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Theorizing the Female Body: Li Xiaojiang, Dai Jinhua and the Female Avant-Garde Writers

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In the roughly twenty years between the end of the Cultural Revolution and the death of Chairman Mao in 1976 and the Fourth World Conference on Women organized by the UN Commission on the Status of Women held in Beijing in 1995, with China's newly opened economic and cultural spaces allowing individuals the means to express themselves in ways not possible in the preceding fifteen years (at least), essentialized gender difference and heteronormative sexual practices once more came to the front of social awareness. In this new atmosphere of increased personal and economic freedom the "woman question" finds new life. In the same climate where young women find themselves confronted with stereotypes such as the "baigujing" career woman, and contemplating "eating the rice bowl of youth," Chinese feminists such as Dai Jinhua and Li Xiaojiang have been and continue to promote their own kinds of "corporeal feminism" as a means for women to counteract gender oppression and create their own individual identities. However, by locating female selfhood in the female body, this corporeal feminism also runs the risk of essentializing gender difference, at the same time that it forces us to ask what exactly constitutes a woman.

In order to understand how "corporeal feminism" in postsocialist China is both an outgrowth of and a response to the "woman question," it is first necessary to understand the history behind it. May Fourth intellectuals first raised the question in the 1920s, in relation to national strengthening and social reform. These intellectuals were particularly interested in the call to individualism and free love, meaning the ability to choose one's own marriage partner, and which was supported with the rhetoric of sexological discourse and eugenic theory. Women were often used as a metaphor for China, kept physically hobbled and uneducated because of Confucian proscriptions,¹ so that calls for female liberation went hand in hand with strengthening the nation. For the May Fourth writers, the image of the "Chinese Nora," after Ibsen's *A Doll's House* was translated into Chinese in 1918 by the reformer Hu Shi, was a particularly potent symbol of the "woman question," as in Lu Xun's² famous lecture given at the Beijing Women's Normal College in 1923 titled, "What Happens After Nora Leaves Home?"

As the discourse of Chinese nationalism became more and more linked with the discourse of class by way of Communist rhetoric, the "woman question" became subsumed into the discourse of the masses. The implication for women was that after 1949 when Mao Zedong declared that China had been liberated and all Chinese people were guaranteed equality under the law, it would seem as though the "woman question" had been solved. This is particularly evident in the passage of the 1950 Marriage Law, which gave women rights in cases of divorce and abuse, and outlawed child and arranged

¹ A lot of recent scholarship has been devoted to deconstructing the so-called "May Fourth Myth" and its somewhat oversimplified picture of the status of women under (Neo-)Confucianism.

² Lu Xun is the so-called "father of modern Chinese literature" and a quintessential May Fourth writer. His works criticized Confucian repression and called for both the strengthening of the Chinese nation and people as well as drew attention to the plight of women in traditional society.

marriages, as well as the formation of the All-China Women's Federation, an official party organization set up to advocate for women in domestic and workplace settings. By the time of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), on the surface it appeared that men and women were indeed equal, with men and women working side by side in factories and in the fields, and with women rising to prominent roles in government. However, this equality was still problematic, particularly in regards to gender and gender expression. During the Mao years, the idea of male-female equality started to look more and more like male-female similarity, as Party propaganda again and again depicted images of a masculinized female body hard at work alongside her male counterparts, as in the "iron maiden" or "iron women" (*tie guniang/tie nüren*), at the same time that more feminine gender expressions, such as perm'd hair styles and make-up, were denounced as "bourgeois" and "reactionary."

Once again in the 1980s and 1990s, with the growth of the market economy, as well as the "Culture Fever" (*wenhua re*), which followed in the wake of foreign ideas and goods as they flowed into China for the first time in thirty years, the situation facing women again changed dramatically. Zhang Zhen describes it well when she writes:

By the 1970s, the image of the iron maiden...with her steel shoulders and desexualized look, vital to the nation builders of the 1950s and 1960s, was already fast fading from popular memory. In the 1980s, fashion and new trends discreetly but decidedly began to reshape Chinese women's self-perception and gender awareness. By the early 1990s, however, flourishing media (popular magazines, television, film, video, karaoke, advertising, and so on) began to transmit on a much broader scale images of a new breed of young women, emphasizing fashion, sensuality, sexuality, social mobility, and the fast-moving tempo of a postsocialist consumerist society.³

Along with these new images of feminine bodies came such ideas as the "rice bowl of youth," (*qingchunfan*) the post-Mao era's response to the earlier socialist concept of the "iron rice bowl" (*tiewanfan*). Where the "iron rice bowl" refers to the certainty of work and security in old age in socialist China, the "rice bowl of youth" illustrates the extent to which consumerism and the revitalization of sexological discourse in post-Mao China had an effect particularly on young women's images of self. Zhang Zhen defines the term thusly:

The *rice bowl of youth* refers to the urban trend in which a range of new, highly paid positions have opened almost exclusively to women, as bilingual secretaries, public relations girls, and fashion models. Youth and beauty are the foremost, if not the only, prerequisites to obtaining lucrative positions, in which the new "professionals" often function as advertising fixtures with sex appeal.⁴

As more and more space opens for expressions of self and men and women alike negotiate the changing gender dynamics of an increasingly consumer-oriented and global society, once again many Chinese intellectuals find themselves attempting to untangle the

³ Zhang Zhen, "Mediating Time: The 'Rice Bowl of Youth' in Fin de Siècle Urban China," 98.

⁴ Zhang Zhen, "Mediating Time: The 'Rice Bowl of Youth' in Fin de Siècle Urban China," 94.

“woman question.” For feminists such as Li Xiaojiang and Dai Jinhua, this means the re-gendering of the female body, in response to the sexless mass body of socialist feminism. Both scholars use their own kinds of “corporeal feminism” to draw attention to how the state’s discourse of equality effectively masculinizes and neutralizes female bodies by making men the standard to which women are compared, as Lisa Rofel points out, “[P]ost-Mao feminists decry the invisibility of women’s bodies, as least those bodily experiences that are distinct from labor. They argue that this invisibility keeps women tied to an outmoded state feminism. It also makes it impossible for women to speak about new forms of devaluation they experience.”⁵ However, their corporeal feminism is not without its own traps, as it begs the question of what kind of body constitutes a woman, and how representations of that body are used both to further female agency as well as to reinscribe gender discrimination.

Li Xiaojiang began writing in the 1980s, and is considered the founder of women’s studies as an area of academic investigation in China. Her efforts led to the creation of the first women’s studies classes and the first women’s studies department 1985, as well as the Women’s Culture Museum, now housed at the Shaanxi Normal University in Xi’an. In her writing, she advocates for what Tani Barlow has called a kind of “market feminism” in which women express their agency and subjectivity through consumption, and particularly domestic goods and services. For her, the erasure of gender expression during the height of socialist China led to a denaturalization and masculinization of women’s bodies; Li argues that by participating in the new consumer economy, women can recover a sense of their feminine selves, as distinct and different from men. As Tani Barlow says:

It was not that the collective mass subject woman was wholly regrettable, in Li’s view, so much as that Maoist women had no body. The ideologically constructed [Maoist female subject] funü’s body did not menstruate, give birth, feel sexual desire, or seek out pleasure. If the positive features of funü were that it enabled individual women to achieve and affirm the right of women in positive terms, the negative features of massified women were that she could not confirm her difference from man affirmatively.⁶

According to Li, because women had been awarded liberation by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), they had not yet had to earn for it for themselves, and the need to fight for their recognition as a group distinct from men drives the need for women to express their feminine singularity in the market economy, as well as for the government to support policies which allow women the space to express themselves this way. She also pioneered the concept of the “double burden” in China: the idea that while Communism offered equality of employment outside the home to women, it did not change the older patriarchal structures which made women responsible for domestic labor inside the home, so that women shouldered twice the responsibility of men. She writes of her own experiences, in which she did not come into full knowledge of herself as a woman until the birth of her first child, and thus for her there is also a connection between reproduction and female awareness. For Li, it is in the active presentation of the female

⁵ Lisa Rofel, *Spaces of Their Own: Women’s Public Sphere in Transnational China*, 122.

⁶ Tani E. Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, 275.

body as gendered female, by purchasing makeup and wearing more feminine clothes for example, as well as the biologically female component of giving birth to a child, that a woman comes to recognize herself as a gendered individual.

For Dai Jinhua, whose writing is more rightly associated with the 1990s than Li Xiaojiang in the 1980s,⁷ her take on the female body is somewhat different, although she too advocates a kind of corporeal feminism. As a Lacanian literary critic and film studies scholar, she is interested in both postsocialist development and mass culture. She reads the social landscape of the 1990s as the “city of mirrors” which is always reflecting back on itself images which are both full of meaning and empty signifiers at the same time. Like Li Xiaojiang, Dai is critical of the state feminism of the Mao-era, and the way it denaturalized the female body by making equality synonymous with masculinity; she is also concerned with female awareness of self, particularly in regards to representations of the female body. Also, like Li, for Dai gender difference is located in the female body and heterosexually aligned. However rather than calling for women to express themselves economically as consumers and to follow a more or less maternal path to female self-awareness, Dai expresses concern both with the politics of consumption and representation, as well as with the idea that the “truth” of female existence is knowable and rooted in female experience. Rather, Dai argues that women become female when they write or otherwise represent themselves, particularly in the age of global media. In her construction, much like Li’s, gender difference is fundamental to her argument that women “excavate”⁸ themselves out of masculine culture. She is also sensitive to the problematic nature of desire and the male gaze, for in as much as women create themselves by writing, so too are they bound by the forces of the market. She writes:

Although Chinese culture in the New Era (post-1979 period) can be seen as patriarchal culture’s counterattack against the gender equality of the previous era, the emergence of women’s writing is nevertheless one of the most important new developments on the cultural scene. However, one problem is that while men’s writing openly presents its male perspective as the mainstream paradigm to be followed, women writers are always vague in the expression of their gender....Meanwhile, as a voice of gender and political resistance against the official discourse of “women’s liberation,” women’s writing stresses gender differences. Yet that stress, on the one hand, leads them into the old rut of classic gender essentialism and, on the other hand, makes it easy for the patriarchal discourse to appropriate.⁹

⁷ Although both scholars are still quite active and their work continues to adjust to the changing situation of contemporary China, the core of their respective approaches remains the same, and reflects to a certain extent the times in which they each began writing.

⁸ See Tani Barlow’s summary of Dai Jinhua: *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism*, 306-307.

⁹ Dai Jinhua, *Spaces of Their Own: Women’s Public Sphere in Transnational China*, 202-203.

That is to say that in as much as women create themselves by writing the self, the representations of the female body that they create can also be used to support the patriarchal order, or in the service of male desire and the male gaze. An example of this can be seen in the “rice bowl of youth” phenomenon mentioned above. Young women who have started to eat the rice bowl of youth both assert themselves as individuals at the same time that they reinforce gender norms and the male gaze. As Zhang Zhen reminds us, while there is no doubt that the so-called “rice bowl of youth” has brought to young women a kind of agency that had never existed before, in their ability to consume as they please and determine where and for whom they will work, it is a double-edged sword. Not only is this agency tied to both their youth and beauty, but also it reinforces the association of women’s bodies with “pink collar” and other sexualized jobs, but also requires that these eaters of the rice bowl of youth express themselves in terms of male desire. As Mayfair Yang notes:

It is not so much that the meaning of woman is expressed through sexual difference, as the meaning of woman comes *to be* sexual difference. In the sexual economy, women are invested (literally and economically) with the quality of “to-be-looked-at-ness,” and their function is to provide a contrastive background against which male subjectivity is foregrounded and brought into sharper relief. The effect of making women palpably visible is to make viewers identify with the subject-position of the male eye. In this way, male subjectivity and its power are made invisible, as in the Maoist gender order, but this invisibility is not based on an erasure or blurring of genders but depends on the hypervisibility of the female image.¹⁰

Using the “rice bowl of youth” as an example, it is possible to see how a discourse of corporeal feminism, even one as sensitive to the problems of consumption and gaze as Dai Jinhua’s, is still somewhat problematic. At the same time that it opens space for female agency and self-expression, it also reifies the sexological discourse of gender difference, and foregrounds male desire over female subjectivity.

Moreover, other ways of referring to women which have entered into popular consciousness in the 1980s and 1990s help to highlight another problematic aspect of a bodily-based feminism. For both Li and Dai, the bodies which they refer to as the basis for their respective approaches to the re-gendering of the female body are both heterosexual and reproductive bodies, and which excludes other kinds of female bodies. This is not to suggest the way that queer theory in the West discusses intersex or third sex bodies which do not fit into the male-female binary, but rather other kinds of female bodies in the Chinese context: the idea of “third-sex” or “middle-sex” women and the more recent term for career women, *baigujing*. The term “third-sex person,¹¹” (*disanxing ren*) although perhaps not as common in the contemporary vocabulary, refers to women who have achieved a high degree of education, specifically women who have earned a doctoral degree of one kind or another. These women, if not married before they

¹⁰ Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, *Spaces of Their Own: Women’s Public Sphere in Transnational China*, 50.

¹¹ From the saying, “In the world there are three kinds of people: men, women, and female PhDs.” (“世界上有三类人，男人，女人，女博士。”)

have completed their degrees, are considered unsuitable marriage partners because they “outrank” their husbands. While this idea has declined a bit in the last ten years or so, the underlying idea that a man should earn more, have a higher education, etc. is still strong enough that many women adjust or delay the course of their academic or career paths to make themselves more attractive potential partners. Similarly, there are women who refuse to adjust their pursuit of career or education; however, like other women, they accept that in doing so they decrease their marriage prospects. A similar concept, the “middle-sex” (*zhongxing*) woman presents a perfect foil to those young women who eat from the rice bowl of youth; preferring slacks to skirts, wearing little makeup and simpler hairstyles, this kind of woman is often seen in the academic or business world as well. While a middle-sex woman is not thought of as distinctly feminine, she is also not thought of as masculine either. These two types of female bodies meet many of Li’s and Dai’s respective qualifications for female-self awareness, however because their bodies do not fit neatly into the gender binary of masculine man and feminine women, and because they may or may not marry or have children, it is difficult to know exactly where to locate these women in a feminism based in/on the body.

In addition, one phenomenon that has developed more recently, that of the *baigujing* woman, also highlights the problematic nature of locating female identity in a gendered-female body. The term *baigujing* is an acronym: **b**ailing (white-collar) **g**ugan (backbone) **j**ingying (elite) meaning a strong, competitive and perhaps aggressive, professional, career-oriented woman. The term is also a bit of a pun on an older idea of a *baigujing*, the “white-boned demon” who seduces and feeds off male scholars. Jiang Qing, the wife of Chairman Mao, has been portrayed as a “white-boned demon” for her role in the Cultural Revolution. The more contemporary *baigujing*, however, is a woman who rather than being soft on the outside and strong on the inside (*wairou neigang*) as a woman should be, is strong on the outside and soft on the inside. These women, while thought of as the professional equals of men and more than competent individuals, are also thought to need re-feminization in order to reverse their “backwards” and unfeminine natures. Countless books, magazines, and even classes are offered to teach *baigujing* women how to get in touch with their feminine selves.¹² It is debatable whether or not Li Xiaojiang and Dai Jinhua would see this particular kind of refeminization as a positive step. However, while neither Li Xiaojiang’s “market feminism,” nor Dai Jinhua’s “city of mirrors,” directly address this phenomenon, there is still room in the corporeal feminisms they advocate to tackle this more recent development in the expression of Chinese women’s agency. That is to say, it is not necessarily the case that their corporeal feminism is somehow lacking, nor that it needs to otherwise “catch up” with Western feminism, especially in regards to understandings of gender expression. Shih Shu-mei, says of the situation facing post-Mao Chinese feminists, that:

Li [Xiaojiang] and others therefore emphasized self-discovery and the self-consciousness of women as women to search for the grounds of women’s

¹² A former classmate of mine at the University of Oregon, Julie Hakenbracht, covered the topic of the *baigujing* in television representations in her Master’s thesis, and I am indebted to her work for my knowledge of the subject.

subjectivity (*zhutixing*) outside the dictates of the state. Consonant with such a critique of state-sponsored women's liberation as normatively male was the emergence of a strong refeminization drive among urban women, who were freshly incorporated into the politics of femininity in global capitalism, celebrating their new-found femininity with flair. After a detour in history through anti-imperialist socialism, China in the post-Mao era has seemingly reentered the global arena and been subjected to a renewed teleological narrative of capitalist development and modernity within which Western feminism is located.¹³

Similarly, both Li and Dai argue that Chinese feminism must follow a different path and has to address different problems than Western feminism, with many scholars now looking to the development of the public sphere in China as a place for the expression of self beyond state discourse. Li writes:

In the past half-century in China, the personal has without exception been political. In everything from relations between men and women to marriage and family relations, the hand of politics was felt everywhere. It penetrated and eventually completely appropriated personal space. Since the family and private life were women's areas of influence, not only were women objects of appropriation, but under the influence and goading of ideology they easily became the appropriators too.¹⁴

As such, Li reminds us that in terms of gender awareness and gender expression in China it is not simply a case of male power structures overwriting female bodies, but that as women adjust to the rapid changes in Chinese society they are as complicit in the reification of gender stereotypes as much as they are also challenging them.

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¹³ Shih Shu-mei, "Towards an Ethics of Transnational Encounter, or 'When' Does a 'Chinese' Woman Become a 'Feminist'?" 101.

¹⁴ Li Xiaojiang, *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China*, 275.

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