

Differences and Similarities in the Discourse of Equality in Cross Cultural Academic Dialogues Europe-China

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**Xiana Sotelo,**

**"Differences and Similarities in the Discourse of Equality in Cross Cultural Academic Dialogues Europe-China"**

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Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 20.2 (2018)**

Thematic Issue ***The One Asia Foundation and its Cooperation and Peace-Making Project***

Ed. **Asunción López-Varela Azcárate**

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**Abstract:** In her paper "Differences and Similarities in the Discourse of Equality in Cross Cultural Academic Dialogues Europe-China" Xiana Sotelo provides an overall summary of the historical, political and socioeconomic context of Chinese women and their understanding of equality. The paper also embraces commonalities and nodal points between Chinese and European gender academics. In particular, it highlights the realization that cross-cultural misunderstandings are not triggered by essential differences among us, but by the ignorance of our particularities and specific contexts. The willingness to be open to the diversity of each other's realities, and to reject hegemonic discourses of sameness, paves the way to recognize that women's equality and liberation cannot be cross-culturally imposed. Retaining differences and interacting peacefully is the first step towards achieving intercultural cooperation and respect.

## Xiana SOTELO

### Differences and Similarities in the Discourse of Equality in Cross Cultural Academic Dialogues Europe-China

Since 2012, when I defended my PhD research on the topic of intersectionality (see Sotelo, *Towards Intersectionality*), I have continued to work in order to help establish cross-cultural dialogues based on respect and tolerance. It was during my dissertation writing process when I first came across the work of Xiaojing Li (*Heading Towards* and "With What") Shu-mei Shih ("Towards") and Yenna Wu ("Making Sense"). This was my first contact with the specific particularities of women's movements in China. I remember feeling absolutely stunned at my sheer ignorance of Chinese contexts (and Asian contexts in general). But more strikingly, I was utterly shocked by the harsh tone that some of those well-known Chinese scholars used, not wanting to be identified with 'Western Feminism' (bearing in mind these are both monolithic categories that need to be questioned). It was not until I fully understood Shih's claim of a pervasive "asymmetrical cosmopolitanism" (Shih, "Towards" 5) between Western and non-Western scholars and Li's plea of the right to 'regionalized voices' in approaches to equality, that I started to recognize signs of unequal landscapes of discursive relations in academic Europe-China frameworks. Due to the Anglo-European scope of my own research at the time, these reflections were put aside until now.

In order to avoid misunderstandings and misfires, it is important to reflect on what Shu-mei Shih describes as "ethics in translatability" ("Towards" 9). As she explains, it implies the willingness to be aware of specificities and particularities among different cultural and linguistic value code systems. Thus, thanks to knowledge gained during the One Asia Foundation course celebrated at Complutense University Madrid, I will try to elucidate my own personal process of realization of the dangers of a decontextualized translatability (Shih, "Towards" 7), resulting from a lack of historical knowledge about other cultural contexts.

With the intention of becoming a sort of spokesperson for many European gender scholars willing to listen to and learn about Chinese Mao and Post-Mao particular contexts with "raw openness" (see Keating), my goal is to bring into the conversation nodal points and junctions of commonalities among the works of Chinese academics, European transversalists and Intersectional gender theorists.

To trace a point of departure in this analysis, it is important to highlight that in the writings of Xiaojing Li, Shu-mei Shih or Yenna Wu, the failure to account for historical and cultural differences between Europe and China is to them the most powerful factor contributing towards opacity and "instances of incommensurability" (Shih, "Towards" 7) in cross cultural academic dialogues about equality. The famous refuser of 'Western Feminism,' Xiaojiang Li, is from my point of view, the most interesting case, being herself a pioneer who, in the 1980s, founded the discipline of Women's Studies in the city of Zhengzhou in the province of Henan. Interestingly enough, her early works rely on Western feminist classics. In *An Exploration of Women's Aesthetic Consciousness* (1989) for example, references to the Brönte sisters, Dickinson, Plath, Woolf, Oates, Beauvoir, Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar and de Lauretis can be found extensively. In another book *Women, A Distant Beautiful Legend* (1992) she cross-culturally celebrates independent and rebellious women from myths,

literature and history from many countries around the world. However, all this changed completely after her invitation to Harvard University in 1992. Due to her deep disagreement with the assumptions of 'Western feminism' presented at a conference, she became a vocal defender of "irreducible differences between Chinese Women and Western women" (Shih, "Towards" 16).

What exactly happened during the conference that infuriated Li and made her change her intellectual position so drastically? As she explains, there were three critical questions posed by a diasporic Chinese woman scholar named P that made her realize the imperialistic nature of 'Western Feminism,' imposing its specific vision of female oppression and women's liberation as universal to all women's experiences. Besides, the fact that it was a diasporic Chinese scholar speaking on behalf of Western paradigms exacerbated even more her feelings of despair. Trained and educated as a feminist in the West, this diasporic scholar had never been involved in Women Studies in China (cited in Shih, "Towards" 17). All these colliding factors explain why Li would later claim that she felt deprived of her "discursive rights" as a Chinese feminist when P asked the following questions (Li, Womanism 1) What is feminism in your understanding? 2). What is 'Western feminism?' 3) What are the differences between what you call "particularities of the Chinese Women Movement" and 'Western Feminism?' Behind these questions, Li states, she found hidden implications and contradictions: What Chinese women call *feminism* is not considered true feminism because Feminism is a universal category, and therefore there is not so-called Chinese particularity outside *feminism* (Li, Womanism 2; italics in the original). Sadly, the 'Western Feminism' that the conference participants were representing had failed to see beyond their own particular meaning of female oppression and liberation. What it can hence be inferred through the interlocutor's questions is that the 'Western Feminism' she was representing, lacked enough objective historical awareness to question its own understanding of female liberation as a fight against state patriarchy and male oppression, accommodating Chinese women specific realities.

In "Towards an Ethics of Transnational Encounters, or "When" Does a "Chinese" Woman Become a Feminist?" Shih recalls with bitter regret a time, in the summer of 1988 at an event hosted by the Chinese Ministry of Culture where she was the translator for the American Writers Delegation in Beijing. Asked about her translations of Zhang Jie, a famous woman writer in China, and whether Chinese women writers were "keen on expressing feminist intent and exposing female oppression" (Shih, "Towards" 3), Shi was unable to reply. Jie Zhang had replied with disdain that "there was no such a thing as "feminism" (*nüxing zhuyi* or *nüquan zhuyi*) in China and that the writer would not have called herself a "feminist" nor a "feminist writer" ("Towards" 3).

Failing to know and validate specific ways of understanding female oppression beyond the mainstream Western model of women liberation, the possibility of a fruitful academic exchange between Western and Chinese writers collapsed into an abyss of misunderstandings and theoretical clashes. Indeed, Shih recalls how outrageous those claims of denial of feminism were felt by the American Delegation. In addition, she bravely admits that "without acknowledging and studying the history of socialism in China, American writers and I turned the possibility of cultural translation and mutual understanding into an encounter of incommensurability" ("Towards" 7). As she further

explains, "not being the consequence of difference made essential or absolute but of ignorance of our specific histories" ("Towards" 7).

Her words serve to ground my argument that the realization that cross-cultural misunderstandings are not triggered by essential differences among us, but by the ignorance about each other's historical contexts. This awareness is instructive to help promote a global community of scholars who strive for situating knowledge in order to encourage a culture of dialogue, integration and peaceful communication.

With a special emphasis on the need for historical and social cultural awareness of China's specific conditions within Western Women Studies, in "Making Sense in Chinese "Feminism"/Women's Studies" (Wu, "Making Sense"29), Yenna Wu refers to a 1998 interview in which writers considered feminist in the West, such as Anyi Wang and Qing Dai, voiced non-feminist claims. Highlighting the fact that the Chinese government provided sexual equality to women and equal opportunity between women and men since 1950s, Qing Dai affirmed that "feminism from abroad," meaning feminisms that react to institutionalized sexism, did not resonate with Chinese reality (Wang, "Three interviews" 133-34; cited in Wu, "Making Sense" 29).

Anyi Wang also remembers being intimidated by the insistence of American writers on the topic of Chinese Women's subordination, and the degree to what Chinese women felt oppressed by men. Even popular figures from the world of culture, such as the female film director Shuqing Huang, denied calling herself a feminist on the basis that it was unsuitable for China's contemporary reality (Dai and Yang, "A Conversation" 802-803). As Wu points out, negative reactions against their non-feminist statements by Western subjects unearths a "dogmatic presumption of female oppression in China" which condescendingly presupposes China to be "backward" (Wu, "Making Sense" 29). In practice, the 'Western Feminism' that those particular American writers embodied was not able to shift their position beyond Western universalism and allow for diversity and complexity. Thus, based on Anyi Wang and Qing Dai accounts, the Western subjects they encountered, who happened to be speaking in the name of feminism, did not embrace Chinese Women in their original contexts, and nonetheless imposed their own vision of women's equality and liberation. Amid such imposing gesture, no wonder these Chinese writers rejected being associated with any strand of Western feminism and its vision of equality for women.

In this regard, Shih argues that what she calls "opacity" in cross cultural academic communication is mostly created by two main factors. On the one hand, by Western's ignorance (and diasporic Chinese's ignorance) of the historical situation of the Other; and by what she terms "asymmetric cosmopolitanism," a landscape of unequal discursive relations within the academia. In her own words: "It is not that the Western feminist has a mistaken notion of difference and similarity [...], but rather that the Western feminist enjoys the power of arbitrarily conferring difference and similarity on the non-Western woman [...] this I what I call the "operation of asymmetrical cosmopolitanism" across the West- non-West divide; that is, non-Western intellectuals need to be knowledgeable about Western cultures and languages to be considered "Cosmopolitan" while Western intellectuals can be considered "Cosmopolitan" without speaking any languages (Shih, "Towards" 5).

Expanding on the historical myopia implied in the operation of asymmetrical cosmopolitanism, Shih further states that "the Western subject strongest weapon in practicing asymmetrical cosmopolitanism is not that she/he denies the non-West access to cosmopolitanism but that has the power to assume sheer neglect or ignorance of the non-West" ("Towards" 5). That is: "With the power to arbitrate difference and similarity in such reductive terms, the Western subject can simply *ignore* that which otherwise needs to be learned with time and effort, namely, the history, experience and representation of the other woman in multiple contexts" (Shih, "Towards" 5; italics in the original).

As a gender scholar trained in a European context, I solemnly agree with Shu-mei Shih on the fact that it is due to an institutionalized academic asymmetrical cosmopolitanism that many European scholars are not aware that the journey towards Chinese liberation has taken both similar and divergent steps than those in Europe. Representing a part of 'Western Feminism' eager to know about Chinese women particularities, the question that arises is what is therefore the Chinese woman's history, experience and representation that the European subject is ignoring? To try to answer this question, let's go back to trace the history of Women's Rights in China and Europe.

Attempts to normalize the situation of women were made in China as early as the seventeenth century, when some women wrote letters thanking Manchu Emperors Shunzhi (r. 1644-1661) and Kangxi (r. 1662- 1722) for banning foot-binding. The practice remained for two more centuries, however (Wu, "A late-Qing" 174-75). In Europe, the *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and Citizen* was published by playwright, feminist and abolitionist Olympe de Gouges (Marie Gouze) in France in 1791. The question of women's rights became central to political debates in both France and Britain. The following year, Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. But it was not until the nineteenth century that political economist John Stuart Mill defended women's right to vote in the British Parliament. While the suffragettes mobilized themselves in the UK and the US, defending women's rights to vote, in China, male intellectuals were also advocating for women's rights (Chen, *A History* 246-257 & 359-363; Bao, "The Feminist" 80-90 cited in Wu, "Making Sense" 32).

In this growing momentum of revolutionary ideas in the early twentieth century, Chinese intellectuals (most of them male) began to introduce 'Western feminism,' advocating for women's rights in different spheres such marriage, reproductive rights, education, and suffrage. Indeed, ideals such as *equality between the sexes* (nannü pingdeng) and *women's liberation* (funnü jiefang) became buzzwords in the intellectual discourse of the time. Most importantly, the promise of a legal equality between men and women was articulated as a key paradigm to the Chinese Project of National and Cultural Revitalization at the beginning of the twentieth century. In the 1920s, female workers in Chinese and Japanese factories had joined labor unions to demand better working conditions. However, the movement for women's equality and advancement would halt drastically during the Sino- Japanese War and the subsequent Chinese civil war in the 1930s and 1940s.

In this brief historical mapping, more analogies than disparities can be traced among the origin of the movements for women's equality in both Europe and China. Indeed, during the period between World War I and II, these movements faded away both in Europe and in China. After the wars, in 1949, different paths were taken in the quest for legal equality. In China, the communist takeover

implemented major changes in the status of women far earlier than any European country. To elucidate these changes, it is important to bear in mind that during the Maoist Era (1949-1976), the Chinese Communist Party focused on class struggle and revolution. Thus, it used slogans such as "Men and Women are the same" (nannü dou yiyang) and "Woman can support half of the sky" (funnü neng ding banbiantian) (Wu, "Making Sense" 42) As a result, these socialist slogans constituted the intrinsic fabric of the official discourse of equality in China. In addition, the so-called New Marriage Law (1950) and the Chinese Constitution (1954) theoretically guaranteed equal rights for women in different social spheres. Women were hence encouraged to join the labor force under the policy "equal job, equal pay," a policy many European countries still fight for to this date. Remarkably early for European standards, in the early 50s, masses of Chinese women entered the public sphere to participate in production (Li, "With What"). In addition, the government supported the creation of an intermediary institution so-called *Women's Federation*, funded to protect women's economic, political, cultural and educational rights.

In this light, Wu and Li's claims for the recognition of specific cultural feminist positionings are a big step towards creating awareness of common misconceptions about Chinese women within 'Western Feminism,' contributing to counter-act Eurocentric asymmetrical cosmopolitanism. Indeed, some important concepts within 'Western Feminism' have very different meanings in Chinese. For example, the word *Liberation* (jiefang) and *Liberty* (ziyou) (Wu, "Making Sense" 42), which go hand in hand within Western discourses of equality, cannot be applied to the Chinese Post Maoist context. It is crucial that European gender scholars become aware of these nuances to promote inclusive and receptive attitudes that will allow Europeans to grasp Chinese gender reasoning. In fact, Europeans ability to listen to the regionalized voices of Chinese Scholars themselves holds the key to understand the evolution of the ideal of equality in China throughout following decades.

However, not everything functioned according to the plan for women advancement in China. As Wu clarifies, there was "a gap between the official discourse and less rosy reality (...) between state government policies and party-state practices (...) During the Maoist Era the ideal of equality before the law was treated with indifference and contempt" ("Making Sense" 33). Thus, the New Marriage Law (1950) and the amendments to the Chinese Constitution were not uniformly propagated or implemented, especially in rural areas. As a result, the double burden of the domestic work created an overwhelming "sense of exhaustion" among Chinese women (Wu, "Making Sense" 34). This explains the reason why scholars such as Shih and Wu imply that the communist revolution failed to eradicate many inequalities suffered by Chinese women. Women were told to work like men in production "but without socioeconomic support for their work at home in their productive and reproductive roles" (Wu, "Making Sense" 34).

Ironically, the discourse of equality proved to be a mixed blessing to Chinese women. Paradoxically, their additional domestic burdens were the result of sexual equality and equal opportunity of employment promoted by the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) after 1949 (Wu, "Making Sense" 39). To put this social circumstance in perspective, therefore, is crucial to be able to understand Li's claim that liberation in China does not necessarily imply liberty: "the lack of freedom is

precisely one of the important characteristics of Chinese Women Liberation" ("With What" 273). Accounting for these specific historical circumstances would make Li's statement a reasonable argument in the eyes of European gender scholars.

Another crucial factor that explains why liberation is not necessarily freedom for Chinese women can be found in the forced suppression of femininity and female characteristics during China's Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Surprisingly, for many European women studies' scholars, equality among women and men implied that women began to dress and behave like men. Xiaojiang Li ("With What" 275) describes how many girls grew up to be called tom-boys (jia xiaozi -literally fake Boy). This created a genderless sense of collective identity as the necessary condition to achieve legal equality with men. This socio-cultural dimension of Chinese liberation was thus overlooking the feminine realm for the sake of equality. Consequently, the category of women "vanished into the ocean of equality" and subjective and collective femininity was lost (Li, "With What" 268-69; cited in Wu "Making Sense" 42). In this context, Chinese scholars' negative reactions towards European feminist slogans such as "the personal is the political" (gerende ji zhengzhide) make sense now. For over 50 years, politics had intruded in the personal realm of Chinese households imposing a state driven definition of equality, making this statement far from beneficial to Chinese women. A Li states: "We would hesitate to politicize the space of the personal again, which is often the women's space" (Li, "With What" 275).

Xiaojiang Li also describes how the slogan "Sisterhood is powerful" (jiemei tuanjie jiushi Liliang) is unpopular among Chinese women on the basis that is "narrow and weak" compared to "Unity is Strength" which became a hallmark in China for decades. Furthermore, she argues that the whole society, including men, has actively participated in the promotion of women rights so calling upon a unity only among sisters, excluding men, would be ineffective and even harmful for the advancement of the discourse of equality in China (Li, "With What" 275).

With all these assumptions in mind, it can be claimed that shedding light into the development of historical differences can prevent potential cultural misunderstandings. Chinese scholars urge European gender scholars to broaden their areas of interest beyond the Eurocentric model in order to accommodate cross-cultural dialogues about equality. As Wu rightly points out, only by bringing awareness of specific situated knowledges "European scholars could be sympathetic to the Chinese women's various self-perceptions in a fructiferous and relational way" ("Making Sense" 45). Putting an emphasis on bilateral cooperation, and drawing onto Li Xiaojing work, Shu-mei Shih remembers that: "the challenge before us is how to imagine and construct a mode of transnational encounter that can be 'ethical' in the Levinasian sense of nonreductive consideration of the other, for which the responsibility of the self (be it Chinese or Western) towards the other determines the *ethicality of the relationship*" (Li, "Economic Reform" cited in Shih, "Towards" 21 italics added).

A practical application of such an ethics of transnational communication is what Xiaojiang Li calls "transpositionality" (lichang de zhihuan) and "transvaluations" (jiazhi de zhihuan) (1999). After her visit to Harvard, Li developed these concepts as pillars of a new epistemology and methodology for women's studies in China (Center for Gender Studies in Dalian University) According to her, transvaluation is the result of transpositioning oneself onto the other's historical and socio-cultural



position. Indeed, most of Li's work in the late 1990s was devoted to articulating how to position oneself in the history of the Other is to be given the opportunity to see how a given system of value production and knowledge works in a relational manner. Implied in her suggestion is the urge to cross borders along diverse and complex value-encodings in cross-cultural scenarios in order to avoid opacity and incommensurability in the discourse of Chinese equality (Shih, "Towards" 22-3).

As we have seen, for women studies scholars such as Li, Shih and Wu, the key to successful transnational communication is the ability and willingness to situate oneself in both one's position and the Other's position, whether on the plane of gender, historical contexts and discursive paradigms: "Beyond the Hegelian logic of recognition that requires affect as the underlying mode of operation in encounters of differences, a transpositional and transvaluational relationality may be the definition of what ethics means in our increasingly globalized world (...) For those in the non-West this means insisting on a nonreactive and non-affective mode of relation with the West while contesting discursive asymmetry (Shih, "Towards" 23).

To reinforce ethics in cross-cultural dialogues, Li calls for a genuine dialogue that starts with the self-criticism of both parties (Questions 52 cited in Shih, "Towards" 46) That is, to truly understand the other party, one needs to be tolerant and inclusive enough to listen patiently and to have the necessary intellectual curiosity and humility to learn about *each other* particularities. Furthermore, for the encounter to be fruitful, one needs to have "empathic understanding" by imagining oneself to be in the other party's situation" (Wu, "Making Sense" 46-7).

For the sake of empathic understanding, self-criticism and genuine conversations of both parties, Chinese scholars' repudiation of 'Western Feminism' can be claimed to objectively align with European transversalists and Intersectional scholars who, for the past decades, following the steps of women of color in the US, have been advocating for intersectional theories and policies driven by politics of partiality beyond the pretenses of universalism.

Drawing from politics of location (Rich, "Notes toward"), Nora Yuval-Davis credits the term 'transversal politics' to a group of Italian feminists who organized a meeting in 1993 in Bologna between Palestinian and Israeli women. In the aftermath of the conference, she understood transversality as a potential alternative to naturalized discourses of identity. In order to develop a model that would enable the ability to engage in dialogue across differences, Yuval-Davis proclaims the need of 'rooting' and 'shifting' as a transversal way of approaching the situatedness of the politics of location with an intersectional mind-set. To clarify this strategy of 'rooting' and 'shifting' Yuval-Davis elicits how: "The idea is that each [...] in the dialogue brings with her *rooting* in her own membership and identity but at the same time, tries to *shift* in order to put herself in a situation of exchange with women who have a different membership and identity" (*Gender* 130; emphasis in the original).

As we can see, the *shift* transversalists are calling for, implies the ability to trans-position, that is, "to put in a situation of exchange," which in itself results in a trans-validation of relational positions. As Xiaojiang Li, Yuval-Davis recognizes the willingness to locate yourself in the specific position of the

other, as the necessary condition to destabilize essentialized and stereotyped understandings of gender.

For the past two decades, the term 'intersectionality' has been widely embraced within European Women Studies Networks on the basis that it "foregrounds a richer and a more complex ontology than approaches that attempt to reduce people to one category at a time [...] In particular, it indicates that fruitful knowledge production must treat social positions as relational" (Pattynama and Phoenix, "Editorial" 187; see Sotelo, *Towards Intersectionality*). Indeed, the *European Journal of Women's Studies* 2006 edition praised intersectionality as methodology compatible with the deconstruction of fixed categories of identity, the rejection of hegemonic universalism and the investigation of dynamics of power, either material or discursive. Currently, it has become a buzzword in the field of Women/Gender Studies. Paying attention to theories that highlight gender as a phenomenon that is constructed discursively, linguistically and communicatively (see Lyke, *Feminist Studies*; Prins, "Narrative Accounts") and is historically specific, European gender scholars' vision of ethical cross-cultural encounters holds many parallelisms with those of the Chinese academics here analyzed. Looking at these similarities can provide the foundation to foster and consolidate bilateral cooperation between scholars in Europe and China.

An in-depth mapping of intersectional theories in the European academic context is beyond the scope of this analysis, although this brief cartography intends to provide a space for reflection on intersectional analysis of identity. Moreover, it aims at warning about the dangers of getting anchored in theoretical clashes that trigger misunderstandings and divisions among us. In line with this spirit, one of the goals of this paper has been to emphasize thresholds and nodal points between Chinese and European Women Studies/Gender academics. In the rooting and shifting among diverse sociocultural categories of identity, transpositionality and transvalidation are intrinsically part of the very fabric of intersectional theories of gender. This realization has the potential to create a space for the critical analysis of intersections of gender and ethnicity in diverse geopolitical positions, especially in European- Chinese academic cross-cultural encounters.

A closer look at Post Mao Chinese women particularities reveals even more commonalities between European and Chinese gender vindications of equality. Even Xiaojiang Li, in collaboration with Zhang, asserts that equality slogans in China have been hiding "an implicit male norm in which women were equal to men insofar as they were like men, dressed and behaved like men, thus "degendering and neutralizing (*Zhongxing Hua*) women" (Shih, "Towards" 10) and depriving them of their difference and femininity. Li and Zhang put it this way: "(Women 'studies) scholars now recognize that the guiding principle 'whatever men do, woman do' while inspirational, in fact it helped to conceal a male standard for women's equality [...] A male standard, however only creates an illusion of equality, since women have no distinct gender identity within the context of so-called liberation [...] The first task of Women's liberation is to allow women themselves to discover who they are [...] and how much they have been influenced by distorted, patriarchal images of their gender" ("Creating a Space" 146 cited in Shih, "Towards" 10).

Although Xiaojiang Li would refuse such an analogy, throughout late 90s and early twentieth century, her initial visceral repudiation of 'Western Feminism' has progressively developed a tone that undoubtedly has similarities with European gender discourses of equality. As we have seen, it is just not because transpositionality and transvalidations are defining features of European intersectional analysis of identity. They can also be found in the growing focus on the necessity of "self-discovery, self-consciousness" and women subjectivity (zhutixing) (Shih, "Towards" 11).

In addition, a new rhetoric within the discourse of equality subtly articulates criticism to the Chinese government. As Shih explains, this resistance and criticism to state patriarchy is not driven by "obvious sexism, as in the West, but because its mode of liberating Chinese women ultimately prevented that liberation from being complete" ("Towards"10). In other words, if women were "liberated or freed from" gender under Maoism, now they are longing to be able to reconnect with the specificities of the female gender, "women's collective consciousness" (nǚxing quanti yishi) and women's consciousness as subjects (nǚxing zhuti yishi) (Li, *Woman* 167). In these regards, European gender scholars must acknowledge the fact that contemporary Chinese discourses of equality are not focused on the acquisition of legal equality between women and men but on "the process of awakening female subjectivity and self-worth" (Li, "Economic Reform" 380-82 cited in Shih "Towards" 14).

At this juncture, to demand the right to embrace women sexual and biological differences as the root of female identity and power, is the current trend pursued by gender scholars such as Anyi Wang, who are currently counteracting hegemonic discourses of sameness and equality (Songs 160-78). This is exactly what 'Western Feminists' like Elaine Showalter described as the "female phase" preceding the "feminist stage," and what Kristeva termed "second generation of feminists" that theorize gender in nonessentialists and non-reified ways. In this regard Yenna Wu formulates that "despite many Chinese intellectuals' reluctance to use the term feminism, there is no denying that 'feminism' broadly defined- has again been developed in contemporary China" (Wu, "Making Sense" 37).

Having arrived therefore to a theoretical middle ground, European and Chinese scholars can start a peaceful dialogue of mutual understandings of equality that fosters co-sensing and co-creating together. Indeed, to make historical awareness the focal point of critical analysis of gender profoundly alters the concept of equality. In addition, highlighting common areas is also a necessary step towards narrowing the theoretical and methodological gap that apparently separates feminists in China and Europe. In this respect, intersectional theories of identity hold the promise of a solid ethical encounter. Like Wu, I am optimistic about conversations and inquiring conceivably happening in this framework of exchange, mutuality and equity, rather than being mediated by the hegemony of universalistic Eurocentric discourses. Even the famous refuser of Western paradigms, Xiaojing Li, resonates with ethics that stretch into intersectional narratives that call for the crossing on situated differences: "The starting point of a dialogue derives from 'differences' while the ongoing process of a dialogue should clarify these 'differences.' The goal of a dialogue has in fact never been the sort of deceptive, utopian 'Grand Unity' which we have eulogized. Rather, the goal is for both parties to understand 'differences'

in order to make the corresponding adjustments and coexist peacefully. 'Retaining differences' may very well be the most direct goal of a dialogue" (Questions 53 cited in Wu, "Making Sense" 46).

Retaining differences and interacting peacefully is the first step towards achieving academic cross-cultural encounters based on mutual respect and cooperation. As concluding thoughts, and in alliance with One Asia Foundation's core values and mission, this paper has intended to throw light into the need to exercise tolerance in complexity and to avoid theoretical and conceptual clashes in European-Chinese academic circles. Furthermore, it is committed to a process of dynamic, transformative and historical situated approaches to equality in cross-cultural contexts. The recognition of intersectional, regionalized narratives of equality provides a space for a solid ground that guarantees ethical transnational communication. To this end, giving teachers the opportunity to take part in academic platforms that promote research, networking and academic exchanges from different parts of Europe and Asia, nurtures new ways of creating peaceful co-existence in the world.

As it has been briefly mapped out, gender is a major structuring force and principle across cultures, but it is by no means a monolithic category. On the contrary, within discourses of equality, as we have seen, similarities and differences are constantly in motion and under socio-cultural negotiations. The aim of One Asia Community is to make the similarities and differences known across the world in order to inspire a vision and a culture of dialogue and peace. This shift in awareness, both acknowledging historical particularities and sensing those similarities than are bigger than our differences, requires us to tap into a deeper level of our humanity in which "the world of egos" disappears and sisters and brothers coexist peacefully, working together to achieve communal goals, such as equality and liberation for all.

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