to Inner Mongolia grassland with Li, let me recap briefly on the debates within Western democratic theory over the identification of freedom with political participation. As feminist theorists, probably the controversy we are most familiar with over Arendt's assertation that freedom is the raison d'être of politics and that genuine human freedom is only possible in politics. With the strict separation of politics from the necessity/the household/the private in her conceptual world, without much surprise Arendt had attracted feminist criticism for excluding issues like care and

reproduction where gender inequality affected women the most from politics, and for creating a gendered hierarchy privileging the public (male-coded) over the private (female coded). Even if we set the gender issue aside, Pitkin for example suggested, Arendt's definition of politics with publicity, speech, and glory, as well as her exclusion of "social questions," i.e., economics and needs of the body, from politics end up making an image of public sphere that is curiously empty.[95]

Moreover, as Pitkin pointed out later, Arendt's insistence that *eleutheria* was Ancient Greek counterpart of English word "freedom," an important piece of supporting evidence for her identification of freedom with participation in self-government, could be incorrect from an etymological point of view. In fact, it was "liberties/liberation," from which Arendt differentiated "freedom" in that the former referred as legal exemption from abuse of power but not active exercising of public power, that had a linkage to *eleutheria* via the Latin word *liber*. "Freedom," on the other hand, with its Germanic root in *priyos*, had no such connection.[96] And even if we do not take Arendt's reference to *eleutheria* a strict etymological claim, Pitkin suggested, she still needed to account for the fact that *eleutheria* only took on the connotation of democratic participation later whereas it started from meaning unimpeded motion, non-slave status, and sexual pleasure, all of which were nevertheless closer to what Arendt characterized liberties – a legal status exempted from arbitrary power, and a license free from external

[95] Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. "Justice: On Relating Private and Public." *Political Theory*. vol. 9, no. 3, August 1981, 337-8.
[96] Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. "Are freedom and liberty twins?" *Political Theory*. vol. 16, no. 4, November 1988, 529.

constraint.[97] In the end, Pitkin concluded that all these ambiguities arisen from Arendt's distinction between "freedom" and "liberties," just as those from Berlin's distinction between negative and positive freedom, were due to the fact that ordinary language is inherently complex and incoherent so to draw neat distinctions as such necessarily comes with costs. In Arendt's case, her distinction left an important issue unaddressed, that is, if we follow her suggestion to privilege freedom to liberties, we would be ultimately at loss when these two words come into interaction and entanglement: does freedom (with its triadic unity with politics and action) need liberation and liberties (as in liberation from enslavement, necessities, and desires) as its precondition, or is freedom is a perpetual, in eradicable human potential?[98]

***Finding freedom and liberty on the Mongolia grasslands***

This puzzle of freedom and its relations to liberation, liberty, and politics that Arendt left us precisely captured the dilemma that Li and her peers found in Chinese politics. Socialist revolution claimed to have won the Chinese people liberation from their former oppressors,[99] but it did not bring them freedom; to the contrary, as we discussed above, both Li and Lin suggested that the Chinese needed a depoliticization of their understandings of freedom and happiness. At the same time, the authoritarian regime never promised civil liberties and hence there had never been freedom as in democratic

[97] "Are freedom and liberty twins?" 530-3.
[98] "Are freedom and liberty twins?" 547.
[99] CPC's official discourse portrayed the revolution as a struggle to overthrow "three mountains:" imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat capitalism.

self-government; so maybe freedom does need liberties as its precondition. So, if freedom is ultimately desirable, one does have to believe that it is a perpetual, ineradicable human potential. But if it is so, then we cannot hold on to definition of freedom with politics, because doing that would mean the Chinese would never have freedom, so it is not a universal potential. Where is the way out?

And now it is our cue to embark our journey to the vast, boundless grassland of Inner Mongolia. In her literary criticism work of a 2004 fiction *Wolf Totem* by Jiang Rong, Li provided us with her most elaborate discussion on freedom, its possibilities, limitations, and ambiguities under authoritarianism where political participation within institutionalized channels is not possible to ordinary citizens.[100] *Wolf Totem* follows protagonist Chen Zhen, a child of "black-class" backgrounds[101] during the Cultural Revolution, and his life as a sent-down youth (*zhiqing*) to a state-run ranch in Olonbulag District of Inner Mongolia. This unconventional fiction does not follow a clear plot but reads more like a series of graphic depictions of how grassland wild wolfs maneuvered around ranch residents – local Mongolian herders, party cadres of Han

[100] Li, Xiaojiang. *Wolf Totem and the Post-Mao Utopian: A Chinese Perspective on Contemporary Western Scholarship*, trans. Gunn, Edward Mansfield, Jr. Leiden and Boston: BRILL, 2018. Original Chinese version is Li, Xiaojiang. *Hou Wutuobang Piping: Langtuteng shendu quanshi* [*Post-Utopian Critique: A Commentary on Wolf Totem*.] Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press. 2013.

Jiang Rong's fiction *Wolf Totem* raised a national sensation in China after its publication in 2004. It was later translated into Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, French, English, and German. In 2007 it won the first Man Asian Literary Prize. The fiction also attracted much criticism for its indicated privileging of the "wolf spirit" of aggression, domination, and survivalism.

Jiang Rong (1946-) was a sent-down youth to Inner Mongolia ranch himself, so the fiction is also semi-autobiographical. He later did his graduate degree in political economy.

[101] Generally, this means their families fall into the categories of "landlords," "rich peasants," "counterrevolutionaries", "bad elements," "Rightists," and "capitalist roaders." Children of these families were systematically excluded from political participation and educational opportunities under Cultural Revolution.

ethnicity, and *zhiqings* like Chen – who saw them as threats to the ranch economy. The only apparent plot following through is that of Chen secretly raising, and imprisoning, a wolf cub from one of the herdsmen's raids of the wild wolfs. Injured in an accident later, the wolf-cub refused Chen's attempt to heal it and committed suicide by biting its wound.

Li read the wolf-cub plot as story of a search for a depoliticized freedom inevitably ending up a political project of liberation. First, she made a distinction between the English terms "freedom" and "liberty" that may confuse those of us situated in Anglophone academia. In her definition, freedom is associated with "spontaneity *(zizai* 自在)," is generally used in philosophy, whereas liberty is associated with "liberation (*jiefang* 解放)" tend to be used in political and legal circumstances.[102] This is exactly the two notions of freedom when Pitkin showed us in her etymological analysis that *eleutheria* (which Arendt associated to political and democracy) did not start from referring to political participation but arguably had a more etymology-based origin in unimpeded motion.[103]

Under this freedom: spontaneity: philosophy *versus* liberty: liberation: politics distinction, Li then characterized Chen's journey to the grassland as a search for freedom. He voluntarily sent himself to ranch as a self-exile to find freedom away from

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[102] See *Wolf Totem*. 422

[103] In fact, Li cited her distinction between "freedom" and "liberty" from an afterward that Li Hongtu wrote for his Chinese translation of Quentin Skinner's *Liberty before Liberalism*; but what she did not mention was that Li Hongtu cited this distinction from Maurice Cranston which was quoted at the beginning of "Are freedom and liberty twins?" Regretfully, it looked like neither Li Xiaojiang nor Li Hongtu read onwards Pitkin's essay. See Li, Hongtu. "Translator's afterwards: finding the definition of freedom in history: Quentin Skinner and Intellectual History." in Skinner, Quentin. *Liberty Before Liberalism*. Trans. Li, Hongtu. Shanghai: Sanlian Shudian. 2003. 133.

the political movements in Beijing. Partly influenced by the popular trope in traditional Chinese literature where politically frustrated intellectuals withdrew to countryside seeking refuge in nature,[104] and partly by Russian literature like *Quietly Flows the Don* like many others growing up in socialist China, Chen thought that the Mongolian grassland would allow him to "let his thoughts roam," that he could find peace and freedom in the cartons of books he and his friends brought with them from Beijing that they could "mull over, like sheep chewing their cud".[105] However, Chen soon became disillusioned because first, exiling himself to the wilderness did not bring him a feeling of spontaneity; rather, monotonous physical labor and the vastness and long winters of the grassland only left him feelings of boredom, isolation, and barrenness. Second, the wilderness ended up being not so far from politics anyway: Chen was soon frustrated by the party cadres on the ranch who are just as authoritarian and bureaucratic.

The way out that Chen found out by accident, in Li's reading, was to find freedom for himself through conquest, dominance, and enslavement of others – that is, he raised a wolf cub.[106] But as freedom became a concern not of just for Chen himself but a dynamic between him and the wolf cub involving conquest, dominance, and enslavement, it also became a problem, whereas before the wolf-cub freedom is just freedom.[107] From the wolf cub's unbending resistance against his enslavement, Chen

[104] Li used the example of Tao Yuanming (365-427) of Jin Dynasty. Another household example is Su Shi (1037-1101) of Song Dynasty.
[105] *Wolf Totem*. 420.
[106] *Wolf Totem*. 422. Some English translation here were incorrect, for example a mistranslation of enslaving into serving. Chinese version is at 417.
[107] *Wolf Totem*. 434.

felt inspired and enlivened by the spirit of freedom.[108] But knowing that it was him who took away freedom from the wolf cub, Chen also imprisoned himself in fear: he not only imprisoned the wolf-cub, he also killed the wolf mom and seven other cubs.[109] And after the wolf cub bit into its own wound to meet a brutal end of his life, Chen was also sent to life imprisonment in the senses of a permanent guilt as "a violator of freedom," while the wolf cub finally achieved freedom in spirit in its death.[110]

The Chen and the wolf-cub dynamic, Li then suggested, illuminates the fact that freedom is preconditioned by "liberty/liberation" which requires positive struggling of the seeker of freedom. Negatively running away from Beijing to find refuge on the grassland did not bring Chen the "depoliticized" freedom he longed for his psyche.[111] It was actively capturing the wolf cub, slaughtering its family, and establishing a master-slave relationship with it, and witnessing its unbending resistance that eventually make Chen experience freedom. This, Li wrote, was a situation where liberalism's notion of freedom – for example Berlin's negative freedom – as a personal

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[108] *Wolf Totem*. 434. Textual evidence Li used was in chapter 35 of the fiction:

> "The desolation vanished from Chen's heart each time he sat down by the cub, as if he'd received a transfusion of roiling wolf blood. Sparked by the wolf cub's high-speed engine, the generator of Chen Zhen's morale now surged humming into life, making him feel enthusiastic and fulfilled."

[109] Chapter 11 in *Wolf Totem* the fiction.
[110] *Wolf Totem*. 426-7.
[111] A "depoliticized" freedom is Li's original language. See *Wolf Totem*. 416. Also see Li's description of Chen's self-exile on page 432 indicating her disapproval of his negative escape:

> "Because of his [Chen] status as a 'child of the black gang' he chooses the grassland where heaven is high and the emperor far away. Faced with unavoidable re-education, he chooses active listening. Situated in the desolate wilderness, he chooses to read. In the stultifying life of tending sheep, he finds enjoyment in raising the wolf cub."

right became useless.[112] Comparing Chen to Berlin, with both the latter's concept of negative freedom and his early experience of leaving Russia and moving to Britain to escape persecution of Nazi Germany and of the Soviet Union, Li argued that both of them started their self-exile journey to find negative freedom yet went on different directions.[113] Berlin, Li wrote, held a "standpoint (*lichang* 立场)" at the "cradle of liberalism" where political liberation had already been achieved under a liberal democracy's protection of its citizens' constitutional rights.[114] Having witnessed fascism's persecution of Jews and of mass political purges in the Soviet Union, Li wrote, Berlin's privileging of negative freedom was a calling for individuals to "try to do what is Good but also preserve the self …and avoid harming others under the banner of political ideologies."[115] Chen's self-exile to Inner Mongolian, on the other hand, was no better than a "negative resistance:" negative freedom was not possible for him unless he actively strives for liberation first.[116] Referring to Berlin's door metaphor, Li wrote, "in a state of captivity with no doors ahead and no path of retreat behind, the only choice of freedom is the positive one that breaks down doors to come out and struggle for freedom."[117] To have negative freedom, Chen must practice positive liberty first to

[112] *Wolf Totem*. 423.
[113] *Wolf Totem*. 418.
[114] *Wolf Totem*. 420-1.
[115] *Wolf Totem*. 419. I replaced Li's language of "political correctness" to "political ideologies" to avoid confusing the readers. I would say Li has a biased understanding of "political correctness" as we understand in today's Anglophone academia. She meant something more generally as ideologies that had gained constraining effect and disciplinary power via state power or societal opinions. I also changed some of the other usage of words as I see fit. Chinese version at p.414.
[116] *Wolf Totem*. 417.
[117] *Wolf Totem*. 421.

muscle through those doors. In this sense, his freedom does need liberation as a precondition.[118]

***"Post-utopian criticism"***

It may sound peculiar to the reader for Li to compare having legal right under liberal democracy to establishing dominance over others via violence and to indicate that both are "liberation," a legal /political concept vis-à-vis freedom that she associated with philosophy. Yet, this was precisely what she wanted to remind us, that is, freedom only becomes a political problem when it is threatened or violated by dominance or abuse of power. This also makes sense in the political thoughts that we are familiar with in Anglophone academia. In Athen's democracy, male adult citizens were able to exercise their political freedom because they were liberated from the household and necessities via dominating slaves and women. In social contract theories, it is for a fear of subjugation to arbitrary violence that freedom come to be flattened into a right sponsored by the state. In democratic theories drawing lessons from prosperity and decline of Athenian democracy, it was partly a caution of public power being hijacked by private interest that Arendt and Pitkin, for example, emphasized that a notion of freedom should not be separated from democratic self-government. This is not even to

[118] The reader may immediately point out that an obvious difference between Chen and Berlin's circumstances that is that one lived in a liberal democracy and hence were protected by his constitutional rights whereas the other lived under totalitarianism where negative rights in Berlin's definition were simply not possible. This is indeed true, and I think she was indicating this already in her comparison of Berlin and Chen emphasizing Berlin's "standpoint" at the "cradle of liberalism." Also, if she explicitly wrote this, obviously we would not be able to see this book published in China, and she would again put herself in political danger like in the 1990s.

mention that Li hinted multiple times that Chen was a colonizer, a Han student wanting to seek license in "the wilderness" which is in fact an indigenous land of the Mongolian people, a human who imprisoned the strongest wolf-cub from a wolf den but violently killed its entire family; and more apparent, the conflict between humans and wild wolves threading the fiction together happened in the background of Han Chinese production teams' colonial agenda to convert Mongolian grazing land into arable farmland.

How is this fable of freedom, liberation, and domination useful to Chinese people for whom Li wrote this book? More important, how is it helpful to our original quest to find political potential in Li's insistence that academia, philosophy, and freedom must be separated from politics? Let us return to the title of the Chinese version of this book, *Post-utopian Criticism*. "Post-utopian criticism" is an analytical category that Li proposed as the most fitting tool to study China with its socialist past, as an alternative to postmodernism and postcolonialism which she saw as inadequate for this purpose.[119] Li never gave a straightforward definition to what post-utopian criticism means, but she left us enough puzzle pieces to put together.

On the dedication page, Li wrote that her book was written for people from the Maoist Era, for those who "diseased, left, and refused to forget," and those who went through "humiliation and ordeal, but still held dreams at the bottom of [their] heart." This was a generation of people who grew up under a discourse that liberation had already been achieved for the proletarians, women, and the Chinese nation. They also

[119] *Wolf Totem*. 551-2.

suffered, witnessed, or participated in the violent persecution of those who fell out of political favor in the Cultural Revolution in the name of building a communist society depicted as a utopia for all. And now, those who survived are standing in the ruins of the "utopian practices" of the Maoist era, wondering aboutg a way out.[120] "Post-utopian criticism," hence, is first Li's implicit effort to give China's socialist experiments a proper reflection, an alternative to Wang Hui's nostalgia for the Maoism[121] and to sweeping dismissals of these experiences under a discourse of rights – or in her euphemistic language – to "find a respected and proper discursive platform for those explorations of utopia and experiences that have long lost its voices."[122]

Second, "post-utopian criticism" is also Li's reminder for Chinese people to not to forget lessons learned from China's socialist experiments, and to remain cautious when other "utopias" come onto stage. For example, as the state actively seeks upper hands in global capitalism, as liberal intellectuals embracing rights discourse, as the market economy advocates touting neoliberalism, and as of course, as the New Left like Wang Hui glorifying China's revolutionary legacy, they all hold out the lure of visions promising security, wealth, prosperity, or happiness. Having witnessed the Cultural Revolution where the socialist idealism became a rigid discursive regime and had driven a generation of Chinese youth fanatic, some of whom became violent victimizers of their parents, teachers, and peers – Li had good reasons to be cautious. This also

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[120] *Wolf Totem*. xv.
[121] In fact, *Utopia* (https://www.wyzxwk.com/) is also a notable internet forum where the Chinese New Left promote their ideas.
[122] *Wolf Totem*. xvii. Some translation revised. Also see Chinese version at p.9.

helps us understand her life-time refusal to identify with feminism. The "ism" in it reminded Li less of its political potential to inspire and mobilize people desiring its promised gender justice, but more of the possibility of it turning into an ideology so politicized that commands unifying thinking and identities. For example, as part of her criticism of "feminism," she argued that patriarchy should first and foremost be analyzed as a "gender institution" which served some social function in human history, whereas what she saw in "feminism" was to "politicize" patriarchy, making its objection and eradication feminism's ultimate goal and definitive command. The latter, she wrote, like "to put an ocean in a horse manger," overshadowing women's tenacious will and capacity for survival and development presented in activities other than directly resisting patriarchy. It could also confine women in an inferior identity of "the second sex," allowing subordination to men as gender identity become "a birthmark stamped by history," which for her, was for woman to commit a "self-inflicted spiritual wound (*jingshen ziqiang* 精神自戕)."[123] Her understanding of "feminism" is obviously limited and biased, but we can also see feminist theorists resonate with her criticism of identity politics where an identity of trauma becomes just another disciplinary regime.

Post-utopian criticism was Li's reminder to us that no matter how seemingly attractive a social ideal is, there comes with the danger that freedom may become its sacrifice. In his search for an idyllic freedom, Chen turned himself into a colonizer, an executioner, and an imprisoner. Similarly, many of those from Li's generation, granted

[123] *Chinese Nation*. 70-1.

that their passion for socialism and revolution was genuine, unfortunately came to believe that such idealism could only be achieved by putting those on the other side in confinement, under mistreatment, or to death. As Li wrote:

> "The destination of ideals lies on the other shore...For ages people have been setting out [for the destination,] but we saw no one who returned, nor anyone to inform us of news of the other shore. The mission of post-utopian criticism is to inform: it tells stories of what is witnessed along the way, it reveals antecedents and their actual significance, it posts landmarks and warning signs – as marks of the defeated – at the entrance to the route teeming with temptation."[124]

***"Freedom does not have the other shore"***

Li did not turn caution into a rejection of idealism, however. In fact, she emphasized that post-utopian criticism is not anti-utopia. In contrast to Chen's struggle for freedom turning into a violation of freedom, she wrote, Berlin's privilege of negative freedom over positive freedom is a classic "anti-utopian" act, which for her, is "throwing away life in order to avoid death."[125] So despite her insistence that freedom as spontaneity would necessarily be compromised when "politicized," she nevertheless does not follow Berlin to define her preferred freedom in as a negative right – as a thing, a sphere called "the personal" or "the private" – that is to be protected. For her, freedom as negative right is just another case of freedom being politicized, in the sense that as it becomes a study of political institutions, of "prisons, and what sort of freedom is the

[124] *Wolf Totem*. 555-6. Some translation revised. Also see Chinese version at p.548-9.
[125] *Wolf Totem*. 437.

most reasonable," it also distances itself from the spirit of freedom in people.[126] In her reading, both Chen and Berlin unfortunately ended up politicize freedom and ended up either violate freedom and reduce freedom's scope.[127] However, what left us with hope, she suggested, was that both of them also started their journey to find freedom, which indicate that freedom as a spirit, an energy, and a desire is always within human beings. Idealism holds out the lure of the other shore, yet "in freedom," she wrote, "there is no salvation of the other shore:"

> "There you have it, freedom is forcing doors open, setting out, [and] displacement. Once the door is forced open and the previous emplacement left behind, the person is spiritually free. At the same time, he begins the journey… [he is] always traveling, never finding rest… Freedom is like water, whereas social institutions or government systems are like different receptacles. [Freedom has] different flows in different containers, but inevitably it fills every crevice: too cold, it will freeze; too hot it will distil or evaporate…[Freedom] is always itself 'free' and spontaneous."[128]

Once Again, Li used her beautiful metaphorical language to move but also to frustrate us due to its sacrifice of lucidity, just like Socrates appealing to dreams and allegories

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[126] *Wolf Totem*. 437.
[127] *Wolf Totem*. 427, for her comment that Berlin "reduced the scope of freedom."
[128] *Wolf Totem*. 438-9. Translation revised. Original at p.433-4 of the Chinese version.

when pressed to speak more clearly about what he meant. Her water imaginary, however, took us back to one of the roots of *eleutheria* that Pitkin told us about, that is, sexuality and procreation symbolically linked to liquidity and flow.[129] Freedom may lose its vitality when politicized and institutionalized, that's why we need to be cautious about how we talk about freedom in politics, but freedom as an energy inherent in human beings is *always already there*. It also takes us back to the Dionysian – Apollonian duality that had originally animated her earliest reflection on how women's subjective consciousness can be awakened. Despite patriarchy's constrains on us and its construction of us, our Dionysian impulse of flux and drunkenness in combination with our Apollonian impulse to dream for a better world are always already there for us to access. But what we should also bear in mind, especially as Chinese women who had experienced disillusionment of the communist utopia in its women's liberation, that each destination that we have arrived finding freedom bears the danger of rigidity and hence destruction; so, it is important that we take great care that our Dionysian spirit is alive, so we are always on our way pursing freedom. As she wrote:

> "What is ahead of freedom? What lies ahead for freedom is struggling for freedom."[130]

[129] "Are freedom and liberty twins?" 531.
[130] *Wolf Totem*. 438-9. Translation revised. Original at p.433-4 of the Chinese version.

In this sense, it looks like the freedom she maintained that must separate from politics, is after all a "political" concept in the sense of its emphasis of fluidity, natality, and action.

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