THE LEGACY OF THE MAOIST GENDER PROJECT
IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

by

Xin Huang

M.A., Institute of Social Studies, 2002

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in
The Faculty of Graduate Studies
(Women’s and Gender Studies)
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Vancouver)
April 2010

©Xin Huang, 2010
ABSTRACT

This study examines various ways in which the Maoist gender project manifests itself in Chinese women’s lives today, as conveyed by a range of women currently living in Beijing. Oral histories were collected from fifteen women, four of whom were selected for in-depth analysis using a method informed by narrative studies and feminist approaches to women’s auto/bio/graphy. Judith Butler’s ideas on gender as performative serve as a framework to examine these individual negotiations with changing models of femininity, and the first chapter presents a critical account of the limits and applicability of her theory in this specific transnational context. The four following chapters provide detailed, contextualized analysis of these particular performances of gender in relation to the Maoist model woman (funū, or socialist labourer), whose presence remains in the shadow of the currently preferred nāxing (feminine, consumer-oriented woman), while the even older pre-revolutionary devoted wife and mother remains in the background. Their gender performances bring out the intersections of physical embodiment and the construction of subjectivity through discourse. Analysis of the content of each story is complemented by a discussion of the structure and language of their narratives, including an innovative interviewing method of “telling and retelling”. Hybrid language—various mixtures of official dialect, regional dialects, and imported terms—is a feature that becomes prominent, conveying changing performances of being a woman, as do the visual representations (photographs, artwork) that some of them shared. The analysis reveals how women individually appropriate, resist or synthesize the ideologically motivated models proposed by government and media, from China and from the West. The concept of gender
performance as a “project” is introduced to convey both conscious manipulation at the collective level, and personal agency for individuals. This research shows that the Maoist legacy still manifests itself in various ways in the lives of women with different social locations and sexual orientations, and is one of the resources for women to formulate strategies for gender subversion. The persistent existence of this legacy sheds light on how to formulate subversive strategies to challenge the narrowly defined, class-encoded, normative gender model of the post-Mao nüxing, and create a more diverse and democratic gender landscape in China.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................. ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS ................................................................................................................. iv
LIST OF TABLES ......................................................................................................................... vi
LIST OF FIGURES ...................................................................................................................... vii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................... ix

Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 1
  Funü, nüxing, and the Maoist gender project ................................................................. 3
  Feminist studies of the Maoist gender project ............................................................. 5
  Research data ....................................................................................................................... 9
  Research summary ............................................................................................................... 13

Chapter 1 Theoretical Approach and Methodology ............................................................... 20
  The conceptualization of gender in China ................................................................. 20
  “Western theory” and “Chinese experience” .............................................................. 28
  Judith Butler and the theory of gender performativity ............................................... 37
  Gender (as) project ............................................................................................................. 57
  Feminism and narrative studies ..................................................................................... 60
  A critical and self-reflective approach ........................................................................... 73

Chapter 2 Born into the Mao Era: Lin’s Life Story ............................................................... 77
  Context ................................................................................................................................. 78
  Lin’s life story ...................................................................................................................... 88
  The storytelling ................................................................................................................... 115
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 122

Chapter 3 Desire and Shame: Dong’s Life Story ................................................................. 127
  Context ................................................................................................................................. 129
  Dong’s life story .................................................................................................................. 138
  The narration: dialect as the vehicle for a story of desire ............................................. 163
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 170

Chapter 4 I am a Rock: Shitou’s Life Story ......................................................................... 173
  Context: female same-sex desire in China ................................................................. 174
  Shitou’s life story ............................................................................................................... 177
  The storytelling ................................................................................................................... 207
  Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 220

Chapter 5 The Uninhabitable Place of the Nüxing: Anne’s Life Story ............................. 224
  Context: economic reform and transnational Chinese identities ............................... 225
  Anne’s life story .................................................................................................................. 233
The storytelling: hybrid language and the cosmopolitan Chinese woman
Conclusion
The Maoist gender project and its legacy
Gender as project, situated subversion, and diverse strategies
Feminist research and alternative story-telling
Bibliography
Appendix I Participant Information
Appendix II Checklist and Questionnaire (English and Chinese)
Appendix III University Behaviour Research Ethics Certificate of Approval
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Lin’s description of her Nainai and her mother ................................................................. 121
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Lin………………………………………………………………………………………………………..88
Figure 2 See the hairstyles of the women on the right and left……………………………………………….113
Figure 3 Dong at the restaurant where she works………………………………………………………………138
Figure 4 PLA sneakers;…………………………………………………………………………………………143
Figure 5 White tennis sneaker……………………………………………………………………………………143
Figure 6 The PLA uniform fashion………………………………………………………………………………144
Figure 7 The PLA uniform fashion………………………………………………………………………………144
Figure 8 Rural migrant workers in 2008,………………………………………………………………………..146
Figure 9 Dulong women (独龙族) in 2006………………………………………………………………………146
Figure 10 Shitou (seated) and her partner Mingming…………………………………………………………177
Figure 11 Shitou, Photo with Mother, 1997 ………………………………………………………………………184
Figure 12 Shitou, Weapon Series #5, 1997……………………………………………………………………..186
Figure 13 Shitou, Weapon Series #6, 1997……………………………………………………………………..186
Figure 14 Shitou, Weapon Series #7, 1997……………………………………………………………………..186
Figure 15 Revolutionary Model Opera (Ballet Version) “Red Detachment of Women”…..187
Figure 16 Posters from the Cultural Revolution era…………………………………………………………….187
Figure 17 Shitou, Girlfriend-reincarnation, 1993 ……………………………………………………………….191
Figure 18 Shitou, Girlfriend, 1997……………………………………………………………………………………192
Figure 19 Buddha Butterfly, from Shitou, “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly Series”, 2000 ..... 195
Figure 20 Cupid Butterfly, from Shitou, “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly Series”, 2000 ..... 195
Figure 21 Zhuangzi Dream Butterfly, from Shitou, “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly Series”, 2000
......................................................................................................................................................... 195
Figure 22 Shitou, “Together Series” No. 1, 2001 ............................................................................ 196
Figure 23 Shitou, “Together Series”, No. 5, 2001 ............................................................................ 196
Figure 24 A Photograph of Chunchun, from Shitou, “Girlfriend Series”, 1997 ................ 198
Figure 25 Childhood Friend, from Shitou, “Girlfriend Series”, 1997 ................................. 198
Figure 26 Karaoke, from Shitou, “Old Advertisement Series”, 2006............................... 199
Figure 27 Commemorate, from Shitou, “Old Advertisement Series”, 2006.................. 199
Figure 28 Shitou, “Together Series” No. 4, 2002 ................................................................. 202
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people told me that doing a PhD is a long and lonely journey. I have been blessed with much loving, caring company on my way, people who have made this a journey full of joy, inspiration, excitement, and gratitude.

Dr. Valerie Raoul, whom I met when I started my PhD program at UBC, has been accompanying me throughout this journey, nourishing me for my intellectual and personal growth with her generous and constant commitment, volunteering to mentor me through even after her retirement. Through her intellectual guidance, and dedication, I have learned to be a feminist scholar and teacher. I have benefited tremendously from her critical and challenging comments that always push me to think further, as well as her patient, meticulous reading of my dissertation. As I came to Canada as an international student, Valerie also generously provided me a “home away from home”, inviting me to join her family on all kinds of special occasions; those are my most treasured memories of my years in Vancouver.

I would also like to thank Dr. Tim Cheek, who has been such a great pleasure to work for and with. He provided me with a democratic and respectful, challenging but supportive intellectual environment. I deeply appreciate how he trusts and encourages me to explore and find out my own way, free to pursue my own answers. He is also a caring and nourishing mentor, who constantly introduces me to new people, providing me with valuable comments, thoughtful advice, and endless encouragement, making sure I have every opportunity to better my academic and social life. I am deeply touched by Dr. Tim Cheek’s caring for his students,
even reading my chapters while he was briefly in hospital.

I thank Dr. Amy Hanser for being very kind and supportive throughout this process, reading through my draft during her maternity leave. Her many important and critical questions helped shape the contours of this dissertation, and the many important and most up-to-date literature sources she provided broadened the depth and scale of my inquiry.

I have benefitted greatly from a number of scholars who have given me comments, thoughts, and inspiring ideas during discussions and conference presentations of versions of the dissertation chapters, and Women’s Studies professors at the University of British Columbia have all been very supportive. Among them, I would like to specially thank Dr. Sneja Gunew and Dr. Yang Jie for reading the draft of one of my chapters and giving me constructive comments.

I have also benefited greatly from participating in the peer review “China Study Group” of faculty and graduate students at UBC, where I presented some chapters of this dissertation. They provided an inspirational and supportive intellectual community, and became an important part of my graduate studies life. I thank all the members of the China Study Group; their work has greatly inspired my own, and their comments on my dissertation improved it enormously.

I am grateful also to the University of British Columbia, for the scholarship that funded part of my PhD Studies, and for the opportunity to teach several courses, which supported and enhanced my research. Many thanks to Dr. Wendy Frisby, Dr. Tim Cheek, Dr. Valerie Raoul, Dr. Miu Chung Yuan, and Dr. Sneja Gunew, who have given me Research Assistant fellowships that broadened my understanding, made me a better researcher, and allowed me to complete my PhD.

I want to thank the fifteen research participants of this project. Some of them remain
anonymous, but all generously shared their life stories, many of which were very intimate. I thank them for trusting me to retell their stories here. I also want to thank many friends, and friends of friends, who helped and supported me during my fieldwork in Beijing in 2006.

I want to thank my fellow graduate students at the Women’s and Gender Studies Centre and members of Wangshe at UBC (our China Studies graduate students club), for their friendship, for many invigorating conversations, and entertaining get-togethers. I thank the members of the dissertation writing group in Women’s and Gender Studies at UBC, for sharing issues and strategies, and for their emotional support.

I want specially to thank Naomi Lloyd for her treasured friendship, intellectual stimulation, and for her critical comments on my work.

My deepest gratitude also goes to my partner, Timothy Bult, for his love and unconditional support for my study, and for his quiet companionship and lively conversation. I also want to thank Timothy for being my first reader, with straightforward comments and up-front challenges.

Lastly, I want to thank my mother, Ma Zhengfang, who is an extraordinary Maoist funü, who motivates me to always go further. It is because of the inspiration and legacy she passed on to me that I chose to write this dissertation about the Maoist gender legacy. I dedicate this dissertation to her, with deepest love and respect.
Introduction

In 2007 Zhang Xiaomei,1 a member of the tenth National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), initiated a motion to the National People's Congress (NPC) proposing to change the Chinese name for International Women’s Day (funü jie). She suggested replacing the term used for “women” (funü), which has strong associations with images of the revolutionary women workers in the Mao era, by nüxing (literally female sex/gender), which has positive associations of femininity.2 For her and many others, the latter conveys a more “modern” idea of what women should be like, one that contemporary urban women can identify with (Zhang 2007). In spite of wide support from other members of the CPPCC, many of them members of the cultural and business elites, this proposal was unsuccessful. It has been repeated each year since then with the same result.

Zhang’s motion echoes a debate which first took place in the early 1980s,3 over the claim of fulian (the All China Women’s Federation) to represent all Chinese women. It reflects widespread contestation since the end of the Mao era over the definition of women as funü, and rejection of the Maoist version of women’s liberation. The Maoist state defined funü as a political category based on the value of women as socialist labourers, and deliberately prioritized those from the proletarian peasant or working classes. Since the Maoist funü constituted a category based not only on gender but also on class, the proposal to rename Women’s Day concerns not only terminology - whether women in general should be referred to as funü or nüxing (or nüren, literally female person) - but which class of women can claim to represent
“Chinese women”, and what kind of woman now occupies the position of the norm, embodying the current ideal woman. This debate also concerns who has the right to demarcate or claim membership in the category of “women”, and who may lose her sense of place and value in a revised gender/class order. Chinese women are being asked to reposition themselves in a new “framework of intelligibility”, to use Judith Butler’s term (1990). Zhang’s repudiation of the image of the state-defined, politically motivated funü exemplifies an attitude shared by many educated post-Mao urban women. The preference for nüxing reflects a desire for de-politicization and de-proletarianisation, and for a more positive evaluation and visibility of sexual difference in the definition of “women”. The proposed change is part of a market-oriented ideological agenda which is no more hidden than that of the Mao era. In contrast to the prestige previously accorded peasants and workers, it values relatively affluent middle-class women who are construed as consumers rather than producers of products, especially those associated with femininity and domesticity.

This debate over renaming Women’s Day raises questions about how we understand and assess the Maoist gender legacy in today’s China. Are the Maoist gender project and its product, funü, anachronistic, and will the signifier funü die out for lack of a referent? Or, as the on-going celebration of Women’s Day as funü jie reminds us, does the shadow of the Maoist gender ideology still haunt even young Chinese women’s lives today, for better or for worse? Is the funü still an undeniable/inerasable part of who Chinese women are, or want to be? For women in China today, is funü the Other within, or an abjected but constitutive outsider? How can we recognize this Other and assess its political significance? What kind of possibilities are opened up or foreclosed in the abjection or re-evaluation of the Maoist conceptualization of femininity?
These questions are the focus of this study, which will examine the legacy of what I call the “Maoist gender project” in contemporary China, as experienced, evaluated, and performed by a range of women living in Beijing today. The emphasis on “legacy” focuses on how the Maoist gender project was and is experienced and performed or contested by particular women, remembered or forgotten in their lives, and highlighted or buried in their narratives. By recording the oral life stories of fifteen women of different ages and backgrounds, and looking at visual materials that illustrate their stories, I hoped to discover more about how the Maoist gender project constructed the category of funü, in relation to individual women’s lives, and to assess whether it is still relevant to gender construction in China today. These personal accounts reflect tensions between the on-going effects of the Maoist gender project and the more cosmopolitan discourses on gender roles and images that have emerged since the end of the Mao era.

**Funü, nüxing, and the Maoist gender project**

In this dissertation, two Chinese terms for “women, funü (妇女, women) and nüxing (女性, female sex), are central to my analysis. My use of these two terms derives from Tani Barlow’s (1991, 2004) analysis of the genealogy of various terms referring to “women” in twentieth-century China. Barlow demonstrates that both funü (妇女) and nüxing (女性) have undergone a process of “re-signification” over time. Originally the term “funü designated the collectivity of kinswomen in the semiotics of Confucian family doctrine. It was later appropriated by the Chinese Communist Party to signify women as political subjects in the communist party-state.
The term *nüxing (女性)* operates in the framework of the western-inspired biologically differentiated male/female binary, and was initially invoked in the 1920s as a discursive sign and a subject position in the context of anti-Confucian discourse. It was taken up again in post-Mao gender discourse as a political tool to resist the state inscription of *funü* in the 1980s, and to imagine a supposedly less politicized (more individual, feminine, and consumer-oriented) “modern” Chinese woman.

The Maoist re-signification of *funü* was not just a linguistic event. It was part of what I call “the Maoist gender project” (to be examined in Chapter 2) which prescribed, institutionalized, and enforced the performance of a range of new gender practices for women, at both the discursive and material levels, through symbolic representations and public policies. It involved various endeavors that reconfigured and regulated gender relations and roles, as well as women’s behavior and appearance. While the Maoist gender project also involved the reconfiguration of masculinity, the focus here will be on the efforts to redefine Chinese women as *funü*. 4

The socialist *funü* represented a new model of revolutionary proletarian womanhood, prioritizing women’s identity as socialist labourers rather than as wives and mothers, and their subaltern class identity over gender. However, rather than being a singular, coherent, and fixed project, the Maoist reconfiguration of femininity contained heterogeneous elements, often competing and conflicting with each other, and it changed over time (as explained in Chapter 1). While the *funü* model occupied the normative position, its existence depended on the repudiation of its constitutive other, the earlier gender models (especially the *jiatingfunü* or housewife) that did not disappear but persisted in the margins. Their survival, and necessary contribution to the
emergence of the funü, constantly disrupted and contested the centrality of the Maoist woman-as-worker. Individual women had different levels of identification with these competing gender models, as reflected in the diverse and innovative ways of adapting and contesting them illustrated by the stories to be examined here.

Since Mao’s death, the Maoist definition of “women” and women’s liberation have been under attack by post-Mao Chinese feminists influenced by gender discourses that affirm gender difference. A new gender model for women, the nüxing, has replaced the hegemonic position of the Maoist funü. The post-Mao nüxing purports to present an essentialized “natural”, “feminine” image, associated with younger, educated, urban women from the emerging middle class, whose performance of being a woman is in marked contrast to the socialist ideal.

**Feminist studies of the Maoist gender project**

Feminists in China and abroad have mixed and sometimes contradictory views on the Maoist concept of women’s liberation and its effects on women’s lives. Many feminist analyses (for instance, Andors 1983; Johnson 1983; Stacey 1983; Wolf 1985) argue that the Maoist agenda for the liberation of women in China was incomplete or postponed. The Party had not been self-reflective and critical towards the patriarchal influences that shaped the revolutionaries, and the gender equality legislated at the constitutional level had not automatically translated into gender equality in the areas of employment, wages, education, and political participation as well as family life (Croll 1978, Young 1988). Many of the patriarchal beliefs and practices that underlay gender inequality in traditional Chinese society survived in the lived reality of the Mao era. The
Confucian patriarchal regime based on gender hierarchy still operated at different levels of public and private lives, and gendered divisions of labor persisted at work and at home. Chinese women were not liberated from patriarchy, but carried a “double burden” (Li 1989) or experienced what Marilyn Young calls “socialist androgyny”: they were expected to behave and work like men, remaining genderless and sexually invisible in public, while reverting to the role of chaste, devoted wife and selfless mother in private (Young 1989:236), and were continuously subordinated to the Communist state.

Some scholars present a more nuanced account that attends to the diverse relationships various categories of women had with the model proposed by Maoist discourse, rather than treating “Chinese women” as a singular category. For instance, Rofel’s (1999) research on female workers focused on the range of relations between different political cohorts and China’s modernity projects, and demonstrates how some women already working outside the home genuinely felt “liberated” by the Maoist gender ideology. Tina Mai Chen (2004a) has demonstrated that although the socialist rhetoric of female model workers limited alternative female subjectivities, it also enabled some women to exercise a situated agency in envisioning alternatives. Gao Xiaoxian and Ma Yuanxi’s (2006) research on the “labour models” (laodongmofan) shows how rural women were empowered by the socialist state’s policies for women’s emancipation to challenge gender and class hierarchies, while simultaneously remaining constrained by existing gender norms and practices of gender inequality. Jin Yihong’s (2006) study of the “Iron Girl” of the Mao era also shows that, compared to urban women, many rural members of the “Iron Girl” teams experienced a greater sense of empowerment, because the “Iron Girl” campaign provided official sanction for them to challenge gender constraints and
oppression in rural life. Some analysts also make a positive evaluation of the impact of the Maoist gender project in other women’s lives, for many well-educated young urban women (for example, Chen 2004a; Lin 2006). In Some of Us, Zhong and others (2001) suggest that the Maoist gender project both empowered and subjugated Chinese women. They were empowered by legalized gender equality and equal participation in social production, but were also subjugated by the patriarchal and authoritarian Communist party. Harriet Evans (2008) also shows that many urban women born in the 1950s enjoyed access to a range of intellectual, social and travel opportunities that offered them self-fulfillment beyond the cultural horizons of their mothers.

Maoist attempts to modify ideas of femininity also constitute a central theme in many feminist analyses. The new roles, social positions, and images ascribed to Maoist women disputed conventional perceptions of proper femininity, many aspects of which were now regarded as feudal, petit-bourgeois attributes (Yang 1999). Women were encouraged to participate in social production, especially in those occupations and tasks that were traditionally perceived as belonging to men. The slogan ‘Women hold up half the sky’ resonates with the pervasive images of women as model workers (Chen 2004), ‘Iron-Girls’ (Jin 2006), militant fighters, or political activists in official propaganda (Evans 1999). This remodeling of femininity has been referred to as the “gender neutral representation” of women (Honig 2002), or the “masculinization of Chinese women” (Yang 1999, Cui 2003; Dai 1995; Li et al 1988; Zhang 2003; Meng 1993). These critics argue that the Maoist gender project promoted gender “sameness”, claiming that women should be equal to men, and therefore like men, entailing the masculinization of society.
While the post-Mao nüxing discourse re-asserting gender difference and valuing femininity is seen by some as a rejection of that aspect of Maoist gender discourse, other scholars point out that both Maoist and post-Mao discourses on gender share some essentialized assumptions of sex-based difference and hierarchy; their studies demonstrate various forms of continuity between gender constructions in the two eras, and the effects of the shifting and conflicting expectations on Chinese women (Rofel 1999; Brownell 1995; Ngai 2005, Hanser 2008, Evans 1997, 2008). For instance, Evans (1997) shows that “naturalized” gender difference persisted through the Mao and post-Mao eras. Roberts’ studies (2004a; 2004b) of the key cultural works of the Cultural Revolution period, the Yangbanxi (the Revolutionary model works or operas), suggest that the Maoist discourse on women displays significant cultural continuity with elements of both pre-Mao and post-Mao Chinese society.

A wide range of perspectives has been taken in studies of women in the PRC, especially in the areas of anthropology and sociology, history, literature and film studies. Some researchers focus on the Mao era (Chen 2003a; 2003b, Gao 2006, Jin at al 2006, Manning 2006a, 2006b, Zhong et al 2001), while others direct their attention to gender and sexuality in the post-Mao era (Honig 1988; Rofel 1999, 2007; Shea 2005; Yang 1999). Attention has been paid to representations of gender difference in the Mao era in posters and pictures (Chen 2003b; Evans et al 1999), theater (Meng 1993; Roberts 2004a; 2004b), film and television (Chow 1995; Dai 1995, 2002; Shih 1998; Tang 2003), as well as literature (for instance, Lu 1993; Zhang 2003). There are also memoirs written by women who lived through the Mao era that provide valuable accounts of women’s experiences and reflections on the Maoist gender project, such as Jung Chang (1991), Anchee Min (1994), and Rae Yang (1998). While these personal histories are
written by members of an educated elite who can write and publish in English, ordinary women’s experience and voices also increasingly contributed to the representation and discussion of gender. Especially since 1978, with China’s open door policy, fieldwork in China has become increasingly open to foreign scholars. Many of the anthropological and sociological studies mentioned above are based on extensive fieldwork involving participatory research, observations, and interviews with a wide range of Chinese women from different backgrounds.

My study of the Maoist gender legacy in contemporary China builds upon and hopes to extend the above scholarly works, by listening to ordinary women’s own oral narratives about their lives, which span a series of changing models of what it means to be, and to appear to be, a woman, with a specific focus on how the Maoist gender legacy is manifested in women’s lives today and narratives about them. In examining four accounts in detail, I will be employing and questioning feminist theories of gender as performance and female subjectivity, as well as feminist approaches to the study of women’s life stories, in the context of their telling.

**Research data**

In this research, rather than seeking similarities in the stories told, my focus is on diversity. I intended to obtain a wide range of individual stories and to seek to understand them through their singularity and uniqueness. Applying feminist qualitative research methods and narrative analysis, I recorded in-depth oral life stories with fifteen Chinese women living in Beijing, representing a range of backgrounds. They include life stories from women of varying ages (from their late twenties to fifties), from both urban and rural settings, well-educated and less
educated. Another consideration in the selection of participants was a desire to include women with different types of family situation, sexual orientation, and levels of ability, and some with experience of living abroad (see Appendix I for information on participants). An advantage of choosing Beijing as the major site for interviewing is that, as the biggest destination for relocation within China, it is an ideal place to find women with different backgrounds and from various regions.

I approached the women through a snowballing method, via my acquaintances and personal network. Some of the participants are my friends or former colleagues, and some are friends or acquaintances of them. Four rural migrant workers were recruited from a restaurant owned by a female friend of mine, where they worked, and one who worked as a house cleaner was introduced by a friend. In a way, I was not a complete stranger to any of the participants, in the sense that at least someone they have a relatively long-term relationship with knew about me. I met most of the participants more than once, first to introduce myself, obtain consent and sort out logistics, and then to conduct the interview at the second meeting. I also arranged third meetings with some of the participants to view and talk about photos they provided. Most of the interviews lasted for about two hours, with the longest one being four hours long. Most were conducted at the participants’ homes; for the rural migrant workers, one interview was at the apartment where I stayed during my visit, and the rest were in the office of the restaurant.

Several elements provided a relatively trustworthy and safe environment for my participants to tell their life stories: my credibility as a friend (of a friend), a former colleague, or an acquaintance (of an acquaintance); my non-involvement with their current lives, as someone who does not live there but was just visiting; and the anonymity not only guaranteed on the
consent form but also further secured by that fact that I will write about this study in English rather than in Chinese. My gender identity as a woman also assured some shared experiences and understandings about life as a woman, even though my heterosexual orientation did cause some doubt in my interview with Shitou, a lesbian artist, as discussed in Chapter 4. As a Chinese woman who lived in Beijing for twenty years, I share with most of the participants a knowledge of Chinese history and society in general, as well as culture and language (including in some cases a common dialect or the ability to speak English), and some personal experiences such as having lived abroad. These factors enabled some of my participants to tell me about more private issues, embarrassing and even painful moments, difficulties in life, unconventional thoughts and feelings, and to share their dreams and desires.

For fourteen out of the fifteen participants (all except Shitou, whose story is discussed in Chapter 4), this was the first time they had been interviewed by a researcher and invited to tell their life story. Each of them was motivated by their own reasons. Five of them asked me for a copy of the digital recording of their interviews. Two who are old friends of mine asked me to give them a copy of the recording of the interviews, as they wanted their daughters to hear them when the time is right. Shitou, a lesbian activist and artist, also requested a copy of her interview, and I made an agreement with her that I would translate the Chapter on her into Chinese for her review, and maybe for publication in China. Feng, a rural migrant worker who worked as a freelance house cleaner, told me that in her six years of working in Beijing, this was the first time someone actually listened to her and cared to learn about her life. Anne, whose story is discussed in Chapter 5, asked me if she could commission me to write her biography, as she did
not have time to write it herself, but felt the desire to narrate her life in a more detailed form than our four-hour interview.

Rather than being passive research subjects, most participants actively engaged in this act of self-representation and took it as an opportunity to reflect on their experience, communicate with others, and perform as agents in their lives. One participant told me in an e-mail one year after the interview that she was finally able to better answer one of the questions I had asked her. My various connections with these participants also made me an active participant engaged in the narrative process rather than a detached and passive audience for the storytelling. My research goal of exploring alternative ways of telling women’s lives shaped the choice of topic, language, and structure of their narratives. The interviewing, especially in the second part when I invited the participants to recount their lives again, with a focus on gender-related topics (see the discussion of methodology in Chapter 1) was an interactive process. The interviews became a collaborative project between the researcher and the participants, and the reflection of this process can be found in the discussion of the storytelling in each chapter.

The core of the dissertation is composed of in-depth analysis of four women’s life stories: the first is an urban woman in her fifties who lived through the Mao era; the second a rural-born migrant woman born in the post-Mao era; the third a middle-aged lesbian artist who has traveled abroad; and the last a business woman in her thirties with experience of living abroad. The stories collected from eleven other women, all fascinating in their own way, provide a broader base for generalization or comparison, and contribute indirectly to the discussion. I chose these four women’s stories for their distinct social locations, and the different insights they bring to my understanding of the diverse aspects of gender constructions in the Maoist and post-Mao eras, as
well as their unique strategies of gender subversion and ways of conveying their experiences. Their stories demonstrate the divergent ways in which the Maoist gender legacy is manifested and negotiated in contemporary China. Each chapter provides a contextualized analysis of these women’s performances of gender in relation to the Maoist gender legacy, paying attention to their unique circumstances and social locations. Analysis of the content of their stories is complemented by a discussion of the structure and language of their narratives, as well as of methodological issues raised in the interviewing and interpretation process.

**Research summary**

The first chapter outlines the theoretical framework that guides the analysis, and defines key concepts. It starts with a historical review of the changing conception of gender in China, followed by a reflection on the debate on using “Western” theory to study “Chinese experience”. It reflects on how to formulate a critical and self-reflective feminist approach to both the “theory” and the research “subject”, which attends to difference and intersectionality on the one hand, and engages with the hybridity and fluidity of gender experience and subjectivity in a transnational context on the other hand.

I then offer a critical reading of Butler’s theories on gender performativity and gender subversion, as well as a discussion of the criticisms of her theory. I situate Butler’s theory in its theoretical and social context, and explore the various ways my research can benefit from it or possibly go beyond it. I outline the ways in which my approach is inspired by and draws on Butler’s theories, including her notions of the subject as the effect of performative acts and a
“zone of uninhabitability”, and her emphasis on the discursive formulation and subversion of
gender at individual levels, through both the body and speech. I also highlight areas where my
research in a Chinese context calls some of Butler’s ideas into question, and attempt to address
issues such as the experience of abjection, and how subversive performances of gender can be
carried out by heterosexual as well as homosexual women. With Butler’s notion that gender
performativity and subversion are contextual and contingent as my point of departure,
emphasizing women’s active role as agents in envisioning and performing new gender
possibilities, I have conceptualized “gender as a project” in order to distinguish and understand
how individual women formulate and signify their own unique and situated projects regarding
themselves as women. They each have individualized strategies of resistance and negotiation in
the context of multiple, changing official and unofficial discourses on gender, both Chinese and
foreign, that surround them in the current transnational context.

Methodological issues addressed include the relation between gender and self-narration,
feminist criticism of traditional narrative forms including auto/bio/graphy, the problematic
articulation of a “women-centred and women-defined discourse”, and my exploration of
alternative ways of telling women’s lives. I will discuss the three innovative approaches I used
in the interviewing process: the use of dialect and hybrid languages, the “telling and retelling”
interview structure, and the inclusion in some cases of visual records of their lives (such as photo
albums and artwork) as a complement to their oral, recorded stories.

Chapter 2 examines the life story of an urban woman, Lin, who has lived through the
Mao and post-Mao eras. Lin’s narrative about her grandmother sheds light on how the
production of the Maoist funü (or women of the socialist nation) as the normative ideal was
sustained through the abjection of “other” gendered existences, such as that of Lin’s grandmother, the jiatingfunü (housewife or woman of the family), one of those who still inhabit the margin, but were erased or rendered unintelligible by the Maoist gender regulatory system. Furthermore, Lin’s story of taming the Maoist funü she once was demonstrates how the encounter of the Maoist gender project with the post-Mao reconfiguration of gender is played out in an individual woman’s life. Lin’s conscious performance of a revised post-Mao nüxing demonstrates how an individual gender project that seemingly conforms to the post-Mao nüxing ideal actually revises and subverts it by incorporating the shadow of the “other” Maoist funü.

This chapter also investigates the narrative structure of Lin’s life story, which reflects the Chinese master-script of “speaking bitterness”, prioritizing class over gender as the primary framework for representation and interpretation of her own life, as well as the role of inter-generational dynamics in her representation and interpretation of her Nainai (paternal grandmother) and Mother. The two parts of Lin’s life story, and a closer examination of the retelling practice, illustrate the adaptation of master-scripts in women’s narratives and the need to “go beyond the ending”.

Moving from an examination of the Maoist gender legacy as experienced by an urban woman who lived through the Mao era to that of a younger, post-Mao woman from a rural background, Chapter 3 looks into the life of Dong, a migrant worker now living in Beijing. An analysis of the role of shame in relation to clothes in her story reveals the effects of changing notions of femininity and the construction of affects such as envy and pride. Her desire for a different physical appearance is governed by notions of class as well as gender. This account demonstrates that the Maoist and post-Mao regulation of gender involve not only the
reconfiguration of gender roles, but also the re-evaluation of femininity/masculinity, and the re-mapping of affects associated with these attributes, along class lines. Dong’s story conveys different forms of exclusion in both the Maoist and post-Mao imposition of hegemonic gender models, and the feelings of shame that many rural women now experience.

This chapter also assesses the narrative potential opened up by speaking Dong’s hometown dialect in the interview. It explores how the use of dialect facilitated the articulation of some everyday experiences and private desires, and encouraged narrative agency. It also reflects on how the fusion of various language resources may lead to resorting master-scripts but also creates a space to exercise narrative agency. The analysis demonstrates how Dong mobilizes different ideological and cultural resources to represent and interpret her experience, and to construct herself as a woman who is beyond a single linguistic prescription.

The image of the “masculinized” Maoist funü often evokes a connection with “butch” images in the West. What is a Chinese lesbian woman’s take on the Maoist gender legacy and its “masculinization of Chinese women”? Chapter 4 focuses on Shitou, an artist who openly describes herself as a lesbian. Her perspective allows me to explore how the Maoist funü, although apparently desexualized and defeminized, was produced and naturalized through a compulsorily heterosexual system and the exclusion of lesbian existence. That exclusion is challenged by Shitou’s personal gender project of articulating a distinctly Chinese lesbian identity. As a visual artist, she provided two interrelated sources for the representation of her life and identity: one verbal (her narrative) and one iconic (her paintings and installations). In tracing the trajectory of Shitou’s life and art, it becomes clear that although the Maoist discourse of gender-sameness (or the masculinization of women) may at first glance seem to overlap with
some butch lesbian projects, it actually erases a feminine space and the possibility of articulating “her story”. The individual story told by Shitou leads into an examination of how the Maoist legacy is selectively and strategically appropriated in post-Mao queer politics in a transnational context.

Shitou uses various narrative strategies to resist the hegemony of heterosexual language and heterosexual meanings in articulating her experiences, often by resorting to multi-lingual and multi-cultural resources: Western and Chinese, traditional, Maoist and post-Mao. These linguistic exercises signify the transcultural dimension of the construction of post-Mao Chinese lesbian subjectivities, and represent a self-conscious gender performance -- one that challenges on the one hand the normative heterosexual and patriarchal representations of women’s lives characteristic of both Mao-era and post-Mao official discourses about gender, and on the other hand a “universal global gay identity”.

The first three life stories demonstrate that the Maoist woman, rural women, and lesbians all appear to be constructed as “less-than-real-women”, in comparison with the hyper-feminine post-Mao nüxing who occupies center-stage and is now largely perceived as the norm. The fourth story told in Chapter 5, that of a post-Mao “nüxing”, Anne, sheds a different light on the persistent presence of the Maoist gender legacy and ambivalence towards it, from the perspective of a younger heterosexual woman with transnational experience.

Anne is General Manager of a multinational company in China and studied and lived in the West before returning to work in Beijing. Her narrative assigns a pivotal role to her mother, whose portrait interrupts the stereotypical representation of the one-dimensional, masculinized Maoist woman. Rather than being the brainwashed political victim of communist ideology, her
mother has had a balanced and successful life (sustained and subsidized by Anne’s grandmother’s free domestic labour), in both the Maoist socialist-collective period and the post-Mao market-competition oriented one. Anne also appears to be highly successful, but her narrative of her experiences in the West and her eventual return to China, her search for meaning in her life, and her tendency to suicidal despair, demonstrate the limited promise Western models of personal liberation and individualism can offer. The tensions in her life and her narrative reflect the struggle to synthesize and reconcile various competing and often contradictory ideologies and values, about gender and also about the reason for living, in the process of re-orientation that many Chinese have experienced since the end of the Mao era and China’s opening up to the outside world.

Anne’s adoption of an English name and frequent use of English words, as well as various other linguistic and ideological resources, communicate the discursive dimension of her hybrid subjectivity. Mastery of English, in both its linguistic function and ideological context, conveys Anne’s understanding and interpretation of the world and her life, and is instrumental in her performance of a transnational, cosmopolitan, post-Mao nüxing subjectivity.

The Conclusion will return to critical speculation about the usefulness and limitations of using Butler’s theory of gender performativity and gender subversion in a transnational context, particularly in China and in relation to the diverse individual strategies presented in these four women’s narratives. I argue that they illustrate the potential for “bottom-up” agency initiated by individual women, which may change the gender landscape in China. Their re-negotiation of discursive and bodily constructions of being a woman is not based on a simplistic rejection or replacement of previous or existing norms. Rather, they challenge the exclusionary operation of
all gender norms by making alternatives visible and by their innovative appropriation of diverse
gendered possibilities, Chinese or foreign, ancient or contemporary, and especially those on the
margins or deemed illegitimate. These stories also offer a basis for exploring the various ways in
which feminist research can facilitate, document, and theorize women’s subversive gender
practices, in today’s transitional world.

1 Zhang is regarded as the “Queen of Beauty” (meirong nihuang) of the Chinese beauty industry. She is a pioneer in
this field, and the president of China Beauty and Fashion Daily, a popular fashion newspaper in China.

2 There is indecision regarding which term can replace funü. In the discussion of the motion, some older people were
not comfortable with the term nüren (female person), while some thought nüxing (female sex) put too much
emphasis on sexual difference. See the commentaries posted at Zhang’s blog:
(accessed May 11, 2009).

3 See Barlow 2004:257-264 for a discussion of these debates, especially Li,1990; Pan,1988.

4 There are few studies on masculinity in the Mao and post-Mao era, for instance, Nancy Chen, William Jankowiak,
Chapter 1
Theoretical Approach and Methodology

This chapter discusses the theoretical framework and methodology that guide my analysis. Since the center of my inquiry is how the idea of gender is formulated and demarcated, signified and articulated, in Chinese women’s oral narratives (as well some visual representations), I will first outline the changing Chinese conceptualizations of gender, with a critical reflection on the nature and relationship between theory, the researcher, and the research subject. I will then provide my reading of Judith Butler’s theories on gender performativity, which sets the theoretical foundation for this research, followed by an elaboration of my own conception of “gender (as) project”. I will go on to discuss feminist studies on gender and self-narration, feminist criticism of traditional narrative forms including auto/bio/graphy, and the problematic articulation of a “women-centred and women-defined discourse”, which provide the methodological framework for this research.

The conceptualization of gender in China

Many China scholars claim that the traditional (pre-twentieth-century) Chinese conceptualization of gender is different from the western modern gender system, which takes the male/female sexual distinction, understood as a fundamental and immutable opposition, as a central organizing principle in all symbolic systems. They argue that in traditional China, not only did
assigned gender tend to determine sex rather than the reverse, but gender symbolism and sex-linked symbols were also often secondary to other more fundamental principles of moral and social life (see for instance, Ann Anagnost 1989; Black 1986; Brownell 1995; Brownell and Wasserstrom 2002; Barlow 1994, 2004; Furth 1999; Ebrey 2003).

The difference between Chinese and modern Western conceptualizations of gender starts from understandings of the human body. In the introduction to The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir quotes a classical definition of woman: “tota mulier in utero” (woman is a womb; de Beauvoir 1989:13). Charlotte Furth points out that in Huang Di Neijing (The Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor), an ancient Chinese medical text that has been treated as the fundamental doctrinal source for Chinese medicine, this definition of “female difference based on the womb as anatomy was reduced to an irrelevancy” (Furth 1999: 44). Derived from European biomedical science, Western anatomy perceives the human body as an ensemble of discrete parts, ascribing a function to every single part from the skull to the pelvis (Schiebinger 1989, 1993; Laqueur 1987, 1990). Sexual differences are understood as residing in the genitalia and the so-called reproductive organs. The Chinese conception of physiology, on the other hand, draws on the classical Chinese medical, philosophical and religious systems. The Inner Canon of the Yellow Emperor understands the human body as a microcosm that corresponds to the cosmos, and is made up of the primordial element, the qi (芝). Qi is regulated by two opposite yet complementary forces, yin and yang, with yin being associated with cold, moisture, darkness, passivity, the moon, and the feminine, while yang connotes brightness, heat, the sun, activity, and the masculine (Sivin 1987; Chen 2002). The classic Chinese body, or the “Yellow Emperor’s body” as Charlotte Furth (1999) called it, has no morphological sex but is
androgynous, containing both *yin* and *yang* forces. Contrary to the common Western misunderstanding of *yang* and *yin* as fixed essences, with *yin* “meaning” female and *yang* male, 

*yin* and *yang* are highly fluid, and the categories of male and female were explained in terms of

the relative predominance of one or the other. In other words, the body is a site in which both

configure in different combinations, varying from person to person and within the same

individual according to age, seasons, weather, diet, and circumstances. Consequently, sexual

differences are understood as moving along “a continuum of probability” (Bray 1995, 235).

This cosmological understanding of the human body was transformed into hierarchal gender configurations. Bret Hinsch (2002) suggests that pragmatism, patrilinealism, and 

cosmology are important elements in understanding Chinese ideas on gender and women’s

position in society. While in Taoist cosmology *yin* was identified with the natural and the female

and valued more highly than *yang*, associated with culture and maleness, this hierarchy is

reversed in Confucian orthodoxy. In her study of the lives of Song women, Patricia Ebrey (1993)

points out that the *yin-yang* cosmological pair had been co-opted in the ordering of gender

hierarchy in Confucian models of social relations, to naturalize male dominance. The two pillars

of Confucian gender ethics (Ko 1994, Hinsch 2002) are the dictum of “three obediences” or

*sancong* (obedience to the father before marriage, to the husband after marriage, and to the son

after the husband’s death) and the doctrine of separate inner and outer spheres (*neiwaï*), with

man being associated with the outer and woman with the inner (*nanzhuwai, nuzhunei*). These

two pillars defined the Confucian gendered subject in both hierarchical and special relations.

The Confucian gender system evolved over time, and was firmly established by the Song era

(960-1279) and became the dominant gender discourse in imperial China. Lisa Raphals (1988)
and Bret Hinsch’s (2002) research demonstrates that before the Song, women were perceived as intellectual and moral agents and women’s ethical and intellectual abilities were recognized. Under the influence of neo-Confucianism in the Song and Ming (1368-1644) eras, emphasis was put on the physical separation of men and women, the submission of the woman to the husband within the family, and the exclusion of women from direct or indirect political activity (Hinsch 2002).

Nevertheless, the ideas of fluid and complementary relationships between yin and yang remained in the conceptualization of the Confucian gender system. For instance, many scholars have pointed out that while the physical separation of men and women demarcates separate spaces, it also suggests a permeable relationship between them. The inner/outer are overlapping spheres with fluid boundaries (Bray 1997; Mann 2002; Ropp 1993; Furth 1999), even through those who enjoyed the freedom of movement from one to the other were a privileged few (Ko1992). This contextual and fluid understanding of gender difference can also be observed in the Qing (1644-1911) juridical files (Sommer 2002), where an individual became socially male or female by playing a specific sexual role, and the focus of judicial anxiety was not the sex of the object of a man’s desire but rather who penetrated whom and in what context.

Furth (1999) further argues that the distinction between the inner and outer spheres also demonstrates that traditional Chinese ideas about gender difference were not just bodily-based, but closely tied to the social roles of men and women. She suggests that in this system social gender overshadowed anatomical sex and sexuality in the definition of the categories male and female: the way one acted as masculine or feminine was often more important than one’s anatomy. She has shown that medical discourse in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911)
dynasties blurred the lines of sex and gender so that physical difference and change were appraised in terms of the capacity to fulfill normative social roles. One became socially male or female to the extent that one played a specific sexual role. Kinship is another important factor in defining a woman’s powers and in differentiating among different groups of women (Ebrey 1993, 2002), and the Confucian conception of gender was constructed primarily around a woman’s kinship position as daughter, wife, or mother (Barlow 1994, 2004).

The notion of the primacy of social role over anatomical sex can also be observed in Jennifer Jay’s (1993) analysis of the gender of eunuchs. She concludes that even though castrated eunuchs remained unquestionably male, their sexuality remained heterosexual in orientation. They were referred to as males in formal address and kinship terminology; they could also claim patriarchal power through strategic manipulations of the gender symbols of proper masculinity, such as male attire, marriage, adopting children, and running their households. Their castration was not primarily perceived as an injury to their manhood but as an injury to the ability to reproduce, thus as unfilial.

Some scholars therefore argue that the Chinese conception of gender privileges social role over biological sex (for instance, Barlow, 1994); they claim that a person’s gender identity in China was defined not in terms of her physiology but in terms of her relation to the family kinship system, linked to the cosmological yin-yang pair. However, some point out that rather than seeking to locate gender exclusively in either social roles or natural (bodily) attributes, we need to understand Chinese gender conceptions as encompassing both, and that the Chinese categories of male and female were understood as both natural and social (Furth 1999:7-8).

The Chinese cosmological paradigm has been seriously challenged, since the modern
Western scientific construction of body-based systems of gender was introduced to China and began influencing popular understanding of gender, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Under the iconoclastic May Fourth New Cultural Movement (1919-1925), traditional Confucian gender codes were under attack, and Western ideologies, such as social Darwinism, anarchism, humanism, Marxism, and feminism were introduced into China. Many Western-oriented Chinese intellectuals, such as Chen Duxiu (1982 [1915]), urged replacing Chinese knowledge with Western science and Chinese medicine with biomedicine.

As Frank Dikotter notes in *Sex, Culture and Modernity in China* (1995), numerous childbirth manuals and medical treatises were produced in the 1920s and 1930s to initiate the Chinese public into the biomedical language of the body. For instance, Yung-chen Chiang’s (2004) research shows that the discourse of exalted motherhood popular in the 1920s and 30s was based on a mixture of biological determinism, eugenics, and sexology translated from Japan, the USA and Europe. A new category of women known as the “new women,” or *xin nüxing* (new female sex) also emerged. As Barlow (1994, 2004) suggests, *nüxing* was the product of a new conceptualization of gender, defined by sexual physiology and based on a Western, exclusionary male/female binary. It emphasizes the opposition of men to women as well as sexual attraction. The gender discourses of the earlier decades of the twentieth century indicate a new feature of gender conception in twentieth century China: hybrid or co-existing combinations of Western and Chinese understandings of the body in relation to gender/sex, as the category of the “new women” (*xin nüxing*) exemplified.

With the establishment of the PRC came another important stage in the reformulation of gender perception—also characterized by combinations of multiple gender discourses. The
Maoist gender discourse was not only based on a Marxist reframing of the “woman question” and class analysis, informed by some key feminist concepts of women’s rights and gender equality formed in the early twentieth-century global context; it also carried on the eugenic discourse and sacred motherhood ideology of the 1920s and discourses on scientific womanhood, health and sport from the 1930s (Manning 2004), as well as retaining some traditional Chinese gender beliefs. On one hand, the popular slogan “women can do whatever men can do” promoted the erasure of gender difference and implied an anti-essentialist and social constructionist view of gender; on the other hand, the Marxist maternalist position emphasized women’s biological difference (Manning 2004), while the “scientific construction” of sexuality in the Mao era put forward an essentialized biological determinist approach to gender based on sexual difference (Evans 1997). Even more interestingly, as Kimberly Manning’s (2009) recent research reveals, some leading figures in the All-China Women’s Federation in the 1950s who had been educated at missionary schools promoted a materialist approach to women’s roles that echoed the discourse of some Christian missionaries.

Rosemary Roberts’ (2004a, 2004b) research on the revolutionary model operas (Yangbanxi) reveals that the supposedly revolutionary Maoist representation of gender roles often blends with traditional gender beliefs. For instance, revolutionary heroines often resemble the images of traditional military heroines who were motivated to go into battle by either filial piety or loyalty to their husbands. Roberts also shows how the gendered symbolism in Yangbanxi draws on traditional Chinese cosmology and the yin-yang symbolism (see also Denton 1987), in its gendered encoding of counterrevolutionary characters as yin/ feminine, and revolutionaries as yang/ masculine. Evans (1997) also notes that discourses on sexuality in the
Mao era have incorporated many traditional Chinese medical beliefs about aspects of female sexual health, such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and the month following childbirth, as making women more susceptible to disease.\(^1\)

One important feature of the Maoist gender conceptualization is the central role of class in defining gender. The Maoist gender ideas were constructed firstly through class differentiation, with subaltern labouring women as representatives of the Maoist gender ideal. This will be demonstrated in Chapters Two and Three, which show that perceptions of gender in the Mao era cannot be separated from the institutionalization of a class system and a rural/urban divide, and gender subjectivity was overshadowed by class identity.

Post-Mao gender discourses (since 1976) convey a radical departure from the Mao era in many ways. One of their features is the interaction between Chinese and foreign ideas, or the process of introducing and indigenizing foreign theories (*bentuhua*, referring to the process of critically applying overseas scholarship to the Chinese situation, see Cheek 2009, Chow et al 2004), especially the introduction of contemporary Western feminisms, and more recently, post-colonial, Third World, and transnational feminisms. For instance, the term "women's studies" was introduced to China from the West in the 1980s (Du 2001). The influence of globalization, direct exchanges between Chinese scholars and feminists abroad, the hosting of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, and increased international funding for women’s organizations and gender projects in China, have brought new language and analytical categories into gender studies in China, and influenced the framing of theoretical and analytical perspectives (Du 2001; Liu 1999). One good example is the introduction of the concept of gender into Chinese Women’s Studies. Chinese scholars and researchers have now embraced the
concept of gender as a social and cultural construction and use it as a key concept in their discussions (Du 1993).

Post-Mao gender discourses also inherited some earlier conceptualizations of gender. On one hand, some scholars continued to take Maoist theory on women as their theoretical base, for instance Li Xiaojiang (1987), Jin Yihong (2000), and Du Fangqin’s (1998) work combines Marxist class with gender analysis. On the other hand, some scholars reemploy gender discourses that circulated in the pre-Mao eras. For example, the biologically-determined notion of gender difference that can be traced back to the early twentieth century, and the urban bourgeois image of the nüxing are deployed to call for restoring women’s essentialized femininity and to construct a sexualized feminine body, as a sign of China’s market-oriented modernity. As Zhong Xueping (2004) points out, such a gender conceptualization is informed by a dichotomous framework of (female) femininity and (male) masculinity, with an emphasis on sexuality. They reduce women’s issues to questions of “femininity” and “sexuality”, ascribe a bourgeois class-based gender ideal as the universal “female essence”, marginalize the reality of class and class differentiations, and negate the socio-economic aspects of gender politics.

“Western theory” and “Chinese experience”

The differences between traditional Chinese and Western conceptualizations of the body and gender raise questions about the appropriateness of applying Western feminist theory and the concept of gender in the Chinese context, especially today when most China scholars working on gender are informed by Western feminist theories. In Mainland China, and even more so in
Hong Kong and Taiwan, many academics' research is more or less informed by Western theoretical frameworks in order to participate in the knowledge production of the institutionalized epistemic community, though the degree varies according to the discipline and background of the researcher (especially in terms of Western training and language skills). The academic exchanges we engage in are mediated by western disciplinary discourses that “structure the very way we articulate our research problems and define what count as legitimate topics of inquiry and meaningful explanations” (Ha 2009: 424).

As Rey Chow (2006) argues in her book *The Age of the World Target*, the global dominance of Western, especially Anglo-American, knowledge is established through both military conquests and flourishing civil apparatuses such as funding agencies, educational programs, culture and information bureaus, religious missions, and publishing houses. As a result, there is a one-way hierarchical privilege between those who specialize in the West and those who specialize in non-Western cultures. Using language as a metaphor (or metonymy), she points out that the latter are pressured to be multilingual, to acquire global breadth -- to be cosmopolitan in their knowledge in order to pass as credible academic professionals, whereas specialists of the West tend to be monolingual, in the sense that they often speak only from within their own specialty or language (2006:13-14).

In Western (mostly Anglophone) academe, the question of the appropriateness of applying Western theoretical frameworks in studying non-western experience is often raised, particularly in Anthropology and in area studies, since the division of intellectual labor often means that “disciplines” are expected to provide theories, whereas “area studies” provide raw empirical data. Even though Western theories are derived from the social structures of the West,
they are often taken as a universally applicable conceptual framework to interpret the non-Western world, whereas empirical data from the non-West “flesh out a theoretical skeleton that is substantially ‘Europe’” (Chakrabarty 2000; see also Sakai 2001; Cheah 2001).

The use of Western theoretical approaches in the study of the non-Western world has long been an issue of debate (for instance, Spivak 1993; Mohanty 1994; Said 2000), and also a heated topic among Chinese scholars and in Chinese Studies in Western Universities (for instance, Chow 1991, 2006; Davies 2007). In China, the issue of the applicability of Western theory to Chinese experience can be traced to an age-old debate in the study of Chinese intellectual history, on whether culture is open or closed (Levenson 1958; Schwartz, 1964).² This debate has gained new relevance today because of increased mingling of the “Chinese” and “the West”. For instance, Chinese scholar Liu Dong (2001) condemns those who indiscriminately appropriate and blindly mimic Western “isms”, as “designer pidgin scholarship” (2001: 91) and has raised concerns that “drawing the West into China” is a process of “ongoing colonization”, part of an “intense clash of civilizations” in the midst of a distorted discursive realm. On the other hand, for Yue Daiyun (2001), a Chinese literary theorist, many Western theories seem to echo some elements of traditional Chinese culture and are thus compatible with Chinese literary studies.

This issue has also been raised in the study of gender in China. For historical and linguistic reasons, Anglophone Chinese studies have mostly been produced by Western scholars, and there has been a long history of using a Western lens to look at China. Many Western scholars’ work presents China to Anglophone audiences, as a case study that illustrates differences, and aims primarily to enrich Anglo-American self-understanding through an
encounter with the “other”. Anglophone research on Chinese women has also been influenced by the feminist movement in the West and its changing agenda. In the 1960s and 1970s, some socialist feminists in the West turned to women in socialist China (as well as Soviet and Third World women) in their search for a universal solution to women’s oppression, taking China as a test case for theories on women’s liberation. Some early Western feminist writings on Chinese women adopted a romantic orientalism or pro-Maoist utopianism, presenting women in socialist China as part of a counter-discourse to the masculinist heroics of European socialism. China was idealized by some as a “feminine” mirror image to the ‘masculine’ West, as illustrated by Julia Kristeva’s essay “On Chinese Women” (1977). Western feminists’ views on Maoist women’s liberation later tended to disillusionment and criticism, while others viewed Chinese women’s liberation as a source of inspiration for white feminists, Asian-American women, and other feminists of color. From the late 1970s on, even leftist feminists became disillusioned with women’s liberation in Maoist China, and charged that rather than being liberated from patriarchy, Chinese women carried a double burden in the new form of the socialistic patriarchal family.

Anglophone scholars engaged in studying Chinese women became more self-reflective in the 1980s, not only because of the demise of admiration abroad for Mao’s ideas but because “intersectionality” emerged as a central critical concept, with attention to gender accompanied by consideration of race/ethnicity as well as class, largely in response to critiques from Third-World feminists and women of color. Since the 1990s, feminists informed by post-structuralism and post-colonial theories have criticized the objectification, generalization, and essentializing of Chinese women in previous representations. Studies in the 1990s challenged Eurocentric assumptions about the backwardness or victimization of Chinese women (see Chow 1991; Ko
1994), and a dialogue began with newly emerging feminist scholars from China (see Gilmartin 1994) who reject the woman-as-victim/woman-as-agent dichotomy. Since 1978, with China’s open door policy, fieldwork in China has become increasingly open to foreign scholars, and dialogue and networking between Chinese and Western scholars have increased.

As for the development of gender studies in China, there has been a history of importing, translating, and indigenizing feminism, a global discourse, to China with its own ideas about gender, class, body, and sexuality. As Dorothy Ko and Wang Zheng (2004) points out, historically “translated feminisms have transformed the terms in which modern Chinese understand their own subjectivities and histories.” The establishment of Women’s Studies as a newly institutionalized discipline in China has been accompanied by the translation and introduction of foreign (predominantly Anglophone Western) feminist theories. In theorizing women’s issues in contemporary China, feminists in China have turned to Western feminism for inspiration and sources of resistance (Bao 1995), and their patterns of inquiry are often influenced and structured by Western academic discourse.

Some scholars express concern that China's Women's Studies are being limited, marginalized, and/or colonized by well-developed, well-financed international movements dominated by Western feminism. They argue against using the concepts of sex and gender developed in the West in explaining Chinese gender configurations, on the grounds that these concepts are different from traditional Chinese understandings of sexual difference. For instance, Li Xiaojiang, a prominent Chinese feminist, argues that “it would be redundant to introduce the notion of gender, shehui xingbie (literally social sex difference), to the Chinese language, since nü (women/female) and nan (man/male) are already understood as social, and not natural,
beings.” (1999:262). In their study of Chinese masculinities, Kam Louie and Louise Edward (1994) claim that Western conceptualizations of gender “only serve to prove that Chinese men are ‘not quite real men’” (Louie and Edward 1994, 138), and propose a Chinese wen-wu model to understand Chinese masculinity, with wen referring to those “gentle, refined qualities that were associated with the literary and artistic pursuits of classical scholars”, and wu associating with the attributes of physical strength and military prowess embodied by the soldier.

In studies of homosexuality in China some scholars also argue that the dichotomy of sexual orientation (homosexual/heterosexual) that has informed many Western gender studies bears no relevance in the context of traditional China. For instance, Sommer argues that the hierarchy of roles in a stereotypical act of intercourse (penetrator/penetrated) constituted the definitive framework for conceptualizing gender and sexuality in late imperial China (Sommer 2002). Even though homosexual anal intercourse had been banned since the sixteenth century, the rationale behind the regulation was that phallic penetration should take place only within marriage, based on the Confucian vision of family-based order. The legal ban can be seen as directed against the marginal man outside of (and presumably opposed to) the family-based social and moral order, such as the bandit, the libertine, the rootless rascal, the marginal rogue males at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale, rather than those with a homosexual orientation (Sommer 2002: 67).

As I outlined earlier, in the twentieth century Chinese conceptions of sex and gender, especially definitions of the ideal woman, underwent radical reformulation with the changing social-historical context, and shifting relations between China and the West. Even though traditional Chinese conceptualizations of gender originated from a different epistemological
framework from those in the West, ideas of gender in twentieth-century China are heavily influenced by various western discourses on the body, gender, and sexuality. In her recent study of Hong Kong women’s perception of their bodies, Ha (2009) shows that while the traditional Chinese understanding of sex and gender has been displaced at the institutional level by Western biomedical discourse, the former still maintains a strong hold in many everyday practices. It has survived among people in China from the pre-1949 years to the present, and continues to inform the sociocultural habitus of contemporary Chinese people, alongside Western scientific ideas. She argues that the multicultural social practices of Hong Kong women demonstrate a heterogeneous understanding of the female body and combines both the traditional Chinese understanding of sex and gender and Western biomedical discourse.

The transnational flow of people and ideas since the 1978 beginning of China’s “open door” policy has enabled many Chinese people to have the experience of traveling or living outside of China, and exposed many more to foreign ideas and ways of life. It can be asserted that in today’s transnational context, there is no historical, enclosed, pure “Chinese” conception and experience of gender. What we can observe is heterogeneity and hybridity: there are multiple overlapping and competing gender discourses, Chinese and foreign, traditional and contemporary, global and local, circulating in China today. These discourses interact with each other to constitute various configurations of gender that are often hybrid products.

I am in agreement with Ha, that rather than falling into an either/or debate on which theoretical framework (Western or Chinese) is better suited to understanding contemporary Chinese concepts of gender performances, we need to articulate a research framework that acknowledges our heterogeneities. Perceptions of gender in China today are the result of
Chinese-Western interaction and local-global interplay. My research also shows that the experience of gender, as revealed in the women’s narratives discussed in the following chapters, cannot be explained simply by resorting to a “Chinese” (often meaning traditional, Confucian-based) conceptual framework for gender, but needs to be understood in a framework that accounts for the ways multiple gender discourses work together to produce overlapping structures of domination, as well as opening up possibilities for resistance.

Furthermore, not only is there no pure “Chinese” concept of gender, there is also increasingly no single Western feminism. While there has been a history of “othering Chinese women” and Third World women in general in Western feminist studies, the critical inquiry put forward by post-structuralist feminism, the development of post-colonial feminist critique, Third World feminism, and transnational feminism, have unveiled and interrogated the unequal power relations between the researcher and the research subject, and between Western theory and Third World experience. They have also facilitated the deconstruction of the previously homogeneous and binary conceptions of “Western theory” (or a ‘global feminism’), and “Third World Women”, and complicated the relationship between them.

These critiques of western feminism point out that rather than assuming a global feminism and universal sisterhood, feminism needs to be attentive to the intersections of nationhood, race, gender, sexuality, and class, and develop analytical frameworks that can understand the hybrid subject with transitional experience or living in a transnational context (see for instance, Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 2001). Transnational feminism urges us to draw attention to difference and intersectionality on the one hand, and the blurring and transgression of boundaries, the hybridity of experience and identity on the other.
Not only are both the theory and the research subject increasingly heterogeneous and hybrid, but so too are the researchers who engage with these issues from two sides. For instance, in the context of the study of Chinese women, there are increasing numbers of students from Mainland China studying abroad, working as academics in the West, and publishing in English. They have not only engaged with but also reworked Western feminist theory (e.g. Wang 1999, Liu, 1999, 2004; Zhong 2000, Sang, 2003). Their membership of both the community in which they do research and the academic community in which they publishing their results, and the increasing level of intellectual exchange and hybrid scholarship with blurred boundaries make the homogenized term “Western theory” even more difficult to define and less productive to use.

My research on women’s live in China today is part of the knowledge production that will contribute to feminist research on “how women become ‘women’ (or other kinds of gendered subjects) around the world” (Grewal and Kaplan 1994:79). As a Chinese-born, Western-trained researcher, occupying a space in-between, and writing for an Anglophone audience, I view this study as a hybrid product illustrating cultural communication and intellectual exchange between Western and Chinese feminisms. My research is part of the equal dialogue between Chinese scholars and their counterparts in the international Women’s Studies community (see Du 2001). This research on Chinese women’s experience of gender today evokes a hybrid use of theories. Rather than using “a” Western feminist theory to understand a singular ahistorical “Chinese experience”, this study of contemporary Chinese women’s lives in a transnational and transitional context draws upon feminist scholarship produced by Western scholars discussing gender in a Western context, Anglophone feminist studies of women in
China (produced by both Western and Chinese scholars), and Sinophone research on Chinese women, including studies of women’s lives in contemporary China in a transnational context.

**Judith Butler and the theory of gender performativity**

Western feminists’ attempt to theorize “gender” was initially driven by a desire to establish the epistemological foundation for gender equality and to counter biological determinism, the view that biology is destiny. Psychologists like Robert Stoller (1968) first separated gender and sex, to explain the phenomenon of transsexuality as a mismatch between the two. Feminists found this distinction useful, and started to understand gender as a combination of culturally specific roles, behaviors, and symbols attached to anatomical sex; sexual difference is the foundation for gendered roles and the combination of sex and gender codifies a wide range of social hierarchies (Haslanger 2000; Millett 1971; Stoljar 1995). Simone de Beauvoir’s statement that “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman” (de Beauvoir 1989 [original 1949]) is taken as a claim about gender socialization. Gayle Rubin, for instance, used the phrase “sex/gender system” and described gender as the “socially imposed division of the sexes” (1975:179). Feminists have viewed gender as a socially shared and historically constituted construction acted out by individuals. Feminist theorizing of gender based on the gender/sex distinction has been under attack in recent decades, particularly by feminists of colour and post-structuralist and queer feminists, for failing to take into account differences among women, and for positing a normative ideal of womanhood. Judith Butler’s theorizing of gender performativity emerged from these debates.
As Lois McNay (1999) notes, western feminist thought on gender and sexuality can be traced along three predominant theoretical trends: post-Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, theories of intersubjective communication derived from Habermas, and post-Foucauldian theories of discursive construction. Working in the Foucauldian tradition, Butler’s work on the performative construction of gender bridges between the psychoanalytic and constructivist perspectives. Her work has provided a major inspiration for me in structuring my analysis. In what follows I will briefly outline her theory of gender performativity, especially the key points on which I draw in this research, and explain how I approach them in my analysis. Through a critical reading of Butler’s theories on gender as performative and gender subversion, as well as a discussion of criticisms of her theory, I will situate her ideas in their theoretical and social context and explore the various ways my research can benefit from them or possibly go beyond them.

Butler is best known for her theorizing in *Gender Trouble* (1990) of gender as performative, which implies a radical reformation/disruption of the assumed “natural” link between sex, gender, and sexual desire. Her other writings build on or revised the ideas she developed there, including *Bodies that Matter* (1993), “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’ (2003), and *Undoing Gender* (2004). Her works theorize and affirm the value of gay/lesbian and trans practices and provide a foundation for an inclusive queer politics that challenges both patriarchy and heterosexual hegemony. My take on Butler’s gender theories focuses on those aspects that can help me to rethink gender construction in contemporary China, concerning both heterosexual and queer gender politics.
The elaboration of Butler’s theory of gender starts with a critical re-reading of some important feminist thinkers’ theorizing of “women” as the subject of feminism, including Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Monique Wittig. Butler builds up her theory of gender performativity by extending some of the arguments of these feminist thinkers, as well as challenging the epistemological or ontological premises of some of their thoughts. To situate Butler’s theory in its theoretical context and in relation to earlier writings on gender and sexuality, I will first outline Butler’s critique of feminism.

**Butler’s critique of feminism**

There are two major critiques Butler puts forward: one is that the totalizing gesture in some feminist theories assumes a shared structure of oppression and fails to recognize “the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete ways of ‘women’ are constructed” (Butler 1999, 19–20), thus reinforcing the gender binary and closing up opportunities to recognize differences. This totalizing gesture is based on the assumption of a “feminine” substance existing before culture, an assumption that reproduces rather than challenges the structure and epistemological foundation of masculinist traditions. Her second critique is that these attempts to define “woman” imply a normative way to be gendered as a woman and lead to political exclusion.

For instance, de Beauvoir argues that the “subject” within the existential analysis of misogyny is always already masculine, conflated with the universal, and differentiating itself from a feminine “Other”; women are irrevocably positioned outside the universalizing norms of personhood, designated as the Other, the negative of men, the lack. Butler notes that while in de
Beauvoir’s theory the radical dependency of the masculine subject on the female “Other” exposes his autonomy as illusory, de Beauvoir’s analysis of gender oppression formulates a feminist politics that calls for the right of women to be included and become existential subjects, like men.

On the contrary, Luce Irigaray (1985) argues that the female sex is neither “Other” nor the “lack,” rather; it constitutes the *unrepresentable*, unconstrainable, and undesignatable, because in a closed phallogocentric signifying economy, both the subject and the Other are masculine constructions. The feminine could thus never be the *mark of a subject*, she is the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence, the “sex” or “subject” which is not “one”. In the masculinist mode of signification in which the masculine constitutes the closed circle of signifier and signified, the female body is “marked off” from the domain of the signifiable. The relation between masculine and feminine thus cannot be represented in a signifying economy. Butler sees Irigary’s inquiry as assuming a monologic masculinist economy that transcends cultural and historical contexts, and as failing to acknowledge the specific cultural operations of gender oppression.

Butler points out that these two seemingly contradictory claims made by de Beauvoir and Irigary share a similar fallacy in assuming a universalizing tendency or epistemological imperialism. This presumed universality of female identity and masculinist oppression has provided the epistemological standpoint for a feminist politics based on common or shared structures of oppression and interests. The assumed “identity” of “women” reinforces a binary view of gender relations on which heterosexuality is based, rather than opening up possibilities for multiple and individualized identities.
Butler’s second major critique is exemplified in her analysis of Wittig’s notion of “Being” and Kristeva’s politics of the “maternal body”, which are both presented as existing prior to their cultural formulation. Arguing that a metaphysics of substance is the epistemological foundation for the production and naturalization of the category of sex, Butler criticizes Wittig’s (1985) project of lesbian emancipation, which calls for the destruction of “sex” and replacing the universal masculine “subject” with a lesbian subject as the speaking subject. Butler points out that this project still adheres to a metaphysics of substance that presumes a presocial and pregendered “person,” a substantial Being existing before representation. It confirms rather than contests the normative premise of humanist ideals by replacing the “masculine subject” by another universal subject-position, evoking a new totalitarianism.

Butler’s critique of Kristeva’s theory of the semiotic dimension of language follows the same line of argument. Kristeva takes up Lacan’s notion that women’s “appearing as being” the Phallus leads to a masquerade, presupposing a “being” prior to the masquerade, and promising an eventual disruption and displacement of the phallogocentric signifying economy. Kristeva contests Lacan’s equation of the Symbolic with all linguistic meaning and argues that the “semiotic” is a dimension of language occasioned by the primary maternal body, manifested in affective and poetic language in particular. For Kristeva, the semiotic serves as a perpetual source for disrupting, subverting and displacing the paternal law. Butler argues that since the semiotic is still positioned as subordinate to the Symbolic, Kristeva’s theory depends on the stability and reproduction of the paternal law that she seeks to displace. In addition, Kristeva states that the semiotic cannot be maintained within the terms of culture, and thus can never become a sustained political practice. Furthermore, Kristeva reinstates the paternal law at the
level of the semiotic itself, as it may be disruptive but does not ultimately challenge Lacanian ideas of sexual differences. Butler further argues that the prediscursive maternal body Kristeva seeks to express, rather than being external to culture, and its secret (or ignored) primary cause, is itself a construct produced by a given historical discourse, it is an effect of culture. Butler points out that the idea of a suppressed feminine desire evokes feminist strategies of unmasking, recovering, and replacing, which may reproduce the totalizing structure.

What differentiates Butler from the feminists discussed above is that, coming from a post-structuralist theoretical position, she takes an antifoundationalist approach to feminist coalitional politics. She questions the assumed “identity” of “women” as the premise for feminist politics, and suggests a poststructuralist understanding of sex, gender, and sexual desire, which she argues may serve as a more effective strategy of subversion. Butler’s theory of gender builds on earlier writings on sex and gender, while questioning them. She draws upon Foucault’s notion that the artificial binary category of sex is the product of a diffuse regulatory economy of sexuality; “sex” thus should be understood as an effect rather than an origin. She also takes up de Beauvoir’s claim that the category of women is a variable cultural accomplishment that gender is always acquired, and therefore sexual difference does not cause gender distinctions. She also draws inspiration from Wittig’s idea that the supposedly biological and innate binary regulation of sexuality is artificial, serving the reproductive aims of a system of compulsory heterosexuality, and based on the suppression of a subversive multiplicity of sexualities. For Wittig, the category of “sex” is itself a gendered category, fully politically invested, naturalized but not natural, and is the reality-effect of a violent process of social configuration of bodies, through a coerced contract. Kristeva’s theory of “abjection” also
influenced Butler’s theorizing of the relationship between the subject and its constitutive outsider, the domain of abject beings. Kristeva (1982) argues that subjective and group identities are constituted by excluding what threatens one's own borders, through the psychic operation of abjection, that is the rejection and expulsion of the in-between, the ambiguous, and the composite that disturbs identity, system, and order. She goes on to claim that in a patriarchal culture, becoming a subject means one must abject the maternal body (Kristeva 1989), and this misplaced abjection of the maternal body is one cause of women's oppression (Kristeva 1987). In *Gender Trouble*, Butler takes up this idea and goes further to suggest that the homosexual is the abjected queer ‘Other’ that is central to the formulation of the "straight" subject. Butler also takes up Irigaray’s argument that women can never be understood on the model of a “subject” within the conventional representational systems of Western culture, which questions the epistemological, ontological, and logical structures of a masculinist signifying economy.

In addition to its roots in feminist tradition, Butler’s theory of gender performativity is also influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis, phenomenology (Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, George Herbert Mead, et al.), structural anthropologists (Claude Levi-Strauss, Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz, et al.) and the speech-act theory of John Searle. Butler adopts their understanding of social reality as not a given but continually created as an illusion “through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social signs” (2003: 415). She further explores how linguistic constructions create reality through the speech acts, especially gendered acts that people participate in every day.
Gender performativity and the body

Butler (1993) goes back to de Beauvoir’s claim that one is not born but becomes a woman, and argues that the notion of becoming could be applied to the conceptualization of gender more generally, and leads in many directions. This claim inspires her to understand gender as a process of doing, acting, and becoming in response to a model proposed by a specific context:

To be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of “woman”, to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. (Butler 2003:417)

In Gender Trouble, Butler (1993) argues that “woman” (as well as “man”) does not exist in a pre-social or pre-discursive state: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results”(1990: 33). The body acquires a gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revisited, and consolidated through time (2003: 418). The gendered body is performative because it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.

Gender attributes are understood, not as expressive of a pre-existing condition, but as producing that condition: gender is a performative accomplishment.

In Bodies that Matter, Butler reworks some of the ideas in Gender Trouble and further explores the working of heteronormative hegemony in its violent circumscription of the cultural intelligibility of the body as gendered. She challenges the dichotomy set up by many feminists that sees sex as a “biological” category and gender as a “socio-historical” one. The distinction between gender and sex has enabled feminists to argue against biological determinism, and to
prove that many differences between women and men are socially produced, and, therefore changeable by political and social reforms that would ultimately bring an end to women's subordination. This distinction, however, has been questioned in recent decades. Moi (1999:6) points out that the distinction between sex and gender and the focus on the latter ignore lived experiences and embodiment as aspects of womanhood (and manhood). Some feminists (such as Antony 1998; Gatens 1996; Grosz 1994; Prokhovnik 1999) argue that there are no tenable distinctions between nature/culture, biology /construction and sex/gender. Butler goes further by questioning the very distinction between gender and sex and arguing that both are socially constructed: sexed bodies never exist outside social meanings and how we understand gender shapes how we understand sex (1999, 139). Building on Wittig’s idea that “sex” is already gendered, already constructed, and Foucault’s notion of sex as a “regulatory ideal”, Butler argues that sex as sexual difference is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs. Sex (m/f) is not “a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies” (1993: 2-3). The ritualized repetition of norms thus produces not only the effects of gender but also the materiality of sexual difference and relations, in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative.

The idea that gender/sexual identity is free-floating rather than connected to an innate “essence” of sexual difference opens the way to reveal the artificial and historical nature of gender construction. Rather than searching for the origins of gender difference and the “inner truth” of female desire, Butler proposes a feminist politics that investigates the political constitution of the gendered subject, destabilizes gender categories, contests heteronormativity, and ultimately leads to potential gender transformations.
The subject and abjection

The perception of gender as performative reveals that what are generally believed to be "natural" masculine or feminine attributes, and even the categories of gender and sex, are the result of social constructions and coercions. The historical manifestations of gender differences are materialized and sustained through bodily signs and discursive means which together constitute a corporeal style. This politically regulated corporeal style marks which bodies qualify as fully human, delineating also a zone of abjection. It is scripted by hegemonic social conventions and ideologies establishing two sexes/genders, through “a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality” (1990:139). Since the corporeal style is not “natural” or linked to “biology”, bodies never quite comply with the norms. In other words, gender performance is always never perfect, and everyone fails to some extent to conform to the model. In order to maintain gender divisions within a heterosexual binary frame, the never stable gender boundary has to be constantly re-established through the endlessly repeated performative acts that mark our sexual identities.

The idea of gender as “doing” is also explored by Sarah Fenstermaker, Candace West, and Don H Zimmerman (West and Zimmerman 1987; West and Fenstermaker 1993, 1995; Fenstermaker and West 2002). Their work illustrates a sociological understanding of gender as a situated “doing” and an accomplishment through social interactions. While Butler and these sociologists all conceptualize gender as something one “does” rather than an attribute (what one “is”), they approach this “doing” in different ways, West and Fenstermaker focus on how gender is “done” (established and reinforced) in social interactions with assigned roles, broadly defined,
and Butler emphasizes that gender is discursively constituted and is “performed” through shared discourse, also broadly defined.

However, Butler’s conceptualization of gender performativity goes beyond gender as doing and into a theory of subjectivity. In *Bodies that Matter* (2003), she points out that the repetitive gender performance is not performed by a subject but is what enables subjectivity to evolve and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. There is no “subject” preceding or behind the acting out of gender, rather, the “subject” is anticipated and produced in and through the act. It is subjected to and subjectivated by gender, or a process of assuming a sex. In other words, discourse produces the effect that it names, regulates and constrains, and the enactment of gender norms constructs people’s sense of subjectivity, or the “social fiction of its own psychological interiority” (2003: 139)

Butler suggests that certain cultural configurations of gender exert a hegemonic control. Other feminists have discussed this idea as well. For instance, in her 1995 book *Masculinities* R.W. Connell builds on Antonio Gramsci’s idea of hegemony, distinguishing between hegemonic masculinity and subordinated or marginalized masculinities. She defines hegemonic masculinity as the one that occupies the hegemonic position (though it is always contestable) in a given pattern of gender relations. In Butler’s analysis, she uses the term “normative”, which refers to “the norms that govern gender.” Where Butler goes further is to argue that normative gender presumptions are built into language and work to delimit the very field of description, or the imaginable domain of gender. The domains of political and linguistic “representation” of gender set out in advance the criteria for what qualifies as a subject of representation, by presupposing what are the imaginable and realizable gender configurations within a given culture and
preempting any others. It extends its representation only to what can be acknowledged by the hegemonic cultural discourse, without threatening a heterosexual matrix—a grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized.

Butler proposes a feminist genealogy of the category of women, tracing the political operations that produce and conceal what qualifies as the juridical subject of feminism. She argues that the concept of “women” as “the subject” of feminism is itself a discursive formation and the effect of a given version of representational politics; the unproblematic invocation of such category may preclude what can be represented by feminism. Rather than asking how women might become more fully represented in language and politics, a feminist critique ought to question how some types of feminism restrict the meaning of gender in the basic presupposition of their own emancipatory practice, producing new forms of hierarchy and exclusion, and setting up exclusionary gender norms with homophobic consequences. She calls for a new feminist politics that contests the reification of gender and identity, in order to increase the possibilities for a livable life for those who live, or try to live, on the sexual margins.

For Butler, the ritualized repetition of gender, reiterated through normative constraints, prohibitions, and taboos, produces not only “the domain of intelligible bodies”, but also a corresponding domain of abject, rejected or discarded non-conforming beings with “unthinkable and unlivable bodies”. The "normal" gender subject’s identification with “the normative phantasm of 'sex'” (1993:3) is accomplished through the creation and repudiation of the zone of uninhabitability:

This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject's domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification against, which—and by virtue of which—the domain
of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy and to life. In this sense, then, the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, “inside” the subject as its own founding repudiation. (Butler 1993:3)

Butler goes on to argue that this abjected domain is not the opposite of the intelligible, but is its reminder, its “unconscious.” It is a domain of unlivability and unintelligibility that bounds the domain of the intelligible, and haunts it as the spectre of its own impossibility. The disavowed abjection threatens to unground the sexed subject, and Butler sees this threat and disruption as a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the very terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility.

**Gender subversion**

Butler’s theory of gender performativity is also a theory of agency. She points out that gender is not an artifice to be taken on or taken off at will, thus not merely an effect of individual choice; the enactment of gender scripts has to be within the confines of a specific grammar of gender. In order to become a subject and to be recognized, people have to subject themselves to the rules that govern social and linguistic existence, to cite or repeat pre-existing norms and conventions. However, the body is not simply a lifeless recipient of cultural codes, nor is gender imposed or inscribed upon the individual. “Gendering-as-doing” means that it cannot be simply imposed onto a passive body from outside, but needs the performers’ participation and cooperation. Gender norms need to be embodied and enacted through individual acts and practices. How gender is played out is subject to negotiation, struggle, and resistance at the individual level, and
this opens up possibilities for the cultural transformation of gender. Construction therefore both
circumscribes and enables agency.

Since gender enforcement entails public actions and its performance needs to be repeated
by subjects, the possibility of gender transformation resides in its very performativity and
citationality. Gender subversion emerges between the acts of repetition, through unwarranted
improvisation and non-conforming performances. Butler sees that these performances may
reveal the psychological presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality, destabilizing the
naturalized categories of gender, sex, and desire. They may expose the need for a critical
reworking of gender norms, and alter the very terms that constitute the “necessary” domain of
bodies. Butler (2003) suggests that one way to denaturalize and resignify bodily categories is
through parodic gender performances that denaturalize and contest given codes of sexual
difference through citational recontextualization, revealing the “masquerade”.

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler (2004) revisits and refines her notion of performativity. She
looks at the ways in which the hegemonic structures of power undo us by either “conferring
recognition” to constitute us “as socially viable beings”, or “withholding” it. She claims that the
collective disidentification of “New Gender Politics” can undo restrictively normative
conceptions of sexual and gendered life, and “establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering
and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation.” (Butler, 2004:4)

**Reflections on using Butler’s theory**

Butler’s works on gender, especially her theorizing of gender as performative, have been hailed
as representative of poststructuralist feminism, as pioneering queer theory, and especially as
indicating new directions in the study of gender and sexuality. They have opened up critical
debates on subjectivity, gender, sex, and language, and provided the epistemological foundation
and supplied theoretical tools for queer politics.

Butler’s theorizing of gender as constructed in and through discourse is helpful in
thinking about how, in today’s China, there is no essentialized, authentic “Chinese”
configuration of gender and the body before its discursive formulation and conceptualization,
and also how ideas about gender in China are hybrid products of the interaction between various
Chinese and foreign gender discourses. In this study I use several of Butler’s notions, including
the subject formation as the effect of performative acts, the subject as emerging through the
repudiation of abject beings, and the gender system as operating through the creation of a “zone
of uninhabitability”. These concepts are relevant in asking how what is thinkable in gendered
life in the Mao and post-Mao eras in China is foreclosed by certain changing and violent
presumptions that delegitimize some performances of gender and sexual practices. These
notions inspire me to attend not only to the visible, hegemonic gender models that represent the
norm of a given time, but also those gendered existences that inhabit the margins, the intelligible
outsiders (not necessarily homosexuals, but others in various forms), that help define and support
the subject but also disrupt the boundary with the abject and haunt the subject. For instance, this
approach draws my attention not only to how the normative Maoist funü is positively defined but
also those “invisible” gender existences that the Maoist funü was defined against, such as the
jiatingfunü (housewives or women of the family). Butler’s emphasis on the discursive
formulation and subversion of gender at individual levels through both the body and speech
draws my attention to the enactment and subversion of gender scripts in individual women’s
(straight and lesbian) narratives about their lives.

I also take up Butler’s notion that gender performativity and subversion are contextual and contingent, to develop a conceptualization of “gender as project” in order to distinguish and understand the unique and situated aspects of deliberately formulating and signifying gender at public, national and individual levels, in different historical periods. Individual gender projects in China today reflect the articulation of competing and overlapping multiple local and global gender discourses. There are also areas where my research calls into question some of Butler’s ideas, for instance, by examining how the experience of abjection and strategies of performative subversion are both relevant to many heterosexual women, as well as homosexuals, when they find themselves reconstructed as the residue of an abandoned gender regime, or at the bottom of the hierarchy that rates heterosexual performances.

My use of Butler’s theory is also informed by and in dialogue with some critiques of her theories. One critic, concerned about the political implications of Butler’s theory, accuses her deconstruction of the subject of depriving feminism of its foundation, dividing the feminist movement, and making collective action impossible. Some criticize Butler for being apolitical and abstract. For instance, in her essay “The Professor of Parody”, Martha Nussbaum (1999) accused her of attending to "sexy" questions of representation rather than addressing the suffering of “real women”. Such reactions occur because Butler’s writing aims to subvert hegemonic structures by exposing their limits; yet she has always had a political agenda of carving out a space, theoretically and politically, for sexually marginalized groups. In her later works she emphasizes more explicitly the political and ethical impetus and implications of her theories. The political potential of her work has been taken up by queer politics and has inspired
marginalized groups in their struggle for equality. My use of Butler’s theory is also driven by a political agenda that questions the rigidly defined, class-encoded, normative gender model embodied in the post-Mao nüxing, by exploring some subversive strategies that emerge from individual women’s life narratives, ultimately aiming to contribute to a more diverse and democratic gender landscape in China.

There are some critics who are disappointed that Butler did not offer practical suggestions on “What is to be Done?” (Bell 1999). As Sara Salih (2002:149) suggests, Butler deliberately resists the demand to specify or prescribe the “right” political practices, because they are contingent, differing according to context, and cannot be predicted, as Butler explained:

When theory starts becoming programmatic… it pre-empts the whole problem of context and contingency, and I do think that political decisions are made in that lived moment and they can’t be predicted from the level of theory.

(Bell 1999: 166–7)

Some scholars are concerned with Butler’s emphasis on discourse and language, and claim that she ignores the “real” and “substantial” bodily experience of gender (for instance Bordo 1993; Digeser 1994; Moi 1999; Prosser 1998). Nancy Fraser (1995) also argues that Butler’s focus on language makes it difficult to apply her work to real-life situations. Others are not convinced by the examples of subversion offered by Butler’s theorizations of agency, and think that subversive performances such as drag, butch/femme, and trans practice have little political relevance to many women’s struggle against gender oppression. McNay (1999) and Fraser (1995) both assert that Butler’s account of agency is too abstract, and relies primarily on individualistic political practice. Nussbaum (1999) also criticizes Butler’s theorizations of power
and agency, accusing her of resorting to minor, individualistic acts of protest such as parody and
drag, which are irrelevant to certain classes of ‘oppressed women’.

In my opinion, Butler’s primary focus on discourse and individualist practice is not a
weakness but precisely the strength of her theory. This focus is closely connected to the locus of
potential agency she looks into, her emphasis on the contingency of subversive strategy, and her
resistance to a totalizing frame of universal political prescription, which risks the danger of
replacing one hegemonic structure with another. The criticism of her ideas, however, reminds
us that rather than being a universal all-encompassing theory of gender, Butler’s thought is most
beneficial when applied to the analysis of certain specific aspects of gender performance; for
instance, how an individual gender project is constructed and subversive practices are engaged at
the symbolic levels of verbal discourse and visual signs. My research on individual gender
projects, as seen through women’s oral narratives and visual records, thus can benefit from
Butler’s theory of gender that emphasizes the discursive formulation and subversion of gender at
individual levels, through both the body and speech.

The criticisms claiming that Butler focuses on discourse and representation and overlooks
the material realities of gender are also relevant to my project. For instance, Carrie Hull (1997)
points out that Butler’s rejection of materialism precludes a political analysis of capitalism, in
relation to society and economics, and that more is needed in order to theorize suffering in
relation to economic oppression (1997:32). McNay argues that Butler overlooks the social and
economic changes necessary for the resignification of terms such as “queer” (McNay 1999). My
focus on China forces me to situate my analysis of individual gender projects in their broader
historical, social and cultural context, as well as to consider the individual’s social location,
personal environment, and age/life span. This approach is reflected in the structure of the analysis of each woman’s life story, which starts with an overview of the historical and social context in which this woman lived, and a summary of the main changes in her life.

Some scholars have also cast doubt on the validity of Butler’s theory of gender performativity in general. Prosser rejects the notion of performativity and argues that rather than intentionally performing a certain gender, some transgendered individuals simply want to be what they believe they inherently are, and aspire to a non-performative identity (1998:32). Hood Williams and Cealy Harrison (1998) see Butler’s theory of performativity as simply replacing the essentialist biological notion of gendered identity with an alternative foundational gender ontology. Peter Digeser (1994) argues that explaining gender in terms of performativity oversimplifies the complexity of gender formation, just as the essentialist view did.

Others, like Bordo (1993), argue that Butler’s theorizations of the body and gender are too abstract and fail to situate resistance in specific cultural and historical situations. These criticisms point to a weakness in Butler’s theorizing: that she takes for granted and does not sufficiently specify the social context her theory derives from, or circumscribe its applicability. Butler comes from a Western philosophical tradition, and puts forward a theory of gender based on the modern sexual regime of Western societies, but she often talks about “gender” with no specific reference to time and place. This ungrounded (at least the ground is not stated) theory about an abstract “gender” gives the probably unintentional but nonetheless inevitable impression of being a universal claim, leaving her open to an accusation that she has often leveled at others. This abstract universalization also leads to the unrealistic expectation that Butler can provide a meta-narrative whose explanatory power can extend to pretty much
everything under the sun: hence the criticism of her emphasis on discourse and individualistic practice, and the claim that her theory is irrelevant to the practical problems of many “women”.

Butler’s theory is based on one historically and culturally specific system, the modern sexual regime of Western societies, which is just one among many other forms of gender system. In his study of the history of anatomical discourse in the pre-Enlightenment West, Thomas Laqueur (1990) demonstrated that gender used to be viewed as the more salient, primary category, from which beliefs about sex derived: in short, gender may be seen as determining sex rather than the reverse. He points out that the separation between sex and gender, and the idea that sex is more fixed than gender, is a product of a particular movement in the history of sex in relation to social roles in the West, as a result of developments in medical science and changes in social structure.

It is certainly necessary to bear these criticisms in mind, when applying Butler’s ideas in a Chinese context. For instance, she argues that the modern Western heterosexual subject is constructed through the abjection of the constitutive outsider, namely homosexuals. This argument does not fit the formation of gender subjectivity in China, especially prior to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, before the introduction and pathologizing of homosexuality and the construction of a hetero-homo sexual identity dichotomy, as discussed earlier. Aiming to theorize queer politics, Butler especially notices gender performances that destabilize the naturalized categories of gender, sex, and desire, and those which resignify bodily categories, as promising examples. In other words, “subversive” here means specifically undermining compulsory heterosexuality and its binary gender system. If what is abjected is not necessarily demarcated only by sexuality, but also by other gendered ways of being within the heterosexual
category, can a gender performance that does not involve the crossing of the binary divide also be subversive? Is acting queer the only way to be subversive? Or can acting straight differently also produce similar effects? What about gender practices that involve the critical reworking of gender norms within heterosexuality—a shaking up of those that are hegemonic and those that are abjected? These questions are central in examining the implications of the stories I collected from Chinese women.

**Gender (as) project**

In this study, I choose to focus on the linguistic and visual aspects of gender performance in selected women’s oral and visual self-presentation through narrative, seeking to understand how such performances become *performative* (producing what they begin by imitating or rehearsing). Butler’s approach to the acquisition and transmission of gendered identities through performances that entail different versions of embodiment (including speech) will be combined with my own concept of “gender (as) project”, which I will define and explore below, at the level of official and unofficial state discourse as well as individual expression.

Wittig (1992) used the term “project” to refer to the repeated, obligatory corporeal endeavor of materializing the body to make the physical self become a cultural sign — a dichotomized sexual difference regulated by compulsory heterosexuality. Butler also mentioned “gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end” (1990:177). Inspired by the connotations of the term “project”, which suggests an intentional will, I use it to emphasize the construction of gender as a purposefully designed social project with interrelated components or
sets of signifiers, and often with specific contours and conscious goals. I understand Butler’s (1990) discussion of gender performativity as emphasizing the performing stage of a gender project, the enactment of gender scripts and the subversive possibilities that are also opened up by the realization of gender as performance. As I have demonstrated earlier, gender perceptions in twentieth-century China often involved the process of translating foreign gender discourses and indigenizing them. In this study, I extend the discussion further by attending to the often conscious (but not necessarily critical) design and performance of individual gender projects that cite broader normative and collective ones, conveying strategic mobilization of various Chinese and foreign gender models including those that are abjected by dominant gender discourse. As McNay (1999) points out, Butler’s account of agency is based on a negative model of action, as the subversion and displacement of constraining social norms. Understanding gender as a designed “project” enables me to shift the discussion of agency to the creative dimensions of action, where actors take an active approach not only to subvert dominant models but also to initiate and institute new possibilities of gender enactment by appropriating various discourses from both local and global sources.

In China, the radical changes that are evident in perceptions and projections of gender highlight the fact that sexual difference and gender categories are not given, but manipulated more or less consciously and even celebrated by official cultural discourses, and also by individuals. Over the last century many women in China have experienced the disruption and overthrow of gender models that appeared to be hegemonic, and the radical promotion of new gender models. For instance, the Maoist gender project represents a radical transformation of many (but not all) of the traditional Confucian notions that preceded it. Comprehensive design,
innovative action, and intensive imposition were necessary to make it acceptable. Old pre-Mao ideas did not disappear overnight, but existed as the spectre haunting the present gender construction. In post-Mao China, we observe the same story, but this time with the Maoist gender project abjected, while modern reincarnations of other previously marginalized gender models, combined with foreign models, occupy the normative position.

These radical reconfigurations of gender require an analysis that treats the structure of gender not as one static and stand-alone system, but as multiple and dynamic, shifting and competing, overlapping and contradictory. They call for an analysis that traces historical change as well as cross-cultural intersections. The concept of gender as project enables me to discern and capture the dynamic, multiple, and hybrid gender constructions that co-exist in contemporary China. The Maoist gender project that I invoke in the title of this dissertation points to the construction of funü as revolutionary proletarian women, and the prioritization of women’s identity as socialist labourers rather than as wives and mothers, and their class identity over gender. While the construction of a gender project takes place at various national, group, and individual levels, my examination of the Maoist and post-Mao gender projects will explore how they are manifested, received, and subverted at the individual level. In the stories conveyed in this study, each woman enacts an individual gender project in and through her narrative, citing not only the current norms but also other gender models, often represented by female family members who belong to an older generation. The contours and strategies of their projects vary according to their circumstances, as illustrated by the four stories that will be examined in detail. Even though they are quite different in many ways, in all of them the Maoist gender project re-appears in one way or another, in their post-Mao era narrative, often as the abjected constitutive
other, the spectre. Rather than being banished or buried, the Maoist funü persists in many post-Mao women’s individual gender projects, through conscious rejection, unconscious abjection, or as ambiguous, shifting loyalty or nostalgia.

**Feminism and narrative studies**

Butler’s theorizing about gender offers a useful point of departure for a contextualized analysis of contemporary Chinese women’s conceptualizations of femininity and what constitutes a satisfactory gender performance. In the accounts to be analyzed, changes in physical appearance play an important role in revealing shifts in the models proposed and/or adopted. As the participants presented a verbal narrative about their lives as women, the telling of their stories also conveyed the construction and contestation of prescribed gendered subjectivity through discourse. Narrative studies provided a framework to examine more closely the form of their oral life stories. Following feminist theorists in this area, I assume that women’s storytelling, and oral life histories in particular, are important sites for the construction of knowledge from a feminist/female perspective and can convey alternative, personal perceptions about the performance and subversion of gender.

“Narrative” is understood here as having both ontological and epistemological dimensions and functions. The exchange of stories is a way of producing and acquiring knowledge, imposing form and meaning on experience, and providing a contextualized “narrative truth” (Bruner 1991) that is inseparable from the identity of the teller. By listening to a range of accounts that may contest (as well as adopt) dominant (official or cultural) “meta-
narratives,” we can discover the complexity of the intersections of various competing discourses. In line with Butler’s idea that gender identity is constituted in and through discourse, narrative theorists also argue that paying attention to how the story is told reveals that a sense of self in relation to the social world is not a pre-linguistic given but a result of discursive praxis, constructed in and through language and particularly through the exchange of narratives of various kinds (Kerby 1986). Narrative is deeply constitutive of what we perceive as “reality”, as well as essential for individual identity construction (Dienstag 1997; MacIntyre 1984; Nash 1994; Taylor 1989): our “life” (including our gendered identity) is a narrative achievement (Bruner 1987).

Women’s Studies have been at the forefront of narrative studies and numerous specialists from many disciplines work in this area. They often emphasize the relationship between auto-biography and gender construction, and the ways in which women’s self-representations contest master-scripts through innovative formal structures. Women’s narratives, whether polished and published or informal and relatively private, play an essential role in understanding what it means to be a “woman” in various contexts and how women resist imposed definitions both in their lives and in the stories they tell about them.

*Feminist criticism of traditional narrative forms*

Feminist theory asserts that systems of meaning are never gender-neutral but bear the gendered marks of their originators and their receivers. When participating in narrative practices, women need to be cautious in adopting or adapting established models and strategies, including assumptions about genre, plot, and style or rhetoric. Teresa de Lauretis (1987) and Sidonie
Smith (1987) have pointed out that when narrating their lives, women often have difficulty in adjusting to narrative forms derived from masculine models and norms. De Lauretis (1987) argues that because conventional narrative forms are patriarchal, women have learned to read and experience narrative texts through masculine eyes, and tend to see themselves through “the male gaze”. Smith has summed up many studies of autobiography that have shown how that genre was constructed according to ideologies of male selfhood that posit women as the “incomplete man” or the essentialized Other (1987). Some critics, like Maria Brewer (1984), claim that the classic “plot” of many male life-stories reveals a “discourse of male desire recounting itself through the narrative of adventure, project, enterprise, and conquest”, with the conquest often including that of a woman (Lanser, 1986:687). Lancer (1986) showed that traditional narrative theorists defined plot in terms of units of anticipation and fulfillment, or problem and solution, assuming a power and possibility available to the hero that may be inconsistent with women’s experiences or desires. Women’s lives are often seen as “plotless” in traditional narratology, aside from the predictable fate (assumed to be fulfillment) of marriage and motherhood. Like Nancy Miller (1988) Lancer urges us to reexamine theories of plot and story, as well as examples by women, and to seek new language and narrative forms to convey women’s attempts to “make sense” of their lives.

Hélène Cixous (2000), followed by other poststructuralist feminist theorists in France (including Luce Irigaray) and elsewhere, asserted that women are ultimately unrepresentable in language, when it is seen as “the discourse of man”. Patrizia Violi (1992) argues that since most women still do not have social and collective forms of self-representation which they have produced themselves as subjects, they have to negotiate with existing language structures and
social representations of what a ‘woman’ is. When women are invited to speak, they have to speak ‘like men’, or as men imagine women should speak, in order to be heard. Smith (1987) argues that when women write and tell their lives, they often convey their feelings, experiences, hopes, and identities in a way that lives up to conventional patriarchal notions of being female. For example, they tend to prioritize partnership in a heterosexual marriage above female friendship, or the joys of domestic life over their desire for more education, or envy of men’s more public life, rather than longing for community with other women. Irigaray (1985) also showed that women can implicitly place quotation marks around such accounts, showing in subtle ways that they are quoting from a pre-scribed script, consciously performing a role and therefore potentially questioning or contesting it by revealing it as impersonation or masquerade.

The context in which women’s narratives are produced and received controls how they are interpreted (for example, as conforming or parodic). As Dale Spender (1980) pointed out, since the general context of narrative production and dissemination is based on gendered, male-centred expectations, women’s public discourse may be contaminated by internal or external censorship. Writing/telling publicly has often been synonymous with writing for men (Lanser 1986: 684), and narrative forms associated with women’s own desire to write for themselves or other women have mostly been in the private domain (journals, letters) or the denigrated sub-genre of popular “female” (romance) fiction, producing texts which reproduce models that are “culturally mandated, internally policed and hegemonically poised” (de Lauretis, 1987:5).

Feminist criticism of traditional autobiography points out that its form is not only patriarchal and masculine, but also heterosexist. As Sedgwick argued, knowledge is constrained by and modeled on ideologies that support heterosexuality (1990). William Stephenson (2000)
notes that traditional narrative systems are dominated by a “heteronarrative”, organized around the patriarchal goals of marriage and reproduction, enforcing “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 1980). Marilyn Farwell points out that the traditional narrative as an “institution” depends on “gender and sexuality alignments” and normative sexual expectations, its narrative patterns are the condition of and reaffirm a heterosexual dyad with male centrality (1996: 26, 41). Most literary representations of women have been based on “the plot of heterosexual romance” (Julie Abraham 1996:xix), even those produced by women, making lesbian experiences un-representable, and invisible (Hallett 1999:79).

The limits of narrative

Women’s narratives, even those that reveal conformity, are useful for our understanding of social life and the production of gendered subjectivities, but there are some further limitations in using narratives as research data and narrative analysis as a method. On the one hand, we need to be conscious of the subjectivity of truth claims derived from narratives. On the other, we must acknowledge that even “scientific” truth is based on narrative, and data are always shaped by interpretation. We also need to be cautious and aware of the danger of “narrative imperialism” (Phaelan 2005), of reducing (or expanding) everything to narrative. As Strawson (2004) warns us, we need to consider whether the grand narrative of self-as-narrative (the argument for “narrative identity”) can be “one size fits all”. My understanding is that individuals have different relationships to both meta-narratives and personal stories, based on differences of gender, class, ethnicity, age etc. At a theoretical level, people are able to experience selfhood as narrative in different degrees. At a practical level, not everyone is a good storyteller and not
every woman will find narrative (especially textual or oral narrative) the best way to express herself.

Gender is clearly established and represented discursively, through language (with all the problems of translation that entails). The choice of words and narrative structure may also deploy stereotypes about women’s modes of self-expression, or display resistance to them. Oral narrative has the advantage of revealing directly how the narrators negotiate the use of a particular language, but it alone has limited capability to provide a rich sense of the visual aspects of a particular gender project and how the multiple cultural significations of gender work. In addition, gender as a signifying practice is also produced and performed through “the stylization of the body” (Butler 1990: 140), relying on a shared sign system that encodes gender. Cultural significations are inscribed on, shown through, and materialized through bodily gestures, expressions, movements, and styles of various kinds. The materialization of gender through body-language is extended through clothing, hairstyle etc. It can be asserted that the visual aspect is as important as the discursive aspect of gender signification, if not more so. In the stories to be examined here, the women’s performance and depiction of their gender through external physical appearance will be given as close attention as their use of narrative form and language.

“Women-centred and women-defined discourse”

Narrative constructs subjectivity and vice-versa, since the structure of subjectivity is inscribed in the deep structure of narrative itself (Violi 1992). In order to make the meaning and experience of being a woman speakable, symbolized, and heard, women must seek or invent ways of
representing themselves, to construct and convey their “other” subjectivity (Violi 1992). Smith suggests that a “women-centered and woman-defined discourse” (1987: 59) is required so that women’s experiences and feelings can be represented in their narratives. Many women in the West have now attempted to experiment with “alternative languages of self and storytelling”, including consciously describing experiences that would not be considered interesting or appropriate autobiographical material by traditional male standards and trying out new forms or media of expression (Smith 1987).

While some may question the concept of a “women-centered and woman-defined discourse” as essentialist, my understanding is that a differentiated woman’s voice can derive from one’s gendered social location of being constructed, socialized, and positioned as a woman in a male-dominant world, rather than from one’s biology. The focus is thus not on the sex of author or reader as a predetermined condition of “feminine” narrative production, nor should we assume a correspondence between a subject’s sex, gender, and sexuality; rather, we can trace how gender is constructed in women’s lives not prior to but through the process of becoming a woman, in narrative processes, and analyze the gendered context in which specific women’s lives are situated and their narratives are produced.

Following Smith’s advice to experiment with alternative narrative strategies that “shift the terms of representation, and (…) produce the conditions of representability of another—and gendered—social subject” (Smith 1987: 109), I chose to develop an innovative interviewing method. Three aspects were different from most oral life-history procedures: (1) I used dialect and hybrid languages in the interviewing process, drawing attention to the situation of both speaker and listener in relation to language; (2) I used a “telling and retelling” interview method
by asking participants to re-tell their lives a second time, probing more deeply into gender-related issues, making their narrative choices and the effects of the first telling more noticeable;

(3) I requested visual records of their lives (such as photo albums and art) as a complement to their oral, recorded stories, in order to juxtapose their physical performances of embodied gender with their narrated stories.

**Language and alternative storytelling**

The range of women I was able to interview in China led me to consider the implications of narrating in different dialects or multiple (or hybrid) languages as an important element in opening up alternative ways of telling their lives. I conducted four interviews in the participants’ hometown dialect (Sichuan dialect, which I speak), rather than using the official spoken language, Mandarin (see Chapter 3). “Chinese” is an umbrella term for many different forms of written and spoken Chinese languages. Spoken Chinese comprises many regional varieties, and the English word *dialect* is used to translate the Chinese term *fangyan* (literally “regional speech”) for these varieties. Some of the dialects are not mutually intelligible. In Mainland China, Mandarin is taught starting in elementary school, and the entire educational system is in Mandarin. Yet for many people from the southern regions, Mandarin is not their mother tongue or everyday language. They speak their own dialects at home, and often only speak Mandarin at school and on official or professional occasions. Even for those interviews conducted in Mandarin, many participants still from time to time resorted to using certain expressions unique to their local dialects (for people from the North, this means variations of Mandarin), to articulate certain reactions and feelings. The story in Chapter 3 also shows that dialect is not
immune from the invasion of official discourses, and its use may not necessarily prevent participants from resorting to master-scripts in the representation of their experience.

Three of the fifteen participants had studied or lived outside of China. When they told their life story (one in the Sichuan dialect) to me, a Chinese researcher based in Canada, they sometimes used English words in their narratives. One woman, a lesbian artist (Chapter 4), has had long exposure to transnational queer culture and the global gay network. Not surprisingly she also used English to evoke certain queer issues. The use of English words was partially facilitated by the specific narrative context, when both participant and researcher spoke the same second language. This brought a hybrid quality to the narrative exchange, involving not only language choice, but translation and synthesizing, appropriation of different ideological resources, and the construction of hybrid cosmopolitan gender identities. The mix of English words in these women’s narratives opens up the potential to disrupt the dominant, masculine and heterosexual, language system representing a culture that makes women’s and lesbians’ experience and desires unrepresentable.

**Telling and retelling**

The conventional way of conducting a life story interview is the “stream of consciousness” (Atkinson 1997:32) approach, in which a researcher invites participants to tell their life stories with minimal interruption and intervention. The researcher will ask open-ended questions only when necessary, in order to elicit the telling of the life story and to encourage the narrator to continue. It is generally recommended that in a life story interview, the fewer questions asked, the better (Atkinson 1997:42). Letting the narrator hold the floor not only leads to the free
association of thoughts, it also makes it possible to analyze what has been called the participant’s “meaning-frame” (Hollway and Jefferson 2000), which is the way she organizes and phrases her life, thoughts, and feelings.

However, there are limitations to this interviewing method, because of the masculine conventions traditional narrative forms convey, as discussed earlier. As feminists (such as Smith, 1987) have argued, women often unconsciously follow a masculine paradigm of what is important and worthy of telling, and minimize or leave out women-specific experiences. It is hard to go beyond and revise “master-scripts” when employing only the conventional life story interview method, when the storyteller is not intentionally reflective about her choice of narrative models.

Rachel DuPlessis (1985) asserts that one way to subvert and rewrite master narratives so that women can be represented is to change the conventional patterns of narrative closure. She suggests a “writing beyond the ending” (1985:4) strategy that rejects the “happily ever after” endings of fairy tales (see also Miller 1988). To offer alternative narrative closures or non-closures, women who narrate their life stories can be encouraged and given space to tell and retell their stories, to verbalize and examine the contradictions of their lives, enabling them to articulate the complexities, confusions, and indeterminacies of lived reality and thwarting the inclination to end with “happily ever after.” Feminist critics and theorists who work on “lesbian autobiography” argue that differences in desire change an autobiographical narrative’s content and form. Lesbians can disrupt patriarchal narrative conventions through excess, manipulation, and alternative plots, as they narrate “within, under, and beside accepted narratives” (Johnston 2007: 7).
Duplessis and many other theorists focus mostly on written accounts. How can “narrating beyond the ending” be facilitated in an oral life story context? My solution was to conduct the interviews in two parts: in the first part the research participant tells her life-story straightforwardly, as she sees fit, and in the second she retells it, in response to open-ended questions from the interviewer.

The first telling gives prominence to the narrator’s agency and imagination, as she decides not only the content but also the structure of the story. The first telling enabled me to examine their representation and interpretation of their life through both the content and the narrative form. The second telling often takes the form of a conversation, with my gender-specific probing intervening through open-ended the questions. They focused on women’s life cycle (including intergenerational differences), family relationships, love and marriage, childbirth and motherhood, and female friendships. I invited them to comment on their understanding of gender identity in relation to femininity, especially with regard to appearance (fashion and style). At the end, I asked each woman to reflect upon the storytelling process and give her assessment of her life. I used a checklist of questions adapted from the sample life-story interview questions provided by Atkinson (1997:43-54), with some revisions. I made notes when I listened to each life-story, and invited further commentary on any aspects that seemed to be missing. By attending to what was absent in the first story, I gained a more in-depth understanding of each woman’s life, based not only on what was told, but what was initially silenced.

Since many of my questions are gender-related, they often triggered the participant’s memories and led her to tell more stories that revealed unexpected or hidden aspects of her life,
as well as encouraging her to comment on gender issues and freely discuss them. The life story told in the first part is often invaded, revised or replaced by the retelling and reflection in the second part. Contradictions and conflicts often emerge, as will be seen in the four stories that I will analyze in depth. In my analysis, I indicate whether the narrative extracts are from the first or second part of the interview when I cite them; this should help the reader to contextualize the narratives, and speculate on the gains of the retelling.

This process of further discussion through open-ended questions creates the conditions and space for women to tell “beyond the ending”. In this process, the researcher and the participants work together to explore alternative ways of telling, knowing and representing women’s lives. Their cooperation creates a feminist narrative project that goes beyond the usual narrative conventions of what is worth telling and how, and becomes a collaborative endeavor enabling conflicting, desires and previously un-representable experiences to be conveyed. The gaps, contradictions, and revisions between the two parts of the storytelling bring hidden aspects and emotions to the foreground. The retelling empowers the narrator as she gains self-knowledge through telling her life as a woman and reflecting on it.

*Juxtaposing verbal and visual representations*

As a further stimulus to reflection, and a means of reviving memory and rethinking some of what was told the first time around, I also invited the participants to show me their personal photo albums (or art work), which convey a different type of information about physical appearance in relation to gender, over time. Considering the limits of oral narrative, paying attention to these visual images helped me work against the conventional, culturally consecrated primacy accorded
to the mind over the body, and provided access to alternative ways of knowing. In Chapter 4, dealing with an artist, I use two interrelated sources, verbal and visual, to better understand the artist’s self-representation in images and words. Attending to both helped me explore the interrelations between image and language, and between the “self” as constructed through autobiographical narration and the artist’s depiction of her own body in her paintings. In both cases, what is not said, or not shown, but may be implied, provokes a reflection on the limits of the sayable or showable (or the hearable or seeable), and the relationship between them. While I have not made extensive use of the photographic material provided by other participants in this project, it is an aspect that I intend to follow up on in future research.

Master-scripts and Chinese scripts

While Western feminist narrative studies provide important insights, in the course of this dissertation I also reflected on difficulties posed by the use of Western feminist theories as a lens to examine Chinese women’s experiences. Even though the idea of a “masculine master-script” is useful in keeping me alert to the problematic relationship between women and narrative, I found that this concept sometimes seemed too general and abstract, hard to pinpoint, and lacking in applicability. In analyzing the stories in depth, I explored strategies to identify not only generally recognized masculine master-scripts but specific models unique to the Chinese cultural context, such as "speaking bitterness" and “Cultural Revolution as the dark age” storylines (Chapter 2).
I also found that there is no single “masculine master-script” to be identified and dealt with, rather, master-scripts take culturally and historically specific forms and manifest themselves through numerous variations. Furthermore, the “masculine master-script” does not always have a coherent and therefore readily recognizable presence, but is often fragmented and illusive, its power and influence on a certain narrative depending on the narrator’s exposure to and reception of it. Especially in oral narrative, the pre-defined path may be disrupted by language and the telling context. In the stories I collected the masculine master script did not always have a strong presence, and in some cases it was significantly weakened when a less-educated and less well-read rural woman narrates her life in her hometown dialect (Chapter 3) associated with informal conversation rather than formal accounting for one’s actions. Throughout the process, I was made aware of my own role as addressee, occupying an in-between status of intermediary between Chinese and Western contexts.

A critical and self-reflective approach

In this research, rather than drawing on one single theory to explain Chinese women’s lives, I engage in a wide range of theoretical discussions, in relation to the specific lives of women I interviewed. My approach is inductive, exploring my own ways of approaching these stories, of analyzing, interpreting, and theorizing these women’s lives, through repeatedly listening to their narratives. When themes and patterns emerge from these stories, I examine existing research to help me understand and interpret them. Theories and concepts have been called upon after my listening to these narratives, rather than being chosen beforehand. They offer me vocabulary and
ways of conceptualizing themes and issues, and put my analysis of Chinese women’s lives in
dialogue with other feminist works, both inside and outside of China, in the Western or the Third
World. The core value of this research lies in its engagement with a wide range of intersecting
feminist theorizing about women’s lives around the world, to which I hope to offer my own
insights as a Chinese woman transplanted to North America. In this process, theory is borrowed,
and returned with interest.¹⁷

The first two stories to be discussed (in Chapters 2 and 3) are from women who have
never left China, but whose experiences in relation to changing gender models have been very
different because of their contrasting class backgrounds. The third conveys a lesbian life-story in
a specifically Chinese context, where national or class identity is eclipsed by the transnational
dimensions of global queer politics. The last is that of a successful, cosmopolitan
businesswoman who has lived abroad and seems to represent fulfillment of the current dream.
Yet her story, like the others, reveals ambivalent negotiation of Chinese and Western models of
what it means to “become a woman”. Rather than using a theory to test my hypothesis, or China
as a test case to examine Western theory, my analysis critically contextualizes theories, and
consciously situates these women’s experiences in the context of Chinese history and the present
social and political environment. By doing so, I explore the possibility of bringing forth an
alternative way of approaching feminist analysis and theorizing, so that “a new understanding of
the grounds of reciprocity and power relationship among different feminisms [can] be envisioned”
(Lydia H. Liu 1999: 36).

¹ Evans argues that these understandings make “normal” bodily functions a sign of women’s weakness and
contribute to the pathologizing of Chinese women’s bodies, reminding Chinese women that their sexuality is fundamentally defined by their reproductive function. As some critics suggest, Evans’ claim valorizes the “truth” of Western scientific perception of the female body and fails to understand the internal rationality of Chinese medical discourses on the body and female sexual health. See Jeffreys and Ross 1998.

2 Levenson argued that “culture is closed”, whereas Schwartz, argued that “culture is open”.

3 In Voicing Concerns: Critical Chinese Inquiries, Gloria Davis (2001) divided scholarship on China into Anglophone and Sinophone. I use this term to refer to scholarships written in English, by researchers in Europe, North America, and Australia, including both white feminists and those of Chinese descent. I put diverse studies into the same category as they are all more or less speaking to a shared intellectual community.


7 See, for instance, the activities of a feminist translation group (“East meets West”) in Beijing (Ge and Jolly 2003; Wang 1998).

8 See also Louie 2002; Louie and Low 2003.

9 For instance, this concern is expressed by Nancy Fraser and Sevla Benhabib, and Butler responds that the deconstruction of the subject does not mean its destruction, but involves an inquiry into the processes of its construction (Benhabib et al 1995:36).

10 See Somers and Gibson’s (1994) distinction between different types of narrative.


13 For instance, Cantonese, which is spoken in Hong Kong and some parts of south China, is incomprehensible for a Mandarin-only speaker. Speakers of different dialects of Chinese have historically used one single formal written language. The contemporary Chinese written language is based on the grammar and vocabulary of Mandarin.

14 Mandarin is a category of related Chinese dialects spoken across most of northern and southwest China. “Standard” Mandarin refers to the standard Beijing dialect of the Mandarin language. As Rey Chow (2000:8) notes, as “standard Chinese” in the discipline of Chinese studies outside of China, Mandarin is also the “white man’s Chinese”.

75
There are limitations to this project too. When the participants are good storytellers and feel more comfortable talking about their lives in front of a stranger, the telling flows smoothly, their stories are told with fewer interruptions, and the structure of their life stories are more a product of their own. Some participants were not very good at telling their life stories; they often stopped and needed my guiding questions to move on. In these cases, the structure of their life stories is more heavily influenced by my questions and is less an independent product of their own.

Atkinson’s sample life story interview questions are not designed in gender specific ways and are heterosexual-orientated. I revised them to reflect women’s life cycles and concerns, and added some questions about gendered appearance, and some to include same-sex relationships. Sample questions are attached in Appendix II.

I am rephrasing Nicky Hallet’s remark: “In the economy of words, language is borrowed, if only temporarily, and returned with interest.” (Hallett 1999 23)
Chapter 2

Born into the Mao Era: Lin’s Life Story

I will start my examination of the Maoist gender legacy with the life story of Lin, a fifty-year old urban woman who grew up in the Mao era and is now living in Beijing. Lin’s narrative sheds light on the configuration of the Maoist funü and how gender, class, and political membership intersect to define who qualified as one. Her narrative also reveals how the production of the Maoist funü as the normative ideal was sustained through “socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility” (Butler 1999: 23), which illegitimated those gendered beings who failed to conform to the funü prescription. Furthermore, having spanned both the Maoist and post-Mao eras, Lin’s life story demonstrates how the encounter of the Maoist gender project with the post-Mao reconfiguration of gender is played out in an individual woman’s gender project, and how a certain version of the Maoist funü inside Lin haunts her present-day negotiation with the post-Mao nüxing. To contextualize Lin’s life story, I will begin with a brief survey of the Maoist women’s liberation project and its post-Mao critique, as well as the class system in Maoist China.
Context

Women’s Liberation in the Mao era

As Lisa Rofel (1999) has demonstrated in her book *Other Modernity*, gender is one of the central areas in which modernity is imagined and desired in twentieth century China. “Women’s liberation” was, and still officially is, part of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) revolutionary agenda, and the Maoist gender project is at the centre of the People’s Republic of China’s (PRC) imagined vision of Chinese modernity. The PRC’s constitution, policies, and legislation are supposedly built upon “Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong thought”. “Women’s liberation” in China was largely guided by Mao’s interpretations of the May Fourth Movement and based on Marxist analysis of women’s oppression.¹ The terms *funü jiefang* (妇女解放 women’s liberation) and *funü yundong* (妇女运动 the women’s movement) were quickly taken over and used by the CCP, and women’s liberation was explained as achievable only through socialist revolution and women’s participation in productive labour. However, under Mao, western feminism was condemned at the time of the Revolution as bourgeois and individualist, and outspoken feminist women like Ding Ling (1942), who dared to criticize the party line on women, were punished for engaging in a type of “gender politics” deemed to be in conflict with party policy.²
In her analysis of the historical changes in the linguistic construction of “women” in twentieth-century China, Barlow (1994, 2004) points out that before the early twentieth century “funü” (婦女) was a relational subject produced within differential kin linkages. It signifies the collectivity of kinswomen in the semiotics of Confucian family doctrine. The term nüxing (女性 female sex) has been invoked as a discursive sign and a subject position in the context of anti-Confucian discourse since the 1920s. This conception changed the foundation of women’s identity from kin categories to sexual physiology. The term nuxing (女性) operates in the framework of the Western, male/female binary. It valorizes notions of female passivity, biological inferiority, intellectual inability, sexuality, and social absence. Rejecting the term nüxing for its bourgeois orientation, the Chinese Communist Party appropriated the term “funü” (婦女) to designate a collective political subject. Funü, or the masses of Chinese women, become the subject-effect of state discourses and a by-product of the Party’s legal, ideological, and organizational apparatus.

As Barlow notes, the Maoist creation of the category of funü was not just a linguistic event but was embedded in a semiotic system that explicitly linked theory and practice (2004: 190). In reconfiguring gender relations and roles, it was implemented through public policies that affected both the private sphere (the family: equality of the sexes within consensual marriage, availability of contraception and family planning), and the public one (women’s full participation in the workforce, entailing equal rights to education and activity outside the home). These public policies partially reconfigured gender relations in both the home and the workplace, as well as women’s relation to the state. The rhetoric of these policies enabled the production of both symbolic and material effects, taking the idea of funü beyond its linguistic significance and
changing collective perceptions of women in society, including women’s own perceptions of themselves. “Women’s liberation” became part of a “universally validated and internalized notion of justice” (Lin Chun 2006:117), a goal accompanied by and accomplished through the redefinition of women.

With changing expectations of women’s contribution to society and modified gender roles and behaviors a new, strong image of the ideal woman came into being in Chinese history: the Maoist woman, with a renewed name, funü, as a revolutionary subject. Funü, a new model of gendered being enabled by these public policies, was consolidated as a socialist subject through various symbolic representational practices. Fulian (妇联), the All China Women’s Federation (ACWF), was designated as the political representative of funü (妇女). As Barlow (1994, 2004) and others (such as Wang Zheng 2005) point out, until recently, Fulian has been in charge of all inscriptions of womanhood in official discourse, and retained the power to determine what constituted a funü. The celebration of Women’s Day (funüjie) is another important symbolic event that was institutionalized to propagandize the importance of funü. The first celebration of Women’s Day was announced in December 1949, immediately following the establishment of the PRC.4

Propagating the new model of funü involved the reconfiguration of femininity and masculinity through stylization of the body. Funü was made present by pervasive images of strong, active women engaged in physical work or traditional male occupations. Funü possess a re-defined “femininity”: a revolutionary proletarian womanhood that incorporated some aspects of traditional masculinity. Being a woman no longer implied traditional femininity associated with fragility or weakness, but revolutionary, proletarian force. What were previously
considered valuable qualities in women (domesticity, tenderness, goodness, moderation, humility, austerity, and tolerance: wen liang gong jian rang) became regarded as feudal, petit-bourgeois attributes, not suitable for funü because “revolution is not a dinner party” (Mao 1964).\(^5\) Characteristics earlier described as deviant, inappropriate, or vulgar because they were associated with lower-class men and women rather than upper-class women became positive attributes of the funü, who could speak loudly, adopt cruder body language, and appear more aggressive.

This change has often been referred to as the “masculinization of Chinese women” or the de-emphasizing of gender difference. This interpretation, however, results from a conflation of gender and sexuality. As Roberts (2004a, 2004b, 2009) argued, rather than erasing gender difference, the Maoist gender project reassigns the feminine/masculine binary on a class basis, with the revolutionary masses valued as virile and strong (including fighting women), and more educated or sophisticated “counter-revolutionaries” derided and femininized as useless and non-productive.\(^6\) The supposed minimalization of gender difference according to appearance (by wearing uniforms, for example), was in fact less rigorous than is often assumed. There were actually clear-cut differences between women and men’s clothes (Finnane 1999, 2008). Wearing plain, faded, and patched clothes with no personal style or adornment signaled not so much a rejection of femininity as of the bourgeois lifestyle, and implied identification with the proletariat (Chen 2004). While the gender line was re-drawn or sometimes blurred when it came to the expression of femininity and masculinity, the regulation of women’s sexuality and reproduction largely remained under a compulsory heterosexual framework. Even though women’s sex-specific needs were ignored, and the funü’s body is a labouring body that does not menstruate,
give birth, feel sexual desire, or seek out pleasure (Barlow 2004: 275), women’s reproductive body was scientifically constructed and closely controlled by eugenic discourse, public hygienic campaigns, and increased population control through family planning (Evans 1997). Pre-marital chastity and sexual fidelity within marriage were required for both men and women. Rather than totally breaking away from traditional patriarchal ideas, the Maoist gender project actually espoused them in its strict control over women’s bodies and persistent gender division of labour (Stacey 1983).

It is important to note that the Maoist refiguration of gender changed over time. As Barlow’s analysis (2004: 57-8) of the category of funü shows, before its political closure in 1949, funü inside the Soviet state had taken a range of subject positions beyond the reach of family and feudalism. While funü was positioned as an agent of politics outside of domestic closure before the late 1930s and 1940s, it was later reformulated through political processes that retained women and men in a sphere of politicized domestic relations. The ACWF was closed down (though later revived) in 1968 during the Cultural Revolution, after being accused of raising gender issues in opposition to class interests, and of distracting women from political life by focusing too much on family problems. There are also gaps and discrepancies between normative prescriptions and lived realities. Other gendered existences that are excluded from the statist category of Maoist funü persisted at the periphery and constantly disrupted and contested the centrality of funü. Furthermore, women’s reactions and relationships to the Maoist gender project were (and still are) complex and diverse, depending on their class, age, and other social locations.
In the early 1980s, while the newly restored fulian (in 1978) sought to reassert its claim to represent the nation’s women and reinsert them into post-Mao political ideology, public debate questioned fulian’s position as representing Chinese women and the Party-mandated women’s liberation. These debates challenged the Maoist state’s exclusive control over Chinese women’s liberation discourses and the definition of “women”, and anticipated a new female subject position unrepresented by the Maoist funü.

Li Xiajiang (1995) and other feminists accused the official Maoist gender project of obliterating sexual difference, denaturalizing women’s bodies, and making Chinese women into non-women. In both academia and popular culture there was a surge of interest in gender differentiation and discourses that affirm gender difference and heterosexuality (Woo 1994; Croll 1995). Discourses that define womanhood as a marker of “difference from men” and revalue femininity were developed as a political tool as part of “de-Maoicization” in the 1980s (Barlow 2004:275). The May Fourth conceptualization of nüxing, based on a heterosexist male/female binary, was recuperated in the post-Mao period as a means to resist the state inscription of funü. Some call this the “re-feminization” of Chinese women (Landsberger 1995:144, Luo and Hao 2007), characterized by a return to ‘traditional’ sex stereotypes. This process is parallel to what happened in post-communist Eastern Europe, where “tradition” was wielded to take back the state’s previous usurpation of familial patriarchal authority, and to recover men’s lost authority in nuclear families (Verdery 1996).

The image of a sexualized, glamorous nüxing is constructed in contradistinction to what now seems to some to be a ridiculous, unnatural, overly politicized, and sexless Maoist funü. Many young urban women in the present era have disassociated themselves from the term funü,
viewing it as passé, associated with the Mao era and the older generation of socialist women. The development of an increasingly publicly visible lesbian community in China in the last decade has further problematized funü as a category that was supposed to represent “Chinese women”. Many lesbians reject this term for its implicitly heterocentric orientation, and object to the heterosexual focus of fulian, funü’s official representative. They identify themselves as nüxing, nütongzhi or lala rather than funü, implying their refusal to be subsumed under the jurisdiction of fulian, and allegiance to a different political orientation (see Chapter 4).

The new category of women, the post-Mao “nüxing”, differs from the “masculinized” politically oriented Maoist funü by her more “natural”, “feminine” image and market orientation. Nüxing as consumer is associated with women from a different class location: she is a “modern”, educated younger urban woman from the emerging middle-class. As some researchers (such as Zhong 2006) point out, the changing terms and definitions for “women” are accompanied by radical shifts in class composition of the category of “women”, and the post-Mao nüxing represents a “bourgeois feminine imaginary” which is itself class-encoded, but erases the reality of class differentiations by evoking an essential “femininity” and “sexuality” (Zhong, 2006: 637, see also Chapter 2 for more discussion on this transition).

Parallel to the Maoist reorganization of gender relations through the construction of a new category of women, funü, was the reorganization and new interpretation of social relations through a theory of class that reversed the hierarchy of the class system and sought to eliminate it. Funü was never a category encompassing all the women of China, but designated women associated with certain classes - namely workers and peasants – the proletariat whose women were supposed to be revolutionary. It defined funü as a political category represented by
socialist workers, women building the nation, and excluded “other” women who did not fit into that category. Furthermore, Barlow (2004:62) points out that the Maoist gender discourse inscribed gender difference at the level of reproductive physiology, positioning material (re)production as the site of difference, but did not theorize personality in physiological terms. This leaves the realm of feeling and identity bound to social class rather than sex or “gender”. Class, rather than gender, became the primary site where personal identity was assumed to be constructed and one’s relationship with the other defined.

The class system in the Mao era

Following the Marxist-Leninist tradition, the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCP or “the Party”) analysed Chinese society and politics primarily in terms of class struggle. It defined the Chinese revolution as the overthrowing of the class order of the “old society”, and the creation of a new egalitarian society free of class exploitation and oppression, by eliminating the ruling class and property-owners such as capitalists and landlords. 10 Theories of class structure and class struggle were understood as scientific knowledge of social reality, and they created “a new consensus, a new public spirit, new social relationships and new institutions” in the new China (Billeter 1985:157-8). The connotations of “class” in China have changed over time since 1949. In the pre-liberation and immediate post-liberation period, the CCP leadership defined class primarily in socio-economic terms. A person’s class (jieji chengfen) was assigned according to the source of her/his economic support in the three years preceding 1949. The “class origin” of children follows the class of their parents, usually the father’s, and children experienced all its advantages or disadvantages (White 1976; Billeter 1985). In 1952, most of the Chinese
population was classified by class origin (Chan, Madsen, and Unger 1992; Hinton 1966), since “there is no one on earth who is not a member of a class” (Li Zhongyang 1956:9, cited in Kraus 1981:40).

People’s class status appeared in all their papers and in all the files that concerned them, because of great importance in the working world, in social relations, and especially in political life. Abstract classifications became lived representations, as the functions of class status include not only representation but also distribution of resources (Billeter 1985:P. 129-130; Kraus 1982; J. Watson 1984). Class determined the distribution of property, rights, opportunities, power, and prestige. In short, a person's entire social reality was defined in terms of her or his class label (White 1976: 2; Billeter 1985: 138, 146-7).

In the 1960s, there were two institutionalised definitions of “class’ in China, which White (1976) called the “old” and the “new” class systems. (1976:5). The ‘socialist transformation’ of 1955-56, the land reform and the subsequent collectivization of agriculture in the countryside, and the socialization of private industry and commerce in the city, had destroyed the foundation of the old propertied classes. However, the “old” class system had never been updated, and became a frozen set of markers of social status that indicated one’s historical location in a property-based stratification system which no longer existed (see Kraus 1981). Mao Zedong redefined “class” as an ideological category, which differs from Marx’s purely economic definition. In Mao’s work, the word “class” confuses class strata, occupations, and political attitudes, dissolving all these into “the people”. The terms “proletariat”, “peasant”, and “capitalist” do not refer to objective categories based on different relationships to the means of production, but to political attitudes and degrees of support for the Communist party (Harris
In this “new” class definition, classes are no longer defined by their relationship to the means of production, but to subjective factors. The definition takes into account personal class status, subjective attitude (sixiang) towards the socialist regime, and their individual behaviour (biaoxian) (Billeter 1985; White 1976). The “old” socio-economically based class categories are overlaid rather than replaced by the “new” understanding of class (White 1976).

This new explicit system of class status was introduced to control the comprehension of social relations, and the strict categorization of people created a new stratification system that institutionalised inequalities of power. Ironically, in a system ostensibly aimed at achieving equality, all the designations, whether derived from standard class analysis or referring to professional categories, constituted a new system of inequalities and established a society fashioned even more than before on a hierarchy of status that governed every individual’s life and relationships with others (Billeter 1985). In official rhetoric, the triad of worker-peasant-soldier (gong nong bing) was glorified as the most progressive and leading force in socialist China (Billter 1985). Two elite groups also emerged: a party-power elite with its own sense of superior solidarity and a life-style based on special economic and social privileges, and a new social elite composed of university-trained specialists and professionals (White 1976). These groups were called “cadres”, and constituted a class unto themselves, as the term “cadre” was attended by special rights and prestige (Billter 1985).

In the work-grades categorization of 1956, the “cadre category” (ganbubianzhi) belonged to a special system managed by personnel departments. A university graduate was classified into the “cadre category” on entering the workforce, while other employees, including workers and lower ranking civil servants, belonged to the “worker category” (gongren bianzhi) managed by
the labour department. The two distinct groups received different treatment in terms of salary, health benefits, housing, medical care, and retirement pensions. The cadres became a new elite group distanced from other citizens, and their children enjoyed superior status and privileges (Kraus 1981). This hierarchy is an essential component of Lin’s story.

**Lin’s life story**

![Lin](image)

Figure 1 Lin: Photo by Xin Huang, 2006, reproduced here with Lin’s permission.

**Outline**

To facilitate the analysis, I will provide a brief summary of Lin’s life story before proceeding to discuss it. Lin grew up in the Mao era, in one of these new elite cadre families. Her paternal grandfather was an old-style private-school teacher and a doctor. Her paternal grandmother (hereafter referred to as Nainai) was illiterate and had bound feet. She married into the family as the grandfather’s concubine, and had been a widow since her 30s. She lived with the family of her son, Lin’s father, who went to university in Beijing and became the principal of a high school
there. Lin’s mother worked in the Machinery Bureau in Beijing.

Lin was born in the Mao era, in 1956, and was fifty years old at the time of the interview. Her family moved to Beijing when she was two. Lin was brought-up by Nainai and is very close to her. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Lin’s father was beaten by the Red Guards and sent to a labour camp, and her mother was sent to work in a factory in Shaanxi province. Lin finished high school and was sent down to live and work in the countryside for two years (1974-1976, when she was aged 18-20). In 1976, Lin came back to Beijing and worked in a post office for five years. In 1980, she obtained a job as a librarian where her mother worked. In 1985, Lin quit that job and began work as an office administrator for a small company belonging to a university, with only two employees. She was still in this position when I interviewed her.

Lin married her husband, a doctor at a university hospital, in 1984 at the age of twenty-eight, and has a daughter. She lives in a three-bedroom apartment on the outskirts of Beijing, and drives to work. Lin’s daughter was in New Zealand, having just finished her university education, and was looking for a job there. Lin wants to travel or live abroad with her daughter after retiring.

Lin’s interview is composed of two parts: her telling of her life story, and our further discussion about her life based on open-ended questions. I have used information from both parts of the interview in my analysis, and indicate the sources of the extracts by noting whether they are from the first or second part of the interview. At the end, I will compare the two parts of the interview, and explore how the telling and retelling of Lin’s life helped generate new ways of representing and understanding her life as one woman in particular, and of thinking about women’s lives in general in China.
Jiatingfunü Nainai: the forgotten protagonist

In Lin’s family, there were two women in the house: Lin’s mother, who worked outside the home, and her Nainai, who lived with them as a housewife and primary caregiver. Lin grew up between these two models of being a woman: the traditional domestic funü represented by her Nainai, and the “liberated” working funü represented by her mother.

I actually grew up with my Nainai, because my parents … at that time everyone was a bit busy, so Nainai looked after me… My Nainai didn’t read a single word. She was a housewife. But my Nainai was a typical Shandong person. She was very bold and uninhibited, upheld justice and was very loyal to her friends. . . She stood up against the Japanese, and… because she had lived as a widow since she was in her 30s, she was very tough. Apparently my Nainai was my grandpa’s concubine...

(Lin 2006, part 1)

Being illiterate, with bound feet, and a former concubine, Nainai in many ways fits the stereotype of the traditional funü, who is simultaneously the victim and embodiment of traditional Chinese patriarchy. Lin’s narrative reveals her ambivalent attitude towards Nainai as a housewife (jiatingfunü), which is the social identity she used to describe her. The conjunction “but” in the narrative segment above indicates that Lin is aware of the negative connotation attached to Nainai’s social status, but tries to contest its negative association. She strategically deploys Nainai’s multiple identities and prioritizes her regional identity, one that is positively evaluated in Chinese society. She also emphasizes Nainai’s moral qualities as a loving, nurturing, and upright person. Her positive evaluation of Nainai challenges the negative perception of a housewife. In response to the often unacknowledged contribution and invisible social position of the jiatingfunü under the Maoist reconstruction of funü, Lin repeated four times...
in her narrative that she was brought up by her Nainai, giving her credit for caring for the young and sick, and all the family members’ daily life:

It’s my Nainai who brought me up, so the feeling I have for my Nainai seems much deeper than that for my parents….Then they suspected me having leukemia... During this period, to be honest, why did I like Nainai? My Nainai cooked about 100-200 batches of Chinese herbal medicine for me. …She also went to look for folk prescriptions for rheumatism treatment. She got tiger’s excrement from the zoo, wrapped the excrement around my legs, heated up a big rock, and pressed it over the excrement. The heat penetrates into the joints, to treat them, to treat rheumatism. It was very effective. My Nainai, with little bound feet, went to the zoo to collect the tiger’s excrement...

(Lin 2006, part 1)

Some feminists, such as Li Xiaojiang, argue that discourse about the emancipation of women in the Maoist period made participation in the workforce equivalent to women’s liberation. Yet women were still (like elsewhere) mainly responsible for reproductive and domestic labour, which often resulted in the “double burden” of being responsible for work inside and outside the home (Li Xiaojiang 1989). In practice, the picture is more complicated. Working women in the Maoist time, especially those living in the cities, had some resources and strategies to deal with their double burden. In order to enable women’s participation in “productive labour” (meaning paid formal labour outside of home), social services offered by the state and work units, such as canteen meals, nurseries and kindergartens, helped to relieve them of some domestic tasks. Even though the dining halls and collective childcare and collective washing and sewing circles disappeared after the ending of the Great Leap Forward campaign (Manning, 2006), they were still largely available in urban areas, mostly provided by working units. However, these services could not eliminate all the housework, and many families, like Lin’s, adopted a common coping strategy in calling on other (often older) female family
members with no formal employment to shoulder the task. They could be the grandmothers (often a mother-in-law who lived with the son’s family), or other female relatives such as cousins, nieces, aunts, or sisters.\textsuperscript{13} Lin mentioned that Nainai was called on for help not only by her family, but also by her uncle’s family. Female neighbours or colleagues might sometimes help as well. Before the Cultural Revolution some families hired maids or nannies, or left babies in the care of host families. After the Cultural Revolution started, hiring a maid or nanny was regarded as bourgeois exploitation and was forbidden. When some family members with rural \textit{hukou} (residence registration) were required to leave because of their suspicious political background or unlawful presence in the city, many urban families with working parents had to put their children in boarding nurseries, or send them to their parents’ families, either in the city or back in a rural hometown where there were women without formal employment who could provide care for their children. They are the unacknowledged domestic workers whose unpaid labour enabled other Maoist \textit{funü} to work outside the home.

The Maoist gender project aimed to divert women’s loyalty from the Confucian patriarchal family to the communist party-state. As previously discussed and by Barlow (1991, 2004), before the early twentieth century “\textit{funü}” (婦女) was not a sexual identity grounded in anatomical difference, but was situated within \textit{jia} (家, family) or a kinship network. When the communist party-state appropriated the term and made it designate a new political entity, it reconfigured women’s gender roles and resituated \textit{funü} within both the state (\textit{guojia} 国家/production) and the family (\textit{jiating} 家庭/reproduction). In other words, women were transformed from the women of the family/kin, to the women of the nation/family. Barlow further argues that since the modern socialist \textit{jiating} and Maoist \textit{guojia} coexisted in a
synecdochic unity and are concept-metaphors of each other, funü becomes the mediation between the modern state and the modern Chinese family. As Kimberly Manning (2006) points out, the Marxist materialist gender discourse promoted by the ACWF rearticulated rather than rejected the family; it emphasizes women’s economic independence, maternal health and family harmony, thus putting great stress on both women’s financial independence outside the home and their duties as wives and mothers inside the home.

Official discourse on women’s gender roles fluctuated along with the changing needs for labour after 1949. The official line encouraged women’s mass participation in the work force in the 1950s, but then changed to encouraging women to stay at home as good wives and mothers in the early 1960s when the economy slowed down and a labour surplus emerged. However, since the CCP’s Marxist analysis of women’s liberation theoretically regarded women’s participation in the labour force (and consequent economic independence) as the only means to women’s liberation, jiatingfunü were still looked on as women who had not yet been liberated. While many women were enlisted into the formal labour force after the establishment of the PRC and became “socialist labourers”, many others remained outside of the formal economy. Those who become funü were materially rewarded and recognized as the official collective female subject of the socialist state, while those who fell outside of the category of funü experienced marginalization and stigmatization.

Lin’s story about her Nainai lead me to look at a very important protagonist whom I have overlooked in my initial research design, a person who emerged as of central importance in many women’s life stories: the jiatingfunü grandmother. Among the fifteen women I interviewed, four were brought up by their jiatingfunü grandmothers, one was brought up by her jiatingfunü
mother, and one rural woman was brought up by her sister-in-law. Some had their grandparents living with them or nearby, lending helping hands. This group of women was largely invisible in the Maoist era, and not included in the representation of the Maoist funü as socialist labourer since they had no formal employment. As Evans (1999:75) points out, there is an erasure of the “old woman” in Cultural Revolution posters, contrary to the regular appearance of older men in authoritative positions, such as the arbiter, the potential head of the household, the old doctor, and the old peasant. When older women did appear in some of the model operas and films of the Cultural Revolution, they were frequently honored as the mother of revolutionary heroes or volunteers (see also Paul Clark 1987). Evans sees this choice of representation as signifying the cultural associations of revolution with the future, and thus with the youth who can transform the socialist ideals of the present into reality.

Women who were older, illiterate, from a “bad” class background, or with heavy family burdens worked at home or in informal sectors; they did not fit the funü ideal and were therefore not counted as “women”. They were leftovers from the “old China” who failed to keep up with the times and transform themselves into the “new women of China”, were victims of the old gender order, embodiments of “tradition”, who could not represent China’s socialist future. They were referred to as “women of the family” (jiatingfunü 家庭妇女) as opposed to the “women of the nation”: funü. The Jiatingfunü designation thus had negative connotations during the Mao era and was often associated with older, illiterate, rural or small town “traditional” women, or bourgeois wives (taitai). They were perceived as women who were uneducated, politically backward, and economically dependent, whose work at home was not recognized as work. Their lives were described as centered on the wok, ignorant of the outside world and new
thoughts.

The existence of these “women of the family” revealed the exclusionary process by which the Maoist funü was constructed: it prohibited “other” women from entering the realm of representation and rendered other gendered existences illegitimate. Excluded from the category of funü and “labourer”, these women were left out of the “women’s liberation” of the CCP, and their contribution to the family and to society was erased. Even though the Maoist gender project glorifies the Maoist funü and marginalizes jiatingfunü, my research participants show that they did not forget these jiatingfunü who brought them up, and have deep emotional connections with them—often exceeding their affection for their parents (and mothers in particular). They tried to contest their jiatingfunü caregivers’ negative social status and acknowledge their contribution. They also experience emotional and intellectual struggles and identification conflict between two very different gender models, valorized for very different reasons. I will discuss this issue further in Chapter 5, in relation to Anne’s life story.

Despite growing up soaked in the women’s liberation rhetoric of the Mao era, Lin consciously acknowledged and valued Nainai’s life as a jiatingfunü, and positively identified with the traditional script for women passed on by her. Nainai won Lin’s love and respect through her affectionate care, self-sacrifice, and dignified conduct. Lin identifies with Nainai not only emotionally, but also intellectually. She clearly acknowledges Nainai’s influence in her understanding about how to be a woman, and strongly identifies with Nainai’s teaching about womanhood, which she repeated six times in her narrative:

My Nainai told me that a woman shouldn’t be gluttonous or lazy. If a woman is gluttonous, then there will be trouble. It is also not OK for a woman to be lazy. So I always remember these two teachings. So I told my daughter, “You remember, a woman shouldn’t be gluttonous or lazy. Other things are not essential.”
The important role Nainai played in Lin’s ideas about being a woman reminded me to look into not only the emotional but also the intellectual influence of the jiatingfunü gender model on some women who grew up in the Mao era. Even though their existences were largely invisible in Maoist gender discourse, these jiatingfunü often occupied a unique position in their families, where they contested the power and gender roles conferred by the state on the Maoist funü.

So my Nainai…is illiterate, and had a very strong belief in the feudal mentality (fengjianguanlian). So things like… about the daughter-in-law, “How could a daughter-in-law just sit around? The daughter-in-law has to go and do the laundry; my son can’t do the laundry.” …But I felt my Nainai was always right, everything was my mother’s fault. Even today, when my mother talks about it, she would say, “You see, when I was about to deliver you, I grabbed a big basin of clothes. It was me who had to wash them, your father wouldn’t help. If your father gave me a hand to wash the clothes, your Nainai would be upset: ‘How could a big man wash the clothes? You are complaining about doing the laundry? Who doesn’t give birth? What is such a big deal about that?’”….. I told my mom, “To be honest, I know that Nainai was being unreasonable, but that was the way people were back then, she lived through her life that way…you can’t criticize her now…”

The reference to a “feudal mentality” here refers to Chinese traditional thinking. It covers a broad range of “old” ways of thinking as compared to the new thoughts of the Mao era. In the context of this story, Nainai’s “feudal mentality” might include her idea of men as superior to women, and the traditional gender division of labor Nainai tried to maintain. The “men are superior to women” idea was criticized during the Mao era, and replaced with Mao’s teaching: “times are different now, men and women are the same, women can do whatever men can do”. In this story, Nainai the jiatingfunü attempted to maintain the traditional patriarchal gender order
and exercise her power derived from that order over her Maoist funü daughter-in-law, who worked outside of the home, earned an independent income, and expected her husband to share the housework. As a chaste widowed mother who managed to bring up two sons by herself, Nainai enjoyed a socially recognized and respected position in the old gender system, but lost her social privilege and experienced marginalization in the Mao era. Lin’s educated mother, the funü who stepped out of the home and disobeyed the traditional gender prescription by shying away from her obligations as a daughter-in-law, wife, and mother, saw her “transgression” socially sanctioned and financially rewarded. The clash between Nainai and her mother-in-law goes beyond a common domestic power struggle between mother and daughter-in-law, typical of the Confucian patriarchal family setting, and exemplifies a political contestation over legitimacy and authority between two gender models: the Maoist one and the previously dominant Confucian or “feudal” one.

Ironically, the younger generation of women attained their goals (and the government’s) on the backs of the older generation of women whose labour was not recognized, who were rendered invisible as women, or became non-women. Yet in this case the “liberated” Maoist funü had to submit to her old-fashioned mother-in-law’s gender order. Nainai made it very clear that no matter what had changed in the outside world, inside the home tradition ruled. Nainai’s rule revealed the limitations of Maoist women’s liberation, as funü competed with men at the workplace to prove they were men’s equals, but often still had to submit to a traditional gender hierarchy at home.

In this narrative, Lin is more sympathetic towards her Nainai than her mother. She is politically aware but emotionally forgiving towards Nainai’s “feudal mentality”. The conflict
between Nainai and her mother had a long-lasting influence on Lin’s life, and she remains ambivalent towards both models. They have left her with conflicting views and perceptions about herself and how she should live her life as a woman, a topic to which I will return shortly.

**Never, never a worker**

Lin’s ambivalent attitude to the Maoist funü model represented by her mother’s generation is also revealed in her reservations about the class-based concept of a “proletarian” femininity. On the one hand, she is influenced by the ideal that women can do whatever men can do, and inspired to be a strong and successful funü, on the other hand she wants to disassociate herself from the “proletarian” aspects of being a strong and independent woman, and to claim an elite class identity through what I will call a “petit bourgeois” femininity that she sees as an alternative revolutionary femininity.

Coming from an elite family of cadres, Lin grew up with a sense of class privilege and distance from the workers and peasants. Her family lived in a house assigned by the Ministry where her father worked. It is in a big courtyard in a quiet lane where the residents saw themselves as different, and kept a distance from their neighbors behind high walls. The neighbours outside the courtyard were mostly workers, clerks, and small private business owners—the local population of old Beijing. There were clearly demarcated special and social boundaries between the two groups of residents in the same lane. When the Cultural Revolution started, the new elite groups became its major target, and Lin’s father suffered political persecution and humiliation. As a result, her family lost its social and political status and privileges.
After we came back, it was chaotic on the street, so my mom exhorted us that no one was to leave the courtyard… so they closed the gate; no one was allowed to go out…. Actually at that time we were different from them. They were all Red Guards, and we were not. We couldn’t even join the Litter Red Guard.  

(Lin 2006, part 1)

The people who caused terror were the Red Guards—children of the workers. The workers and “us” were not only different, but also antagonistic, with the earlier hierarchy reversed. Once the inheritors of the revolution, “we” were now not only excluded from participation, but were its enemies and targets. Lin’s personal and family experience during the Cultural Revolution fueled her antagonism towards workers and peasants.

On the first day of class, I fell asleep. It was some kind of public accusation meeting… Then they said, “Everybody look back, Lin from class three grade two is sleeping!”. Everybody was laughing at me. I hated Yang Zikun [the teacher’s name] very much, because I was made a fool of in front of everyone….He was a rebel party member (zhaofanbai). They were students two or three years more senior than us, and were from the workers’ and peasants’ families….Those from bad family backgrounds wouldn’t be qualified. They were just like those hatchet men (dashou)…At that time, what was in my mind was that we were different from them. And I just didn’t like those workers and the kids of the workers and peasants (gonglong zidi). Even today, this idea of disliking kids of the workers and peasants is still deeply rooted in my mind (genshendigu).

(Lin 2006, part 1)

These students from workers’ families overthrew the school authority (including Lin’s father) and practically ran the schools. Note that Lin describes them as like “hatchet men”. For her, they were the same as the students who beat up her father. Lin’s sense of class division began in
her childhood and was intensified in the class struggles between the “Red” and the “Black” in the Cultural Revolution.

Lin’s experience in the Cultural Revolution and the strong sense of class division made her dis-identify with many of the revolutionary heroines propagandized in that era. On one hand, Lin desired to be part of the Revolution and to become a revolutionary heroine; on the other hand, the social positioning of these heroines in terms of class and political background did not match her own social location and implicitly disqualified her. Yet Lin managed to find her own heroine:

That was during the Cultural Revolution. At that time, all the movies we had were the eight revolutionary model operas.17 There were almost none of them I couldn’t sing all the pieces of. Not a word I couldn’t sing. I remembered every line of them….It happened that at that time they imported movies from Albania… one is called “Rather Die than Surrender”, I watched it 11 times…that woman, she was sort of a heroine, Alfertida, she had a mole here. So I went home and used ink and I painted a mole on my face. I felt really great!…. Really, I remembered every line of the movie clearly….. And then, I watched the news before the movie. Today is the first time Chairman Mao meets the Red Guards. Tomorrow was the second time Chairman Mao meets the Red Guards. At the end it was the 13th time Chairman Mao met the Red Guards. Still I watched. I love movies. I also loved to watch Chairman Mao meet the Red Guards.

(Lin 2006, part 1)

During the Cultural Revolution, Mao’s wife Jiang Qing supervised the production of the eight revolutionary model operas (Yangbanxi). One of the influences Jiang Qing exercised in these productions is that six out of the eight pieces featured female protagonists (which furthered her own political agenda). However, to implement Mao’s instruction that the arts should come from, serve, and be approved by the masses, only the triad of worker-peasant-soldier could be the subject of art (Mao 1980 [1943]). The heroines in the revolutionary operas therefore all come
from peasant or worker backgrounds. Meng Yue (1993) argues that these female images were used to convey the political code of class struggle rather than gender messages, and these female protagonists represented a class rather than a gender stance. While Lin was familiar with all these Chinese female protagonists in the operas, her deepest identification went a foreign heroine. The movie *Rather Die than Surrender* is similar to many Chinese stories about revolutionary martyrs. They aimed to educate the youth about the sacrifices the past generations of revolutionaries had made to obtain the happy life and new China they (the youth) now lived in. The protagonist in the movie was a student living in a city. She would be a typical “petit bourgeois” according to China’s class system. While Lin could not identify with the heroines in *Yangbanxi* because of their class and their “proletarian femininity”, she was attracted to the combination of petit bourgeois background and feminist revolutionary zeal in a foreign film.

Since the Maoist *funü* is a class-encoded gender identity, Lin’s rejection of it took the form of pursuing a different class identity. In other words, she disassociated herself from the proletarian Maoist *funü* by refusing to remain a peasant/worker, which she had been forced to be during the Mao era. Lin undertook a long journey of escape and recovery from having been forced to become a peasant/worker in her youth. After graduating from middle school, all the students in her class were assigned jobs working in a factory. Being a worker in a big state-owned factory was a prestigious job in the Mao era. It was not only politically favorable but also offered permanent employment with job security and cradle-to-grave benefits. Skilled workers could earn higher salaries than some cadres and were widely respected, at least in official discourse. Being such a worker was a dream for children from ordinary families. Lin, however, was firmly against going to the factory to be a worker, and rejected her first employment
opportunity. By the time she graduated from high school, the wave of sending youth to the countryside to be re-educated by the peasants had come. Having escaped from being a worker, Lin faced an even worse fate (in her value system): to be a peasant. She eventually managed to return to Beijing and obtained a job (still in the worker category) at a post office. Five years later, Lin’s mother got her transferred to be a librarian where she herself worked; Lin finally escaped the worker/peasant category. In 1980, when Lin met her future husband, class identity, combined with occupation, was her primary criterion of desirability in a potential marriage partner:

So we dated… Firstly, he works at Peking University. To be honest, these four characters, *Beijing Daxue* (Peking University), could count for 80% of the success of this relationship…. To be honest, I set my sights on FG because he worked at *Beijing Daxue*. I really didn’t pick him for the type of person he was…Really, the four characters, *Beijing Daxue*, attracted me the most…. I didn’t take a fancy to him based on the person he was… I really didn’t take a fancy to him. But *Beijing Daxue*, these four characters really attracted me.

(Lin 2006, part 1).

After years of denouncing intellectuals, there was a shift of attitudes in the Party in the post-Mao era. The positions of workers and intellectuals in the hierarchy switched yet again. Regarded as the victims of political campaigns in the Mao era, intellectuals were redeemed and renewed their status, whereas workers became the embodiment of the shame of socialist history in official and popular discourse. While intellectuals were constructed as the revolutionary “other” in the Mao era, as Rofel (1999) points out, the post-socialist construction of otherness fixes the worker once again in the position of historical otherness. No longer the proud agent of history and hero
of socialist progress, workers were de-centered and reconstituted as one of the central obstacles on China’s road to modernity (Rofel 1999:103).

After her marriage, Lin worked as a sales person, office administrator, and assistant to the General Manager, all so-called “white collar” jobs, in several businesses. Tracing the trajectory of Lin’s life, her job changed from peasant, to worker, to clerk, and finally to white collar worker. After having been forced into the class categories she hated, in the post-Mao era she undertook a journey of disassociating herself from workers and peasants, in order to be associated with cadres and intellectuals, pursuing a career and family life typical of an educated elite.

In conjunction with the downfall of the status of workers and peasants came the post-Mao rejection of the Maoist funü, while the re-emergence of intellectuals and bourgeois values was parallel to the post-Mao construction of the nüxing, representing urban, educated, affluent women. Lin’s pursuit of an elite class status involved not only shaking off her worker and peasant past, but also rejecting a Maoist proletarian funü femininity.

*The tough funü my mother and I were*

Even though Lin was determined to distance herself from the proletariat, she nonetheless identified positively with some aspects of the strong revolutionary woman, and was proud of having acquired some qualities associated with workers. In other words, the Maoist funü image that she severely criticized is nevertheless part of who she is, and it appears that she had internalized some of the shame previously associated with being bourgeois. As well as learning a model of pre-revolutionary feminine behaviour from her grandmother, Lin admired and imitated some typical Maoist funü qualities exemplified by her mother.
I am like my mother. Even working hard like hell, my spirit was high. … you see, no matter how tired I am, I am hustling and bustling…. my mother is also always like… I got to be tidy and pretty… I like my mom very much. We are always very vigorous.

(Lin 2006, part 2)

The phrase “even working hard like hell, my spirit was high”, and terms like “hustling and bustling” or “vigorous” were often used to describe revolutionary labour heroines who fully participated in production. Lin’s forced and unpleasant experience of working in the country also imbued her with certain values, including the need for physical effort and a strong body and the ability to defend oneself verbally as well:

When I was young, I was short and skinny. The big hoe I used was a lot taller than me. But I felt I wasn’t afraid of doing hard labour. I didn’t mind working hard. Whatever hard tasks you asked me to do, I wasn’t intimidated… Um, I think I changed a lot when I was in the countryside… our party secretary, I really couldn’t like him… He always gave me the hardest labour to do… So sometimes I yelled at him. So that way, maybe I picked up that way of talking in the countryside… If you say how tough I was, I wasn’t. Do you think I am tough? No, that is not tough. Even now, I am not tough. I am not very tough. But if there is unfairness, I like to speak out. I have to say it. Just like this. I wasn’t like this before. I didn’t like to speak much.

(Lin 2006, part 1)

Able to endure harsh physical labour, hardworking and upright, outspoken and tough, Lin’s description of herself resembles the qualities of the “Iron Girls” that were presented as the model of young women in the Mao era (Jin 2006). However, while Lin is proud of that tough woman she once was on the one hand, and also tries to deny it as part of herself, not wishing to be classified as “tough”, which has negative connotations for the modern woman. At the same time, she has contempt for a “squeamish woman (jiaoqi)”: 
Giving birth to Maomao [Lin’s daughter] was very smooth…I didn’t really take the fetus very seriously, such as carefully protecting the fetus. Never! I rode a bicycle. I went hiking and swimming, I did everything…. I am a person who is not squeamish. I was never squeamish (jiaoqi). I have always been like that.

(Lin 2006, part 2)

*Jiaoqi* is not only a gendered but also a classed quality. It is seen as a negative feminine attribute associated especially with bourgeois women in the revolutionary discourse of the Mao era. As opposed to women of the bourgeoisie, women from the proletariat were perceived as tough, hardworking, and definitely not “jiaoqi”. In a time when bourgeois and elite classes were being publicly denounced, the feminine attributes associated with those classes, such as domesticity, delicacy, and self-indulgence, were the target of criticism and seen as shameful. As a member of the proletariat and a revolutionary, a woman should not expect special treatment for any real or imagined specifically female needs.

In the Mao era, in order to construct *funü* as primarily a socialist labourer, women’s gender differences and sex-specific needs were de-emphasized, their reproductive labour and needs trivialized. By emphasizing that she was not *jiaoqi*, Lin identifies with the attitude that women should be like men and not show or admit any physical weakness, if they are to receive, or deserve, respect: 22

I never show my weakness. No matter to whom… “You did that well,” I always say, “I can accomplish the same task as well as you.” So I was never a chicken….It seems my mom was like this. My mom … In many ways I took after my mom…. we had a printing workshop. When the papers came in, we needed to transfer the papers, then print, print a very small amount. The men would arrange the papers and our documents; I went over to have a look at them setting the papers. I felt I could do it too. I also could do it. I could even do better. They felt, “Oh, she could, she could do it well. ” Then I felt good
In this story, it is explicitly men that Lin wanted to emulate. This reminds us once more of Mao’s famous speech claiming that “The time is different; men and women are the same; whatever men can do, women can do too”. This was popular during Lin’s years of growing up. The fact that she did not want to be looked down upon because of her gender implies that this attitude was often the case, and there was still a real need to prove that women could measure up to men’s standards in order to be taken seriously, even when the task might have been physically more difficult for them.

Telling this story in the present, Lin is now critical of the necessity of appearing to be a strong woman. She reflects on the personal cost she has had to pay to live up to the ideal of funü, and also believes that a strong woman who appears to be invulnerable risks foregoing a man’s love and sympathy, since she does not seem to be in need of protection.

I think, actually, women should exhibit their weak side. Show your weakness, and then you gain people’s sympathy. Others will help you… Actually I think women should show their weakness…I have never done that…So I feel it’s not good. You couldn’t get that kind of… to let others to love you dearly... Women who don’t show their weakness are not good... It is very laborious.

Lin’s criticism of the ‘strong woman” model as putting too much strain on women and forcing them to appear stronger than they (naturally) are reflects the post-Mao return to a belief in inherent gender differences and positive valuing of femininity in contrast with masculinity. Since Mao’s death in 1976, both the party line and popular discourse represent the Cultural Revolution as “ten years of chaos” (shinian dongluan) that distorted “HUMAN nature”.

Since Mao’s death in 1976, both the party line and popular discourse represent the Cultural Revolution as “ten years of chaos” (shinian dongluan) that distorted “HUMAN nature”. Gender is an important constituent in these discourses about the Cultural Revolution, as critics of the
Maoist era argue that ultra-leftist policies distorted “women’s nature” (nüren de tianxin) and led to the “unnatural” masculinization of Chinese women. While the Cultural Revolution was a time of general disorder, the Maoist funü is seen as the disorderly woman who is the manifestation of chaos, threatening not only the political order but also the gender divide. As Roberts’ (2004) research notes, gender discourses in the Cultural Revolution period associated the strong revolutionary with masculinity, and conflated the weak feminine (symbolic female) with the counterrevolutionary, and the latter was to be subordinated to the former. On one hand, revolutionary women’s appropriation of masculine power threatened the male ownership of masculinity; on the other hand men who had belonged to the counter-revolutionary classes were emasculated and feminized and experienced identity crises. With the ending of the Cultural Revolution, it became imperative for many men to throw off their counterrevolutionary/feminine identity, to reassert their masculinity and male supremacy, and restore the old gender order, pushing women back into their subordinate role. This process is reflected in the search for the “real man”, nanzihan, in the literature of the 1980s (Cao 1988; Zhong 2001).

Post-Mao discourse on sexual difference seeks to reestablish “real women” as more fragile and dependent, and “real men” who can protect them, conforming to a “tough guy” (yinghan) stereotype. With this man around the new hyper-feminine woman should not need to appear to be tough herself in order to survive. (It is not foreseen that she may need to defend herself against the tough guy!) The Maoist funü no longer appears as a model to emulate, but as an unfortunate and dangerous deviant, the monstrous product of that era. Her transgressive survival disturbs the post-Mao project of restoring “proper” gender order, and she is in need of taming in order to reestablish clear categories of masculinity and femininity.
From funü to nüxing: negotiation and revision

The post-Mao discourse of restoring women’s feminine nature offers new models for gender (re)construction, which may not always seem compatible with each other. Among them, two images representing the post-Mao nüxing ideal gained primacy in post-Mao popular discourse: the “white collar beauty” (bailin liren) active in the market economy, who is young and beautiful and enjoys a successful career working in a prestigious business (at least until she marries, if she does); and the “virtuous wife and good mother” (xianqi liangmu) reminiscent of the pre-Mao era, who may have an undemanding job but devotes her energy mainly to her family. Many Chinese women, like those in the West, find themselves torn between these two models.

In opposition to both is a third model, the “strong woman” (nüqiangren) who puts career before family, successfully competes with men by acting likes a man, and renounces “feminine” values and virtues. The first two models offer an “ideal” life trajectory for many urban women: to have a prestigious job when young, and retreat to a less demanding one to devote time to a family and children. The third (nüqiangren) can be seen as an almost caricatural reincarnation of the Maoist funü (as well as of older stereotypes of dragon ladies), and anecdotes about women of this type tend to turn into cautionary tales of disorderly women, whose gender transgression threatens the configurations of gender deference and destabilizes the meaning of femininity and masculinity. The negative connotation of the term nüqiangren serves to discipline women who deviate from the newly re-inscribed and prescribed social norm of being a post-Mao nüxing and disrupt the new (re-established) gender order.

Lin sees herself as having enacted a gender project of transforming herself from a Mao funü into a post-Mao nüxing, but many aspects of both mingle uncomfortably in her self-image.
Lin’s shift from dreaming of being a revolutionary heroine in her youth to accepting the role of the happy housewife not only follows a scenario proposed by the post-Mao discourse of domestic femininity, it also echoes the pre-Mao values of her grandmother. She imagines achieving fulfillment from being a good wife and mother, renouncing all other ambitions, but her doubts emerge between the lines:

I am a very well qualified housewife (jiatiangfunü). Really. I am a very well qualified housewife. I have the breakfast ready in the morning, have the kid ready to go. I can only say that I am a very well qualified housewife. I also enjoy doing housework very much. I feel that to make the home nice and orderly is a very happy thing to do. I could give up my job. I felt as long as my husband can earn enough money, I don’t need to work at all. I make the home nice. Just be a housewife. No ambitions... Actually if I put in some effort, in 1985, if I had stayed in Shenzhen, I might have earned a lot of money. I might have been a “strong career woman” (nüqiangren). Then this home wouldn’t exist anymore... But this home, I never could turn away from this home. No wonder I said my life is unpromising, it’s really unpromising. I don’t have strong willpower. Can’t make that step… There are always concerns (qiangua) for the family...

(Lin 2006, part 2)

In this narrative, Lin repeats three times that she is a very well qualified housewife, obviously trying to convince herself that this is what she could or should be. However, she then turns to speculating on the alternative possibility of becoming a rich and successful nüqiangren, but ending up without a family. Since she now has one, that path is no longer open to her, and her narrative retrospectively justifies her choice. She repeats the popular idea that a nüqiangren loses out by not having a family and children, and thus is not a complete nüren (woman). Yet she is nostalgic about the lost possibility of freedom from family obligations, and reveals (once more through repetition) that for her, being a housewife is “unpromising”: however well she does it, it cannot bring the satisfaction and respect that a successful career would. It appears to
be a fall-back solution for those (like herself) who did not have the willpower to succeed in a man’s world. According to my personal knowledge of Lin’s family, it is mainly thanks to Lin’s earned income that they can afford their current life style. Lin could not actually give up her job, so her hypothesis of being a stay-at-home housewife is an imaginary rather than realistic scenario. The return to a male-led nuclear family popular in modern middle class myth is as unattainable for most families in China as it is in the West, and women have the same doubts about whether they would like to return to it.

Under the influence of popular cultural products from the West and other parts of Asia, especially Taiwan, Korea and Japan, this model has made a come-back in China. Lin’s fantasy is fuelled by watching Korean soap operas, and she also admires the stereotypical gender norms she sees projected in many Western programmes:

I feel in China men are not gentlemen and women are not lady-like. I really dislike that. No fine breeding.

Men never give up seats to women on the bus. I just really dislike that. I just like Western civilization. I like it very much... Why did I send my daughter abroad? I just want her to learn the foreign civilized life. I like it very much.

(Lin 2006 Part 2)

Obviously, Lin has not yet experienced the reality of living in the West, where two incomes are necessary for most families to survive and seats on buses are rarely given up. What she imagines as a current way of life elsewhere is in fact long gone, reminiscent of the 1950s post-war period when Western women were forced into suburban domesticity in order to provide work for returning soldiers. The situation is similar in post-Mao China, and a parallel shift has occurred in what is expected of women. Post-Mao discourse sees the revolution as having destroyed traditional Chinese culture and disrupted the “natural” gender order, just as the Second World
War was seen as having disrupted the social fabric in the West by leading women to expect to work outside the home in jobs previously restricted to men. In both China and the West women have been expected to act like men when it suits the national economic and political interest, but to revert to womanly submission when it does not. In both contexts, women have much to gain and to lose with every shift in expectations, and end up having to negotiate, like Lin, a way between conflicting paths. The main difference in the Chinese context is the overt association of conventional masculinity and femininity with the class structure. The images of gentlemen and ladies in Lin’s narrative convey a dream of changing class rather than gender, a fantasy of being a “lady”, rather than just a labouring “woman”.

Lin’s attempts to reaffirm her belonging to an elite social class entail not only reflection on her role at work and at home, but also the re-stylization of her body. The hardworking, tough body that she was once proud of is perceived as a body whose strength had been exploited and desires suppressed. This awakening body now becomes a site and source of agency, which Lin acts upon and from which she derives identity and power. Her body has literally changed: once that of a short-haired, uniformed, anonymous worker, it has now softened into a more glamorous and decorative feminine body:

I never wear make up. I also never knew how. These (her ears) were pierced two or three months ago. I just had them pierced two or three months ago….Xiao Xing (a younger colleague)…(said) it would be a pity to live a life as a woman but never pierce your ears. That would be a pity, yep. We should have whatever a woman should have. I said that makes sense …If you say I am really into dressing up, I am not particularly like others. If you say I am not into it at all, but I, when I dress up, I want them to match well, it must be appropriate. I must dress up appropriately, I feel, it must be what I feel is appropriate.

(Lin 2006, part 2)
Her attempt to conform to the regulatory practices imposing what it means to be and look like a “real and complete”, appropriate woman in the post-Mao era leaves Lin with a sense of lack. Her remark that “we should have whatever a woman should have” indicates a sense of deprivation during the years when the Maoist funū was denied feminine attributes and pleasures. Yet her austere past and internalized values from the Mao and pre-Mao eras still make her reluctant to indulge in wearing make-up or risk appearing to be the “loose woman” such an appearance would have indicated earlier.

At first glance, Lin seems to be attempting to conform to the post-Mao hegemonic ideal of nüxing. Yet a close examination of Lin’s bodily transformation reveals that it is not simply an acceptance and enactment of the post-Mao nüxing ideal, rather, it represents her own individual negotiation between competing models of femininity. She takes advantage of the post-Mao liberalized atmosphere to redeem the revolutionary urban elite femininity that she had to suppress in the Mao era, without abandoning all the values associated with the Maoist woman:

I always have short hair. …..Now I am planning to grow my hair …When I was in elementary school, our math teacher made a very deep impression on me. Two little braids. Then round them up, connect one to another, like this… Oh, I felt it was really pretty… I have always wanted to have a hairstyle like that one….Later on I think, I must at least have had that kind of hairstyle once… I don’t like the kind of bun made with one braid. I felt it seems like all the adults and kids have that style….I really don’t like it. Very poor taste. Pingqi. 26 I am not very good at making myself look beautiful…. but I have my own style of beauty and standards. I won’t follow what’s on the street, just like if everyone is wearing that and looking good then I will also have one….I also don’t blindly follow the trend no matter what trash is out there.

(Lin 2006, part 2)
Short hair had a symbolic connection with urban style, modernity, literacy, and the image of revolutionary women in the Mao era. A plain and un-elaborate style also exhibited a proletarian attitude towards one’s appearance, whereas long hair was considered overtly feminine and bourgeois (see discussion in Chapter 3). The two-braids-up hairstyle (see figure 2) was very fashionable in the 1950s in Chinese cities. The traditional Chinese hairstyle for women in the first half of the twentieth century was one long braid, with girls leaving it to fall down behind, and married women putting it up into a bun. These styles later evolved in the cities into girls having two braids, and more fashionable girls or married women having short or permed hair. The hairstyle Lin describes is a variation of the two braids style, suitable for both single and married women, between “traditional” and “modern”. For Lin, the 1950s are associated with a happy childhood, as part of a new, privileged elite cadre group. Lin’s dream hairstyle represents an urban elite revolutionary femininity of the 1950s, before the Cultural Revolution.
and its proletarianisation of Chinese women. The much-missed hairstyle symbolizes a lost femininity that Lin now wants to retrieve.

Lin emphasizes, in both her narrative and her attitude to hairstyles and clothes, that she wants something different from the fashion on the street, meaning that she is not willing simply to conform to the current nüxing image, but has her own vision of the ideal look. The direction of her bodily transformation is not simply from the image of a Mao funü to that of a post-Mao nüxing, but from that of a Maoist proletarian funü to that of a pre-Cultural Revolution urban elite revolutionary woman – rehabilitating a type of revolutionary femininity that was marginalized in the late Mao era. Lin attempts to perform her gender in a way that incorporates the post-Mao nüxing, but also attempts to differentiate herself from THEM. She seeks an image that can incorporate the past rather than erase it, one that can encompasses an “other” Maoist funü within the post-Mao nüxing.

Lin’s “re-stylizing of the body” became possible in the post Mao era, as the Party’s grasp on personal life has loosened, and people have started to have more choice in creating a personal style and greater opportunities to express their individuality. Under the banner of post-Mao liberation of “humanity”, what is revived and celebrated are not only the pre-Mao bourgeois feminine woman, but also other marginalized femininities that were suppressed in the Mao era. Lin has embraced the new possibilities and found ways to express her sometimes ambivalent ideas on femininity.
The storytelling

A specifically Chinese master-script, and going beyond the ending

As discussed earlier, Lin’s resistance to the Maoist gender prescription was largely expressed through efforts to reaffirm her belonging to a certain class. The primary focus on class identity rather than being gendered is also reflected in Lin’s narrative structure, which conveyed a world centered on class difference, and interprets the relationships between protagonists in terms of class conflict.

Lin starts her life story with an account of her family’s genealogy, which follows her father’s line. Her life story can be summarized as a series of three discrete periods: a childhood of being loved and spoiled by Nainai; growing up in a chaotic time, confused, angry, and scared; a struggle of resistance to becoming a peasant and a worker, and a journey to find a space where she could belong. The narrative has a turning point in 1985, when Lin was thirty years old and got married and started to work at Peking University. She then concluded her first story very quickly by giving a work résumé of the last twenty years. Over one hour and ten minutes, as she provided a mainly chronological account, Lin spent a whole hour narrating her first thirty years, and took less than ten minutes to recount the last twenty years of her life.

In Lin’s life story two masterscripts are present and ultimately converge: the common happily-ever-after “success story” on one hand, and on the other a specifically Chinese story model of “speaking bitterness” (suku). Following the first script, Lin, the active protagonist, is the agent of change who overcomes obstacles and hardships on her journey. The type of conflict
presented in this story of her life has the protagonist battling against those in control of society (the Cultural Revolution) and against a specific category of antagonists (the proletariat). In the end, the heroine overcomes obstacles and hardships, and triumphs by successfully reaching her destiny and achieving her goals: in the home of her dreams, a husband she chose because of his superior social class, and the non-manual job she wanted. She should then live “happily ever after”, as in fairy-tales and romances based on this model. Life after the happy ending is assumed to continue without conflict, and the plot is over. In this scenario the heroine is a coherent subject, and little internal conflict is revealed.

The “suku” scenario emerges in parallel, sometimes with ironic effects. “Speaking bitterness” was a political tool of the party in the 1940s and 1950s during land reform campaigns (Belden 1949; Chan, Madsen, and Unger1992; Hinton 1966). It was originally a type of public performance in which party organizers mobilized and taught poor peasants to speak up about their experiences in a language of class exploitation, as part of public accusation sessions against the landed gentry (Hinton1966). It was later performed in urban factories as well. Rofel (1999) points out that speaking bitterness is a political praxis of signification that creates the new socialist subject: the subaltern as speaker. As a genre, speaking bitterness organizes disparate experiences into a plot of overcoming life's bitterness through socialist means, subsuming the individual in a collective endeavor, with the upper classes as the common enemy. After the socialist revolution, the function of the speaking bitterness story changed from mobilization to educating the next generation. The state brought out workers and peasants to tell children about their experiences of class exploitation. Its narrative structure was also revised accordingly, to yiku sitian (remembering past bitterness, and appreciating present sweetness), with “before” and
“after” comparisons. The suku story resembles the structure of stories of overcoming in that it provides a similar narrative closure: the workers will live “happily ever after” thanks to their Liberation.

While this narrative strategy was practiced as propaganda during the land reform period, it has persisted for different reasons. It was used in “struggle sessions” during the Cultural Revolution (Anagnost 1997; Jacka 1998; Liang and Shapiro 1983; Luo 1990), and appears in memoirs by intellectuals and “educated youth” about their suffering during the Cultural Revolution. It is typical of a new literary genre known as “scar literature” (shanheng wenxue, literature of the wounded) composed of memoirs of the Cultural Revolution (Barme and Lee 1979; Honig 1984; Siu and Stern 1983). Rofel (1999) shows that women workers also adapted the strategy of speaking bitterness in the post-Mao era to contest public discourse about them and unsettle the universalizing vision of modernity that has displaced them. Rural women in urban China also used the speaking bitterness genre to denounce capitalist exploitation and the injustice of the rural/urban divide (Jacka, 2006: 266-270).

Class is the essential building block of the speaking bitterness narrative edifice: it structures the relations between all its characters, as class conflict provides the plot and class hatred (jieji chouhen) the motive for action. All these elements are present in Lin’s life story. She is always very clear about her class preference and allegiance, and her unshakable conviction about which class she belongs to is a major motif in her story. Her narrative about her family trauma and the unjust treatment she received at school and in the countryside takes up the legacy of speaking bitterness, echoing many memoirs and other accounts of the Cultural Revolution. Lin establishes two antagonistic categories: the elite/intellectual and the proletarian
classes, and she casts herself as proud to belong to the former by telling her story as one of unjust victimization and survival. As a plausible outcome of the class conflict, her persistent dislike of the proletariat is established as a well-grounded motif that drives the development of the plot.

The choice of a narrative genre is never a simple choice of form or style, but implies strategies to organize and interpret human experiences in a meaningful way. A certain genre enables but also limits what can be told, and how events are intended to be interpreted. By adopting the speaking bitterness narrative genre, Lin’s narration and interpretation of her life story largely operates in the framework of class, rather than any other category, such as gender, age, or ethnicity. This framework privileges the first thirty years of her life and emphasizes her class identity, while generally playing down the gendered aspects of her experiences and her identity as a woman. When the overt conflict between classes withered away in the post-Mao context, Lin could not find a narrative model that would enable her to impose a structure on the last twenty years of her life.

In the interview with Lin, I employed the method discussed earlier, beginning with an initial straightforward, spontaneous and uninterrupted telling of her life story, followed later by further exploration based on open-ended questions initiated by me. The differences in the second telling provide a good example of why a feminist project that aims to understand women’s lives needs to be cautious about the adaptation of masterscripts, and the effects of “going beyond the ending”.

The second part of her life story conveys important knowledge about Lin’s life as a woman, and the dialogue format provides a space for her to elaborate on her gendered experiences, adding personal information that was not included in the first telling. Many aspects
emerged only in the process of retelling, through interaction between the interviewee and the researcher. For instance, a story about Lin’s experience of having an abortion, and an account of her later pregnancy and the birth of her child, only came out when I asked questions about her daughter. The omission of this significant part of her life in the first part of the interview reflects a problem that often occurs when women engage in oral history. Some female-specific experiences, which are important for understanding women’s lives, often do not fit neatly into male-oriented masterscripts, including the general structure of a conventional (male) auto/biography, and thus are not considered worth telling. Some women may also feel it is either embarrassing or trivial to tell stories about the female body and its reproductive function. In her story about childbirth, Lin mentioned that she did not want to give birth at the hospital where her husband works, even though she would have received much better care and treatment, because people there knew her and it would have been too embarrassing. Such events are still seen as private and almost shameful, to be hidden from public scrutiny.

The retelling of Lin’s life in the second part of the interview also reveals the complexity and conflicts of her experiences as a woman, after the apparently “happy” ending. In the second part of the interview, Lin had a chance to talk about her dissatisfaction with her marriage. Her reflections on being a wife and mother conveyed her struggle to negotiate a personalized gender project that can meet the needs of her own imagination and desire.

A sub-plot emerges in the second part of the interview, based on Lin’s constant attempts to reconcile competing culturally prescribed ideals of being a Woman. The autobiographical “I” is no longer a coherent whole based primarily on class identification, but is revealed as a more complex subject with contradictions and internal conflicts, related to gender roles and
expectations rather than class allegiance. The plot changes from a story of anticipation and fulfillment, or class conflict and resolution, to a process-oriented one revealing how Lin constantly tries to make at least provisional sense of her world, as she formulates her own recipe for “becoming a woman”.

A de-gendered narrative reality

Lin’s story illustrate my earlier discussion of how the Maoist construction of funü intersected with the PRC’s class interpretation of social relations, and heterosexual labouring women from the worker and peasant classes were the only females to be acknowledged by the state as appropriate “women”. A sense of class difference and conflict was internalized by Lin, and comes out in her narrative through intense emotions of anger, hatred, and extreme distaste for workers and peasants on the one hand, and loyalty and affection for the unjustly persecuted elite class on the other hand. Even in her stories about her Nainai and her mother she uses language related to class, or political and geographical attributes, rather than references to their gender. In the table below, I coded her allusions to these two women.

Other than the last line, the attributes used to describe the two women are all gender-neutral, or are often associated with masculinity in a Chinese context. There are very few references to their physical appearance, and none to their sexuality. Most of the attributes mentioned were related to political (class) or geographical (region) characteristics, rather than manifestations of gendered qualities. While children often tend to desexualize and ignore the physical appearance of their parents and grandparents, these descriptions convey a largely “gender blind” construction of these women’s lives.
Table 1 Lin’s description of her Nainai and her mother

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description of Nainai</th>
<th>Description of mother</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geographical</td>
<td>Shandong person</td>
<td>Dongbei person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Feudal</td>
<td>Not seeking advancement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>Upholding justice and loyal to friends, bold and uninhibited</td>
<td>Cares about other people, generous, upholding justice and loyal to friends, hardworking, spirited, young at heart,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classed</td>
<td>Rough, coarse, illiterate</td>
<td>Hygienic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>Frank and straightforward, tough</td>
<td>Hustling and bustling, optimistic, fearless, resolute, competitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gendered</td>
<td>Jiatingfunü, bound feet</td>
<td>Tidy, likes to dress up</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Furthermore, rather than exhibiting “feminine” qualities like docility or domesticity, timidity or tenderness, shyness or modesty, gentleness or refinement, both mother and grandmother are frank and outspoken, uninhibited and tough. These qualities transgress and transcend the traditional gender scripts for women in China. This does not necessarily mean that these women did not have any “feminine” characteristics, rather, it indicates that Lin chose to highlight certain attributes that she sees as desirable and positive. Many of the qualities she ascribes to these women she admires are those that were often used to describe revolutionary labour heroines. This confirms that the Maoist funü has not been completely rejected or eliminated, but survives in many ways as a model to be emulated along with newer images of femininity.
Conclusion

The presence of the jiatingfunü grandmothers in Lin and other women’s stories reveals how the Maoist funü is envisioned against the backdrop of “other” women, those rendered invisible when funü was made the norm, in fact the only type of woman who was acknowledged. These jiatingfunü were not only essential substitutes assuring the Maoist funü’s caregiver functions, but their different ways of being a woman disrupted the gender model the Maoist funü represented.

The gender models that informed Lin’s personal gender project come from various ideological sources, revealing a complex landscape where many “other” gender discourses persisted. For instance, during the Mao era, when proletarian revolutionary femininity officially occupied a hegemonic position, an urban elite revolutionary type of femininity still existed, as well as the traditional jiatingfunü representing the old Confucian gender system. Through Lin’s narrative about her Nainai, her mother, and herself, we can observe the continuity and disruption, negotiation and contestation, between multiple gender discourses. Lin consciously or unconsciously absorbs or rejects, carries on or abandons, denies or affirms all these models in the formulation of her individual gender project.

In theorizing gender as performative, Butler (1990) points out that “gendering-as-doing” means that it cannot simply be imposed on a passive, lifeless body from outside, but needs the performers’ participation and cooperation. Her theory of gender performativity thus assigns the opportunity for cultural transformation of gender to individuals (or a collective of individuals), as dominant gender scripts are challenged, revised, and stretched in the process of their individual enactment. Furthermore, individual variations in performing gender scripts mean that the performance is never the true copy of an existing original but always an approximation or parody.
of a model that no one really embodies. How gender is played out is subject to negotiation, struggle and resistance.

As Lin’s story demonstrates, the process of constructing a personal gender project draws cultural resources not only from the dominant cultural script, but also from marginalized and “illegitimate” ones. What cultural resources are available depends on the specific cultural environment as well as individual circumstances, and each gender project is often the result of the innovative synthesizing of various models. As for how subversive an individual project can be, that partly depends on the level of consciousness or reflectivity of the individual. Lin’s personal project of performing a revised post-Mao nüxing demonstrates how an individual gender project that seems to conform to one model may actually revises and subverts it by incorporating other supposedly rejected earlier models, including the Maoist funü. Therefore even an unconscious gender project may pose challenges in its own way to hegemonic models and contribute to the diversification and democratization of gender performance in individual lives.

---

1 See Davin (forthcoming).

2 In 1942 Ding Ling published an essay, “Thoughts on March Eighth”, criticizing the persistent patriarchal attitudes towards women in Yan’an. She was accused of being a “narrow feminist”, lost her post, and was forced to engage in self-criticism. For a discussion of this incident, see Barlow 1989.

3 See Davin (forthcoming).

4 In December 1949, the new government of P.R. China announced March 8th as Women’s Day. On this day, women have half a day off from their work, so they can participate in various celebrations. This regulation was further elaborated in 1954 in the State Council issued “Notice on holiday salary payment for International Women’s Day”, and reiterated in the 1999 “Regulations on National Holidays and Memorial Days”. See Chapter 3 for further discussion of Women’s Day.
This is a quotation from Mao which was popular during the Cultural Revolution period. The full version is: “Revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, of temperate kind… revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.”

Roberts’ research (2004a; 2004b) on the Yangbanxi (Revolutionary Model Work) demonstrates that rather than erasing gender and sexuality from public discourse, the Yangbanxi reassigned gender on a class basis, with the revolutionary masses assuming masculinized gender roles and the “counter-revolutionaries” being assigned a range of feminized gender roles.

For instance, Dorothy Ko (1994) distinguished between the “official ideology” of the Song neo-Confucian canon, the “applied ideology” of instruction literature, the “ideology in practice” of literati and officials, and the gap between ideology and lived reality.

For example, Rofel (1999) and Zhong at al (2001) showed women’s diverse relationships to the Maoist concept of women’s liberation.

See Barlow (2004:257-264) for a discussion of these debates.

Since 1958 notions of “absolute egalitarianism” have been abandoned. Even the most radical Chinese leaders have recognized the need for unequal rewards during a prolonged period of socialism. The inequality under socialism was understood as a transitory inequality which would wither away and transform itself into true equality (see Kraus 1981:145).

Although this does not necessarily coincide with the prestige accorded by public opinion, which I will discuss later.

This outline is based on a 2.5-hour life story interview with Lin conducted in Beijing in 2006. The interview was in Mandarin Chinese (Lin’s mother tongue) and digitally recorded. The oral narrative has gone through various layers of interpretation in the process of transcription and translation into English. To preserve the nature of Lin’s speech, I retained some obvious grammatical inconsistencies in my transcription and translation, such as pronoun shifts, and other rhetorical glitches. Please note that this is my reconstruction of her life story according to the information I selected and sorted from the interview. I apologize for converting her vivid, rich and interesting life story into a more boring outline. The structure and the amount of detail of certain events, as reflected in my analysis, do not necessarily convey the way they were organized and appeared in her narrative.

This has been a common strategy for many families. For instance, Jacka (1997:117-19) describes the importance of grandmothers in caring for young children in rural China. See also the discussion of Shanghai’s households in Davis (2000: 254) and Unger (1993:42-3). In some families, husbands and other male family members also helped, but they were not usually the default major caregivers.

“Little Red Guard” (hongxiaobing) was a children’s organization for honour student during the Cultural Revolution, a counterpart of the “Red Guard”, which was for teenagers.

Secondary education was five years during the Cultural Revolution period, divided into two parts: three years of middle school (chuzong), and two years of high school (gaozhong). In this narrative, “grade two” means grade two of middle school.

It is not clear whether they were all male. The term dashou is not gendered in Chinese.
Cultural production was stopped for a period when the Cultural Revolution started and resumed under strict Party censorship. There were very few cultural products and most of the works were produced collectively, under Party guidance, especially that of Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, who took charge of the arts and cultural sector during the Cultural Revolution period. The major cultural product during this period was the eight (some say nine) revolutionary model operas produced under her supervision. These eight dramas became almost the only cultural works available, and the same stories were adopted in various genres and forms. See Roberts 2004a, 2004b, 2009.

*Rather Die than Surrender (Horizonte te Hapura)* was first screened in China in 1969. The story was set in a city in Albania during the Second World War; a female student, Mina, helped a female member of the Communist guerillas to escape the enemy’s search. They were later given up by a traitor and arrested by the Fascists. They withstood torture and promises of gain, and never surrendered. At the end, they sang “The Guerillas’ Song” on their way to execution.

During the Cultural Revolution, cultural production was heavily censored, and political propaganda dominated the cultural landscape. As one of the few socialist countries friendly with China, Albania’s movies were among the very few foreign films the Chinese could watch (North Korean and Vietnamese were the only others).

There were works of literature and films about female intellectuals converting to become revolutionaries, such as “Red Bean” by Zhong Pu, and “Song of Youth” by Yang Mo (for a discussion of the female intellectual archetype in the literature, see Meng 1993). Both Yang Mo and Zhong Pu were labeled as rightists in the 1957 Anti-rightist campaign and denounced during the Cultural Revolution. Their works were banned.

Deng Xiaoping, speaking at the National Science Conference in 1978, maintained that intellectuals (which included most cadres) “have become a part of the working class itself. The difference between them and the physical workers is only a difference of division of labour in society” (Kraus, 1981:175). It was then believed that in order for China to achieve the “four modernizations” (modernization of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology), science and knowledge were the keys.

“Not being jiaoli” is an attitude to femininity that reappears in both Lin’s Nainai’s Confucianist teaching and Maoist gender discourses, which both devalue and trivialize women’s biological needs and reproductive tasks. Lin received direct teaching of this attitude towards women’s reproductive role by witnessing the ways Nainai treated her mother when she was pregnant.

Lin has in fact been the one that has brought the most money into the family, since she has been working in business for years. Her husband, as an office manager in the hospital, earns a fixed salary and his income alone cannot support the family’s needs.

The popularity of Taiwanese female writer Qiong Yao’s romance novels and soap operas adapted from them provided an escapist fantasy of passionate indulgence for Mainland Chinese audiences.

Confucianism is still one of the ruling ideologies in Korean society, where many women choose to become stay-at-home housewives after marriage.

The single-braid hair bun Lin hates became fashionable in the 1980s, along with the nostalgic sentiment that emerged in Chinese popular culture. This hairstyle and the silk qipao (Chinese gown) became the signature look of “the traditional Chinese woman”, and are used as a uniform for young girls working in restaurants, hotels, and tourist sites, to satisfy Chinese who are nostalgic for an imaginary “Chinese past” and foreigners who come to consume the stereotypical exotic “Chinese culture”.

17 Cultural production was stopped for a period when the Cultural Revolution started and resumed under strict Party censorship. There were very few cultural products and most of the works were produced collectively, under Party guidance, especially that of Mao’s wife, Jiang Qing, who took charge of the arts and cultural sector during the Cultural Revolution period. The major cultural product during this period was the eight (some say nine) revolutionary model operas produced under her supervision. These eight dramas became almost the only cultural works available, and the same stories were adopted in various genres and forms. See Roberts 2004a, 2004b, 2009.

18 *Rather Die than Surrender (Horizonte te Hapura)* was first screened in China in 1969. The story was set in a city in Albania during the Second World War; a female student, Mina, helped a female member of the Communist guerillas to escape the enemy’s search. They were later given up by a traitor and arrested by the Fascists. They withstood torture and promises of gain, and never surrendered. At the end, they sang “The Guerillas’ Song” on their way to execution.

19 During the Cultural Revolution, cultural production was heavily censored, and political propaganda dominated the cultural landscape. As one of the few socialist countries friendly with China, Albania’s movies were among the very few foreign films the Chinese could watch (North Korean and Vietnamese were the only others).

20 There were works of literature and films about female intellectuals converting to become revolutionaries, such as “Red Bean” by Zhong Pu, and “Song of Youth” by Yang Mo (for a discussion of the female intellectual archetype in the literature, see Meng 1993). Both Yang Mo and Zhong Pu were labeled as rightists in the 1957 Anti-rightist campaign and denounced during the Cultural Revolution. Their works were banned.

21 Deng Xiaoping, speaking at the National Science Conference in 1978, maintained that intellectuals (which included most cadres) “have become a part of the working class itself. The difference between them and the physical workers is only a difference of division of labour in society” (Kraus, 1981:175). It was then believed that in order for China to achieve the “four modernizations” (modernization of agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology), science and knowledge were the keys.

22 “Not being jiaoli” is an attitude to femininity that reappears in both Lin’s Nainai’s Confucianist teaching and Maoist gender discourses, which both devalue and trivialize women’s biological needs and reproductive tasks. Lin received direct teaching of this attitude towards women’s reproductive role by witnessing the ways Nainai treated her mother when she was pregnant.

23 Lin has in fact been the one that has brought the most money into the family, since she has been working in business for years. Her husband, as an office manager in the hospital, earns a fixed salary and his income alone cannot support the family’s needs.

24 The popularity of Taiwanese female writer Qiong Yao’s romance novels and soap operas adapted from them provided an escapist fantasy of passionate indulgence for Mainland Chinese audiences.

25 Confucianism is still one of the ruling ideologies in Korean society, where many women choose to become stay-at-home housewives after marriage.

26 The single-braid hair bun Lin hates became fashionable in the 1980s, along with the nostalgic sentiment that emerged in Chinese popular culture. This hairstyle and the silk qipao (Chinese gown) became the signature look of “the traditional Chinese woman”, and are used as a uniform for young girls working in restaurants, hotels, and tourist sites, to satisfy Chinese who are nostalgic for an imaginary “Chinese past” and foreigners who come to consume the stereotypical exotic “Chinese culture”.

125
27 Photo source: http://cache.tianya.cn/publicforum/content/no11/1/591429.shtml.

28 I thank Timothy Cheek for pointing out this connection to me.
Chapter 3
Desire and Shame: Dong’s Life Story

The analysis of Lin’s life story in Chapter 2 demonstrated that the Maoist construction of funü was highly classed, introducing a revolutionary ideal of “femininity” that reversed previous models. It designated a certain group of women as the embodiment of the image of funü, namely female workers and peasants – members of the proletarian (peasant or worker) classes, as defined by the CCP. The Maoist state created and presented funü as a political category, valorizing women as socialist labourers. With the end of the Mao era, a reversal occurred and the previously glorified Maoist funü were stigmatized as ridiculous, “unnatural”, overly politicized, and sexless. The construction of an attractive, “feminine” post-Mao nüxing as a “modern”, educated, younger woman, from the emerging middle-class, is based on the abjection of those who now became the “other”, namely the proletarian Maoist funü. For rural or working-class women who were supposedly the “original” funü, the social pressure for conformity to a different model and the required self-transformation involved a denial of who they were and the model they embodied. Their social location still makes them a constant reminder of Maoist history, and their very existence recalls an embarrassing past that many are eager to leave behind. This chapter examines the experience of one such woman.

The life story told by Dong is that of a rural immigrant worker now living in Beijing. As she grew up in the post-Mao era, her experiences took place in a context where shifting official
and unofficial discourses of femininity were naturalizing the new hegemonic gender ideal of the *nüxing*, partly by repudiating the previous model of the *funü* in various ways. Dong’s life story conveys her personal and affective experience of shame and stigmatization as the living manifestation of the Maoist legacy in the post-Mao period of desire for new images. Her account demonstrates that both Maoist and post-Mao constructions of gender involve not only the reconfiguration of gender roles in terms of the types of work and domestic tasks expected from women, but also the re-mapping along class lines of femininity itself in relation to masculinity, and of the affects and self-esteem associated with these attributes. My analysis of Dong’s story focuses particularly on changing notions of femininity in relation to the value attributed to women’s appearance, as reflected in relatively expensive clothing, and the shame associated with failure to become or appear physically attractive by new standards that entail a change of class allegiance. The use of a regional dialect in Dong’s story is highlighted, as it provides a means for her to convey both desire and shame, revealing the exercise of personal agency in constructing her own gender project, one that both follows and resists the new model proposed.

To situate Dong’s story in its historical context and social structure, it is useful to recall some background to the ongoing rural/urban divide in China, especially the ways in which shame has been associated with both.
Context

Shame and social relations

The concept and experience of shame have been approached from various perspectives in different disciplines. Biology, neuroscience, and psychology tend to focus on how shame is felt and expressed in the human brain and body, or the “affect” system, though cognitively oriented psychologists and learning theories do acknowledge the importance of social context. The humanities and social sciences are more interested in the social imposition, expression, and interpretation of shame. For instance, research in anthropology and sociology has addressed the cultural meaning and function of shame in different social and historical contexts. There are also studies that break disciplinary boundaries and try to understand shame in terms of both its bodily aspects and cultural context, like those of American psychologist Silvan Tomkins, whose clinical work inspired queer theorist Eve Sedgwick (1995) to examine shame in a context of transgressive sexual orientations.

Many researchers have investigated various aspects of shame from different perspectives, and consequently their definitions of shame and its causes vary. Nonetheless, it is commonly recognized that shame is one of the most profound and widespread social and reflective emotions. In this chapter, I understand shame as a socially oriented affect that involves the internalization of the authority of the other. My discussion of the role of clothing in constructing gender identity and producing shame in the Mao period and in post-Mao China makes reference to
psychological, philosophical, sociological, and feminist research on shame, placing shame in its social, historical and cultural context, which brings out the intersections of class and gender.

Among various types of shame, such as shame related to sexuality, body, and transgression etc., my focus here is on clothing-related shame, and the intersection between gender and class in the experience of shame, along with the changing notion of femininity.

In the Western world, a widely accepted definition of shame, from William James (1890, 1950), understands it as the displeasure which a person experiences upon realizing that she does not measure up to the values which she embraces. Shame generally involves both the self and the other: the consciousness of self from the point of view of the other. On the one hand, as Mario Jacoby explained from a psychological perspective, we all have a partially conscious image of a self we want to be seen as—the so-called “ego-ideal” (1993: 3). People subscribe to a socially sanctioned “ideal” due to a longing for social recognition and self-esteem, and shame occurs when we internalize moral and social codes and ideals but are not able to meet them. However, being seen and judged by an Other is crucial in provoking public shame. As Sedgwick (1993) notes, “shame on you” acquires its illocutionary force (the conferral of shame) by the interpellation of an imagined witness (1993: 4). “To shame” means to actively confer or project shame on another person.

In her philosophical discussion of emotions related to self-assessment and self-esteem, Gabriele Taylor (1985) points out that shame is only experienced when one identifies with the critical audience, perceiving their degrading judgment as valid judgment. This raises the question of what makes one subscribe to other’s judgment. Sociologist Theodore Kemper (1978) analyzes shame in terms of power relationships in human interactions, and argues that how a
person perceives the other in relationship to the self constitutes the essential structure of shame. For instance, when the other’s status is perceived as insufficient, shame will not occur even when there is an apparent transgression. In other words, as Jacoby states, those who are superior define the standards and are the authoritative judges. Those in a state of inferiority internalize the other’s judgment and experience a shame nominally conferred by those who are perceived as superior (Jacoby 1993:61-62).

The values that one embraces, but is unable to live up to, thus cause shame. People experience shame over a variety of things: accent, physical features, parental background, clothes, type of work, and so on. In a society organized into various hierarchies, membership in a certain gender, race, or class evokes a sense of inferiority. In this case, shame “does not attach to what one does, but to what one is” (Sedgwick 1993: 12), and is an inextricable part of one’s being. Jacoby explains that since one’s sense of self-worth and dignity is often linked to social standing, shame is often a result of “the manner in which my entire being or self is valued—or more precisely, devalued, not only by others but by myself.” (1993: 2).

In Faithful Change, James Fowler examines Jesus’ responses to personal and social shame. He presents shame as a spectrum with five types or degrees of shame (2000:113). The third type, “shame due to enforced minority status” (2000:118), refers to the “ascribed shame” that is transmitted from parent and family to their children, in a social environment that disvalues qualities over which people have no control. Among the sources of ascribed shame, most potent “are the distortions due to socio-economic class, race, ethnic background, sometimes religion, and – most commonly — gender (2000:119”).

Situating shame in the social location and social systems that produce it highlights the
links between the shame socially disadvantaged groups experience and the central role shame plays in the construction of race, class, gender, and other social relations.

**Shame in a Chinese context**

The English term “shame” can be translated into various terms in Chinese: 1) *chi* 耻 (being shamed/feeling ashamed), *xiu* 羞 (feeling shy), or *ru* 辱 (experiencing disgrace); 2) *diulian* 丢脸（loss of face); 3) *guofen de shiqing* 过分的事情（stepping out of line, inappropriate behaviour). In addition, there are also Chinese terms that express the combination of shame and other emotions, such as anger-shame (羞愤), humiliation-shame （耻），guilt-shame （愧疚 or 惭愧), and “*buaoyisi*” (不好意思) which combines gratitude, apology, avoidance, shame, and embarrassment.

Traditionally in China the Confucian concept of *li* (propriety) governs all relationships, and shame is the consequence of straying from *li*. Even though shame is undoubtedly implemented as a major technique of social control, in Confucian philosophy it is more than merely a cognitive response to external sanctions since it is also seen as having an important moral effect in the personal cultivation of Confucian values. As Confucius stated, “lead them with virtue and regulate them by the rules of propriety (*li*), and they will have a sense of shame and, moreover, set themselves aright” (Confucius 2006:9). Shame is thus seen as an important positive force that pressures individuals to meet expectations in social exchanges. Similar in function to Freud’s super-ego (or internalized “conscience”), it encourages *li* (propriety), motivating a conformity that helps to maintain social order. For Confucius and his followers, a society guided by *li* should foster a sense of shame among its members. This is what Jane
Geaney calls “boundary shame” (2004), referring to a contact-driven effect when people or things are perceived as transgressing the accepted line of appropriateness. She argues that, rather than the present general Western understanding of shame as often either visual or sexual in nature (an aspect which will be discussed below), early Confucian texts reveal a concept of shame as a response to disconcertingly blurred boundaries.

In the middle of the twentieth century, there was a trend in anthropology that distinguished between “shame cultures” and “guilt cultures”. Following Mead (1937, [1961]), anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1946) argues that countries such as Japan have a 'shame' culture which depends primarily on external sanction and how one's moral conduct appears to outsiders, whereas most Christian societies have a guilt culture that depends on internal sanction and emphasizes the individual's internal conscience. As Takeo Doi (1981, [1973]) points out, this distinction implies that the shame culture is inferior to the guilt culture, and tends to identify Western European and American cultures as conforming to a model reflects internal self-regulation rather than external pressure. Gerhart Piers, a psychologist, and Milton Singer, an anthropologist, reject the prejudiced use of the terms ‘‘internal’’ and ‘‘external’’ as exclusively descriptive of guilt and shame, and posit a notion of internalized shame (Piers and Singer 1953). Their study also shows that the difference lies more in the degree to which shame/guilt is acknowledged in each culture rather than in the distinct kind of emotion experienced.

According to Gershen Kaufman (1985) and Donald Nathanson (1988), shame is a universal affect that occurs across cultures, but is experienced and reacted to differently in different cultural traditions. The social mores of the “ego-ideal” differ across cultures and historical contexts; consequently the meaning and experience of shame are different, as cross-
cultural research studies demonstrate. For example, Heider’s (1991) study in three countries shows finely differentiated aspects of shame in Indonesian language that do not seem to exist in English-speaking cultures. Other research found that certain types of shame were more prevalent in Japan and Indonesia, when compared to Western cultures (Crystal et al 2001; Kitayama et al 1995; Lebra 1976) and showed that when compared with European-Americans’, Asian-Americans’ experiences of shame were both more frequent and prevalent. In Many Faces of Shame (1988), Nathanson observes that Jewish and Chinese people experience shame in distinct ways not shared by most Americans.

As Sedgwick (1993) notes, the structuration of shame not only varies across cultures, periods, and political ideologies, but also differs from one person to another within a given context. Any individual’s sense of shame is connected with a particular personal history and current cultural context, and informed by a specific social location in terms of gender, class, age, ability, and often physical appearance. Deeply rooted in historical and cultural context and central to the social structure of a society, the source and meaning of shame shift along with societal changes. The cause and experience of shame for a young woman in contemporary China may be expected to differ significantly from that of a woman in traditional Confucian China or in the Mao era. A woman living in the country would also have experienced different expectations from one living in a city, throughout most of Chinese history. To situate Dong’s story in its historical context and the social structure in which she lives, I will provide some background information on the rural/urban divide in P. R. China.
The Rural-urban divide in China

Despite the CCP’s rural origins and peasant orientation, P. R. China’s socialist industrialization achieved its first accumulation of capital by sacrificing rural development and exploiting the peasantry. From 1955 to the early 1980s, the Chinese government imposed a state monopoly over the purchase and marketing of agricultural products, and transferred much of the agrarian surplus to the finance industry and other investment priorities (Zhang 1999; Lin Chun 2006). The household registration (hukou) system set up in 1955 classified all citizens into either agricultural or nonagricultural residents, according to their place of residence (Cheng and Selden 1997; Wang, Fei-Ling 2005). Hukou is inherited, and it was and still is extremely difficult to transfer from agricultural to nonagricultural status. Mobility from rural to urban areas was strictly controlled. Even though there was basic collective welfare in the countryside, such as schools and public health services, rural residents did not have the same access to many benefits as city dwellers and state-sector workers, from employment with a pension, to subsidized food and housing or guaranteed schooling and health care (Selden 1988:210). The hukou system institutionalized the hierarchical urban-rural dichotomy and created a rigid quasi-caste division in which peasants were second-class citizens, “in a subaltern position on the land” (Cheng and Seldon 1997). This led to structural inequality and rural impoverishment. There were virtually two Chinas: the rural, and the urban, with the city prioritized over the countryside (Cheng and Seldon 1994: 645). In recent years rural living standards have remained low, and rural/urban inequalities have been perpetuated and even accentuated. All traces of the Maoist discourse glorifying the simple country life and claims to superiority for peasants have disappeared.
The rural reforms of the early 1980s raised prices for farm products, relaxed restrictions on domestic migration, and stimulated rural markets and rural industrialization. The average household income increased and living standards rose in both rural and urban areas (data in Kelliher 1992; Lu 2001). However, from the late 1980s on, incomes in rural areas stagnated, and income inequalities both within rural and between rural and urban areas increased, undermining the initial gains from the early reform era (Nee 1989, 1991; Nee and Liedka 1997). Rural areas then experienced shortages of arable land, lack of local employment opportunities, falling prices for agricultural products, and rising taxes. Meanwhile the urban economy witnessed an unprecedented expansion under the neo-liberal policies of deregulation. China’s entry into the global economy, the expansion of urban infrastructure projects, and large-scale foreign investment created a huge demand for unskilled and low-cost labour in construction, manufacturing, and service industries. Whether their aim was to improve their material life through employment in the city, or to take advantage of the new freedom to move around to see more of the world, or to escape oppression or familial conflict (especially gender oppression or violence), a huge “floating population” of rural laborers, male and female, migrated to live and work in the cities. Though they live in the cities, these migrants retain their rural hukou status and are treated as outsiders and discriminated against by both the state and urban residents who look down on them with disdain (see studies on rural migrants by Ching-Kwan Lee 1998, Pun Ngai 2005, Dorothy Solinger 1999, Jacka Tamara 2004, 2006, and Li Zhang 2001). Dong, whose story is conveyed in this chapter, belongs to this urban-peasant category.

As Rofel argues, capitalism is a world-transforming project that reaches both the body and heart by producing and fostering a wide range of desires, and China’s transformation from
Maoist socialism to post-socialist neoliberal capitalism has produced new forms of desire among newly constructed, consumer-oriented, post-socialist “desiring subjects” (Rofel 2007:3), including newly urbanized peasants. China has seen the emergence of many new categories of consumers, from the fashion-conscious nüxing to cosmopolitan globetrotters (see Chapter 5), to a Chinese transnational queer culture (as will be discussed in Chapter 4).

Older women from urban elite families, like Lin whose story was told in Chapter 2, can now say goodbye (if they wish) to the Maoist funü image to which they were previously required to pay lip service, even though many could never conform to or identify with it. Many of them have the material and cultural resources to participate in the post-Mao gender project of constructing an attractive feminine nüxing image, or to negotiate an individualized gender project of their own. Displaced rural women, like Dong, who now live in the city, may also long to become post-Mao nüxing. However, the class-based nature of the nüxing category, which implies a certain frivolity, fragility or decorativeness previously denied to rural women, combined with the ongoing hierarchy based on identification of one’s origins with the city or the countryside, tends to lead to their social exclusion and humiliation. Their desire to become “feminine”, fostered in the urban context by the development of China’s neo-liberal capitalism and market economy, is often thwarted, resulting in multiple layers of shame. Unable to attain the ideal subject position of nüxing, they are regarded by “successful” urban citizens, who successfully espouse the hyperfemininity promoted by the post-Mao gender revision, as non-women, or less-than-women. They become invisible or are seen as an eye-sore. For instance, in Lei Guang’s (2003) discussion of popular and political discourses on rural migrants and urban-rural difference, the author mentioned a news report in a popular Shanghai newspaper that
bashes the bad fashion taste of migrant women in Shanghai, and their vain efforts to imitate urban fashions.

Highly visible aspects of public culture, such as fashion, are among the major sites where desire is produced and the success of performing conformity assessed. The stories of gendered and classed desire and shame presented here are mediated through clothes, which appear as a synecdoche (a part representing the whole) of the post-Mao nüxing: having the right wardrobe may be expected to bring with it access to other attributes, such as self-esteem and respect for oneself as a “feminine” woman.

_Dong’s life story_

_Outline_

_Figure 3 Dong at the restaurant where she works. Photo by Xin Huang, 2006, reproduced here with permission._

Dong, who was born in 1977 in a village near Chongqing, in Sichuan province in Southwest China, was twenty-nine years old at the time of the interview. Her father was a local-level cadre working in another village, and her family was poor compared to other villagers and most of her schoolmates. A matchmaker had introduced Dong’s parents, leading to their marriage. Her mother worked in the commune in addition to her responsibility for taking care of
her children and the household work, which included cooking for the whole in-law family of six siblings. Dong’s mother was ill-treated by her mother-in-law because she did not give birth to a son in the first ten years of her marriage. After graduating from junior high school, Dong left to work away from home, and a neighbor helped to find her a job in a Sichuanese restaurant in Beijing. Since then Dong has worked in various restaurants in Beijing over the last ten years, occupying various positions; she climbed the ladder from bussing tables, to receptionist, to waitress taking orders, to VIP room waitress to manager of a restaurant. She married a co-worker, who was a dishwasher and is now a chef in the same restaurant. They have a daughter who lives with her grandparents in Dong’s hometown, but Dong does not want to go back there herself. She bought an apartment in a small city near Beijing, with a loan offered by her current boss, and plans to open her own restaurant in the future. At the time of my interview with Dong, she was working as the supervisor of a restaurant in Beijing.

The interview was conducted in Sichuan dialect (which I also speak). When I started the interview with Dong, she told me that she did not know where to begin, so I used prepared questions which follow a chronological order from birth to current status. She quickly responded to this structure, and the telling of her life story flowed smoothly with few pauses. Her narration became increasingly confident and articulate, so that I did not need to ask many further guiding questions after a while. After she finished her life story, I invited her to reflect on her life and make some concluding comments. Since the structure of Dong’s life story was influenced by my initial questions, which established a pattern (unlike the interviews with many other research participants), there was no clear division between her first telling and the retelling of her life story. However, the use of Dong’s hometown dialect in the interview did impact on what I was
told, and brought out some unexpected elements which I will discuss in the last section of this chapter.

“Women’s Day” and the funü

When Dong went to Beijing in 1997, she encountered and benefited from a Maoist funü legacy:

The day I arrived was March 8th… That was the year I turned 17. Which year?... Anyway, it was March 8th, I arrived... I just got off the train after a two-day ride; they didn’t say have a rest or anything, just gave me a uniform and told me to get working. So I started working. I worked the whole day… In the evening, when we finished working, I got 50 yuan. “What is this 50 yuan about?” And then they told me that it was to celebrate “Women’s Day”. They gave us 50 yuan for “Women’s Day”. For the first time, I learned about that.

(Dong 2006)

As discussed in Chapter 2, the celebration of Women’s Day was one means to draw attention to the Maoist funü in the symbolic domain, and to establish her status as representing the mass of women in China. Since December 1949, when the new government of P.R. China declared March 8th as Women’s Day, women have been given half a day off from their work, so that they can participate in various celebrations. This rule works in conjunction with the 1995 paper entitled “Opinions on several issues regarding the implementation of the Labour Law of P.R. China”, issued by the Ministry of Labour, which stipulated that employees must receive triple overtime pay for working on statutory holidays. The celebration of Women’s Day and related compensation policy therefore aimed to reinforce the value accorded to the category of funü through both symbolic celebration and material recompense.

Dong does not remember exactly which year she arrived in Beijing, but she clearly recalls that it was March 8th. On that day, for the first time in her life, she officially became a
and enjoyed the material benefit of being recognized as a valued contributor to the state, as a “working woman” (laodong funü). However, Dong’s story about the 50 yuan she received also reveals the actual exclusion of many rural women labourers, who were clearly in the category of funü but received no recognition, even on March 8th. Her clear, joyful memory of that unexpected 50 yuan reveals that in her village no-one had even heard of extra compensation for working on Women’s Day. In fact, although the day is officially called “March 8th International Working Women’s Day” (sanba guoji laodong funü jie), it is generally only a holiday for women with formal employment who earn a regular monthly salary. Since rural women’s remuneration was calculated in daily work points (gongfen, evaluated according to a scale of 1-10), if they did no work on a certain day, they received no pay. Women’s Day is therefore not a holiday for rural women working on the gongfen system, or for women who stay at home taking care of the family, or urban women working for hourly wages or as casual labours. Even though the Maoist construction of funü designated female workers and peasants as the origin and representatives of funü, the regulations related to Women’s Day reveal that, ironically, many of those who were represented symbolically as typical funü, especially rural women, were and still are actually excluded from the official, recognized category of “working women” and denied the (small) material benefit associated once a year with that status.

This story further demonstrates that for many women, the funü category that Women’s Day aims to honour, and that the fulian, ACWF claims to represent, remains an empty signifier, meaningful only for the state as a means of governance, rather than as an inclusive category representing “Chinese women”. While many rural women, like those in Dong’s village and jiatingfunü like Lin’s grandmother (Chapter 2), were not entitled to any reward on Women’s
Day, other women from urban elite backgrounds did not wish or seek to be identified as funü. In Some of Us, Wang Zheng (2001) talks about some young women’s non-identification with the term funü even during the Mao era. In her story, some female students refused to take the free movie tickets handed out for International Women’s Day, because they identified themselves as “youth” (qingnian) rather than as funü (women); the latter term had negative connotations for them of being matronly housewives, or older, uneducated, married women. The debate over the renaming of Women’s Day (mentioned in the Introduction) exemplifies the rejection of funü as a category of identification for individual women.

With the post-Mao denunciation of the reversed Maoist class hierarchy and its egalitarian ideas, the groups previously glorified as the agents of history, the leading classes of workers, soldiers, and peasants with whom all former bourgeois or aristocrats were supposed or forced to identify, once more became relegated to the role of “others”. The espousing of the class-based post-Mao “feminized” nüxing is also accompanied by the abjection of the Maoist proletariat funü. While the abjection of the Maoist funü is regarded as one of the means for many to resist the state-defined meaning of being women and express individual agency, rural women are now stigmatized in the post-Mao construction of nüxing, as the embodiment of the Maoist funü. The following story of Dong’s experience with army-style attire tells us about the shifting ground of pride and shame, and the symbolic violence enacted upon some rural women in the process of articulating a new version of themselves as post-Mao nüxing.

From pride to shame: the significance of PLA sneakers
Since I was little, I’d been wearing rubber shoes (jiaoxie). I’d always been wearing rubber shoes. I hated the rubber shoes so much, that whenever I saw them, I hated them…..The kind … they wear in the army. Yeah, that kind of rubber PLA sneakers… I longed so much for a pair of white tennis sneakers (bai wanxie)…..So I wanted to buy a pair of boots….But my request was never approved.

(Dong 2006)

As Emily Honig (2002) notes, the militarization of civilian life influenced the popularity of an image of female militancy even before the Cultural Revolution, with the publication of Mao’s poem “Militia Women,” (1972: 98-99) and stories such as “The Red Detachment of Women”, and state-sponsored militia training for men and women (White 1989). Beginning in 1964, a nationwide campaign urged people to learn from the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and be like the model male soldier, Lei Feng, in order to acquire the “most progressive” status associated with the PLA. During the Cultural Revolution, the PLA uniform symbolized the most “revolutionary”, pure, trustworthy socialist commitment. Both Mao and Jiang Qing, Mao’s wife, often appeared in military uniforms during that period. Army uniform became a widespread national fashion (Finnane 2008), and even police uniforms were changed to be identical to the PLA uniforms of the mid-1960s (Hua 2008).

![Figure 6 (left) the PLA uniform](image1)
![Figure 7 (right) the PLA uniform](image2)

In rural areas, green army-style uniforms that marked identity and difference between the “sent-down” youth from urban areas, veterans, and the local peasants, became a symbol of status. For rural residents, military-style clothing was associated with the PLA, the Red Guards, and big cities. It symbolized revolution and progress. Army-style clothes were the most produced garments during the Cultural Revolution period, and because mass production and state subsidies allowed reasonable prices, they became the most widespread fashion.
The end of the Cultural Revolution saw the disappearance of the “daughter of China with a marvelous will”, as described in Mao’s poem about female militia members mentioned earlier (see endnote 6), who preferred military style (wuzhuang) to girly style (hongzhuang). The educated urban youth who had been “sent down” left the countryside and returned to the cities. A fashion industry started to revive in the 1980s (Finnane 2008). Followers of the Iron Girl model and former female Red Guards now permed their hair and put on skirts and high heels. The wuzhuang (military) style was definitely out, and hongzhuang (feminine style) was in.

As a conscious reaction against the compulsory austerity of the Mao period, public messages about the appropriate adornment for women have changed radically since the 1980s. Dressing up became regarded as a liberating act and an indication of the success of economic reforms and the rising standard of living (Honig 1988, Finnane 2008). Young women were encouraged to “love beauty” (aimei). Instructions on how to dress well, choose a hairstyle, wear make-up, and build an attractive, slim body proliferated in popular magazines and books. Cultivating a feminine appearance became a social obligation for women. Images of strong, active women engaged in physical work or traditionally male occupations were replaced by those of sexy, glamorous ladies working at clean “white-collar” office jobs, exemplifying a radically different way of fashioning femininity and stylizing the female body (Luo and Hao 2006). The loud voice, aggressive manner, and cruder body language associated with the “unisex” revolutionary comrade, and the plain, faded, and patched clothes symbolizing a proletarian aesthetic (Chen 2003a, 2003b), now become signs of the ridiculous, “unnatural”, over-politicized and sexless women of the Mao era. Those who still carry these signs now often feel the social
stigma attached to a sense of defeat (of the old regime they still represent) and bear a sense of
shame or resentment for former sacrifices now deemed worthless.

Figure 8, Rural migrant workers in 2008

Figure 9, Dulong women (独龙族) in 2006

Since the 1990s, PLA and police uniforms have been changed; the once popular
and fashionable old-style army uniforms are still produced, but they are sold mostly in rural areas
(and the caps as souvenirs for tourists). While army-style green clothes are mostly now worn
only by rural men, other items such as the long quilted green army coat, and especially PLA
sneakers, are still considered unisex.\textsuperscript{12} Cheap army sneakers with waterproof rubber-coated
edges are still widely worn in rural areas, where most of the roads are unpaved and muddy.
Army sneakers became almost the universal shoes for rural people, old or young, men or women,
Han majority or ethnic minorities.\textsuperscript{13} Once a symbol of status and pride, the old PLA army style
now brings shame for being associated with a rustic life style and a forgotten ideology, and army
sneakers in particular symbolize peasantry and poverty, the Maoist past, and China’s
backwardness. The era that obscured gender difference became frowned on, and wearing PLA sneakers made Dong a living manifestation of the repudiated Maoist history as well as drawing attention to the now embarrassing poverty of her family and her rural origins. For her, the sneakers were a source of shame.

The change in the symbolic meaning of the PLA uniform reflects the broader change of dress codes and their meaning in China’s transition from the Mao to post-Mao era. The shifting convention of what are appropriate and desirable clothes for women is closely connected with which class and class-encoded femininity is the norm and represents the ideal of ‘Chinese women’ on the one hand, and the changing construction of the “feminine” as a source of pride or shame on the other hand. As discussed above, shame is an important instrument for social regulation, moral control, and the policing of culturally programmed, internalized, prescribed performances of socially constructed selves, including roles associated with gender, race/ethnicity, class, and age. Gendered socialization in a patriarchal society also makes women more prone to emotions of guilt and shame (Ferguson and Eyre 2000: 256; Bartky, 1990). The evolution of the status of the PLA uniform from a source of pride and marker of gender equality in the Mao era to an indicator of rural poverty and backwardness at the present time, clearly illustrates not only changing ideas about femininity, sexuality, and militancy, but also how public opinion and attitudes are changed through both official and unofficial discourses and policies. Both obvious and subtle means serve to produce individual and collective feelings of pride and shame that regulate and modify gender and class hierarchies.
Clothes that bring shame and pride

In many studies the experience of shame is associated with visibility and sexuality, with revealing what should be kept hidden. Keon Wurmser (1981: 29) linked the modern English word “shame” with the Indo-Germanic root kam/kem meaning “to cover, to veil, to hide”; the prefix “s” (s-kam) adds a reflexive meaning – “to cover oneself.” He notes that the notion of hiding is intrinsic to and inseparable from the concept of shame in the West. Following Wurmser, Mario Jocoby (1991: 1) suggests that the idea of covering oneself with a garment has been implicit in the concept of shame. In an article entitled “Cloth wounds, or when queers are martyred to clothes: the value of clothing’s complex debasement”, Kathryn Bond Stockton (2002) argues that whereas we are told that clothes are designed to cover, protect or adorn the body, they can also reveal, wound or debase the body that they pretend to cover. Clothes can be both a shield and an agent for suffering and shame, and wearing certain clothes may bring shame, while wearing others may cover it up.

Shame is also a gendered emotion. Gendered socialization in patriarchal society makes women more prone to emotions of guilt and shame than men (Ferguson and Eyre 2000; Bartky 1990). Departing from Freud’s suggestion (1974: 132) that human clothing ‘imitates’ pubic hair in order to cover and conceal a woman’s “genital deficiency”, Stockton sees clothing as not primarily a means of concealment, but rather a bold statement that reveals the category (male, or female) of the genitals that it purports to cover. For Stockton, it may indeed point to a “vaginal wound”, but one that is socially imposed: “not just the socio-political disadvantage attached to women’s clothes, but the bodily and psychic wounding that may powerfully adhere to them.” (2002: 292) For her, cultural investment in gender differentiated clothes for men and women is
attached to a deep-seated “stain” or stigma associated with “normal women’s clothes”. Women have therefore historically felt shame or a psychic debasement in having to wear women’s clothing, since it is the surface sign that signals the “normally feminine” wound (Stockton, 2002:303). Clothing thus can be an act of public self-betrayal, by which one reveals oneself and brings about debasement. What clothes reveal (or conceal) is not only gender but also class. Clothes can mark shame on a middle upper-class woman for her inferior gender status; they may also bring her pride for her class status. On the other hand, a woman from a lower-class background who cannot afford “proper women’s clothes” may suffer from the dispelling of her gender membership (though already inferior in the gender hierarchy) and experience doubled shame not only from her class location but also from her “non-woman” gender status.

The “vaginal wound” takes a different form in PR China, intersecting with class and political status to map shame and pride. The associations of certain clothes to shame or pride changed dramatically in the Mao and post-Mao eras. As discussed earlier, after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China the triad of worker-peasant-soldier (gong nong bing) was proclaimed as the most progressive and leading force according to official socialist rhetoric (Billter, 1985:136-7). As an expression of one’s political stance, wearing plain, faded, and patched clothes manifested willingness to be close to the masses. The austere style (pusu) was highly valued, because it reflected Maoist egalitarian ideas and the attempt to erase the “three great distinctions”. It not only indicated one’s identification with the proletariat, but also signaled a devotion to revolutionary idealism, and the rejection of material comfort and a bourgeois lifestyle. The tale of revolutionaries who wore clothes “three years new, three years
old, stitch and patch it for three years more” was used to educate young people to carry on the revolutionary tradition of the older generation. Faded and patched clothes were worn with pride.

The austere style became compulsory when the Cultural Revolution began. With the Cultural Revolution slogan “choosing socialist poverty rather than capitalist prosperity”, being poor became political capital and brought recognition and pride rather than shame. Fashion and adornment were regarded as bourgeois, politically backward, and morally suspicious. Even though some women still found ways of dressing up and creating certain “revolution tolerant fashions”, women who paid more attention to their appearance were condemned and suspected of being “bad girls”. One of my research participants, Wei, who was born in the 1950s in Beijing, told me that, like many other girls at that time, she did not dare to wear brand-new clothes. When she had any, she would wash them a couple of times to make them look faded and older (Wei 2006).

Even though both men and women were encouraged to adopt the austere style, it bears gendered implications as well as class connotations. For instance, as Finnane (2008) notes, in the new socialist China, male cadres dressed in Sun Yatsen suits had the most recognizable social status, whereas the Lenin suit was a quasi-male style worn by women. It was meant to blur gender distinctions and to be as close as possible to standard male attire, while still differing from it. For female Red Guards, wearing military uniform symbolized not only a rejection of the bourgeois lifestyle, and their revolutionary attitude of challenging figures of authority (Honig 2002: 257, 264), but its masculine style also deliberately blurred gender distinctions (Yang 1997:135).
As Roberts (2004a) demonstrates, the gender discourses of the Cultural Revolution period feminized the counter-revolutionaries by mapping gendered representations along class lines, associating the feminine and female bodies with the counter-revolutionary, and consequently with shame and inferiority (Roberts 2004a). Signs of femininity, such as high-heels, *qipao*, skirts, permed hair, and make-up, were attacked and branded as bourgeois and unrevolutionary. Women who wore “feminine” or “fashionable” dresses at that time were called shameless/shameful, or “without face” (*buyaoliang* – lacking in pride/losing face). They were often denounced by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution (Yang 1999). One well-known example is the public humiliation of Wang Guangmei, wife of President Liu Shaoqi, during the Cultural Revolution, for wearing a Chinese style *qipao* on a tour to Southeast Asia in 1963 (Hinton 1980).

It can be argued that the preference for austerity and unisex clothing was still in line with the traditional female code of conduct that regarded women who conspicuously adorned themselves as sexually loose and morally degenerate; simple dress still functioned to control and police women’s bodies and sexuality, as was the case before the Revolution (see, for instance, Honig 1988:42). Military attire was far from revealing, and served as well as long gowns to cover up the female body and the “female wound” (Stockton 2002:303)— the shame of being a woman in a patriarchal society (see discussion below). However, masculine trousers and army boots or sneakers also signaled a freedom of movement for women that contrasted with earlier costumes, and especially the tradition of footbinding. The unisex uniform sent a message of liberation and equality for women in their capacity as workers, while hiding or downplaying any
sexual attraction that might have distracted them – or their male counterparts – from their revolutionary tasks.

In the Mao era, austere and unisex clothing that obscured the female body contours was constructed as signifying not only a political and class stance, with politics outweighing sexuality, but also the eradication of “female shame” and the pride of women’s liberation. When the way for women to achieve social recognition/revolution was deemed to be the same as for men, by women doing whatever men do, in fact the male-dominated gender hierarchy was ironically subtly reconfirmed, since masculinity was established as the desirable norm for all and femininity/the female gender still seen as inferior and in need of repression or denial (better not seen at all). Dresses that emphasized the female body and gender difference may have been tacitly assumed to remind women of their “female wounds” – their vulnerability, weakness, inadequacy, and inferiority, indirectly invoking a history of gender oppression. Overt femaleness/femininity was not perceived as a rejection of or differentiation from maleness, but as a failure to become a liberated woman. The austere unisex style of clothes thus brought some Chinese women a sense of pride, as they said goodbye to the “women’s clothes” which symbolized gender oppression and the shame of being women in old China, taking pride in being “the same as men”, or “non-women”.

The low level of productivity in the late Mao period, and the failure of the Cultural Revolution to achieve equality, led to criticism of “egalitarianism” in post-Mao reform discourse (Friedman 1982; Tsou 1983). A new approach of “letting a few people get rich first” was proposed by Deng Xiaoping, to facilitate productivity and bolster economic development. This encouraged a new culture (“it is glorious to be rich”), which legitimizes inequalities, and
glorifies the emerging elite groups. This discourse rehabilitating class distinctions based on wealth intersects with the discourse of gender differentiation. Rather than signaling a political allegiance, clothes and gendered appearance become an expression of wealth, individuality, and personal liberation, sites outside of state control and available for self-expression.

What is not openly said as the sequel to national leader Deng Xiaoping’s famous phrase, “it is glorious to be rich”, is that “it is shameful to be poor.” Poverty becomes a symbol of the Maoist egalitarian legacy and a result of the low productivity of “eating from the big wok” (chi daguofan) in socialism. In the free market, with its discourse of individual achievement, being rich is seen as the reward for successful entrepreneurship, while being poor is regarded as a result of laziness, indicating that one is unfit to succeed in the new system. While those who became rich first have entered China’s post-socialist modernity, as demonstrated by their improved living standards and the fashionable clothes they wear, those who are still poor are stuck in the Mao era and unable to attain modernity. As explained above, because of the historical hierarchy between the city and countryside in P.R. China, and post-Mao ridicule of the Maoist funü, many rural women experience shame, not only because of their low class status but from being living reminders of the Mao era.

Intersecting with the shifting notions of shame and pride associated with being rich or poor is the changing evaluation of the ‘feminine’ and gender difference. With the downfall of workers’ and peasants’ social status, and the rise of the business elite and intellectuals, proletarian revolutionary femininity and austere unisex clothes were transformed from being glorious to being shameful. The post-Mao nüxing ideal, with its emphasis on women’s gendered differences and the expression of sexuality and individuality, appraises the “feminine” as a
source of pride. Its rejection of the Maoist gender project operates through the reversal of what is considered subject to shame or pride, manifested in one of the important sites where gender is signified: clothes.

**From shame to pride, a story of resistance**

As previously discussed, people subscribe to a socially sanctioned “ideal” because of a longing for social recognition and self-esteem, and shame occurs when we internalize moral and social codes and ideals but are not able to meet them (Jacoby 1991). In post-Mao China, the nüxing ideal is articulated in the context of new forms of inequality produced by neo-liberalism and urbanism, and creates new forms of inclusion and exclusion through shame. Most rural women, even those now living in cities, do not have sufficient economic or personal resources to restyle their bodies to fit the new ideal, their out-dated clothing, including PLA sneakers and old-fashioned quilted jackets, reveals their low social status and makes them feel ashamed of their body. Dong’s story reveals the shame evoked from feeling unable to measure up.

From my first year in Elementary School, I’d been wearing hand-me-downs...I wore a quilted jacket in the winter. The quilted lining was long, past my bottom, and the outer shell only reached my waist. So a big chunk of the quilted lining showed through underneath...I felt awkward. I didn’t have many friends…I was eccentric and felt inferior…So I’d been longing for a down jacket (*yurongfu*). No, at that time...it was called a ski jacket. Seeing others wearing *yurongfu*, they looked so nice…the other kids dressed so sharp, and I wore that damn quilted jacket …so when I entered junior high school, I couldn’t stop desiring nice clothes, because as I grew older, I loved beauty (*aimei*) more and more. At that time, people were dressing more and more pretty. Caicaiku (the kind of gym training pants with stirrups on the feet) became fashionable. And there was a fashion for wearing wool sweaters and polyester pants. I couldn’t keep up with the fashion… I still wore the big quilted jacket. That was shameful, that was even more shameful
[than when she was younger]…Whenever I saw the teachers, I lowered my head…usually I didn’t go to the washroom during the break…I could hold in my pee for a whole day, not going to the washroom…I didn’t want to walk across the classroom, since I didn’t want to draw other people’s attention… Other kids might go out to play and do other things after class; I just leaned over my desk to nap…I was never good at any physical activities, because I was reluctant to do exercise. I didn’t want to… It was impossible for me to participate in those activities.

(Dong 2006)

For Dong, owning a ski jacket or training pants with stirrups was a symbol of class status and represented a claim to the identity of nüxing. Her goal was to be able to participate in the post-Mao project of attaining modernity, to be mainstream rather than left behind and stigmatized. Munt claims that shame is inseparable from womanhood, “shame is also a [being a] Woman” (1998:5); but it is even more shameful to be perceived, or to perceive oneself, as a “failed woman”. Dong is beautiful by conventional Chinese standards, tall and slim, with fair skin tone and a typical round Sichuan face with beautiful big eyes. Nonetheless she experienced the gendered shame of being a “non-woman” or “less than woman”, because of her clothing:

At that time, let’s not say whether I was pretty or not, because if you didn’t have the right kind of clothes, then there was no point saying whether you were pretty or not, and there was no chance the teachers would choose you to give the dance performance….that kind of chance never came for me.

(Dong 2006)

Dong’s type of femininity and beauty became non-existent to her teachers, and she internalized that invisibility because she lacked the artifacts that constituted a culturally and historically specific image of a “real” woman. Shame and pride are often presented as a dialectical dyad, in the sense that shame is the opposite face of pride, and pride is dependent on avoiding shame, it “is predicated on the – sometimes conscious – denial of its own ostracized corollary, shame”
Thomas Scheff (1994) proposes a hypothesis to explain the pride/shame binary, relating it to how the experience of exclusion provides the motor for ethnic nationalism. Similarly, the shame/pride dichotomy occupies a central position in the epistemology of a transnational post-Stonewall gay identity. A source of shame can also ultimately become a source of pride, and clothes that marked shame can later be recoded to show pride. Where shame is still attached to what clothes signify, it may require only a relatively minor change of garments to recover a sense of self-worth. While Dong’s lack of fashionable clothes initially brought shame, 50 yuan worth of clothes shopping restored her self-esteem and success at school:

So when I reached grade eight, I couldn’t stand it anymore. I asked my father, I said “Please buy me some clothes”... So we bought two jackets for me, for about 10 yuan each….Oh, I was so happy…so in grade eight, I regained some self-confidence. During the period when I was lacking in self-confidence, my grades had been really bad. I had never been good at school. It might be because my IQ is not high. Also now, when I think about it, I felt also it might be because of my low self-esteem, which affected my schoolwork. I was not very social, and didn’t dare to speak out when I needed to. So I did not ask questions when I didn’t understand.... Life was much nicer when I reached grade eight. They also bought me a semi-western style suit jacket, which I wore in the winter. That jacket cost 30 yuan…So from grade seven, my life started to be better, more colorful...

(Dong 2006)

When I asked Dong if she started to feel pretty after her father bought her some new clothes, she replied:

Well, I felt myself more well put together. Not much prettier, but I felt less shy. I was not so inferior. But I still had a sense of inferiority. Compared to others, I still couldn’t measure up. It was impossible to compete with others...

(Dong 2006)
Although Dong can now afford what she lacked in childhood, she cannot really undo the shame she felt so acutely then. Even though she worked hard to conform and is now closer to the ideal nüxing image, she knew she would never be able to fully adhere to that model, because of her rural roots. Furthermore, she is now approaching middle age and has other priorities in her life (such as buying an apartment in the city, and saving to open her own business). Achieving a sense of redemption might be psychologically appealing, but her present success does not feel as exciting as her earlier relief at escaping from the shadow of shame by a change of clothing.

When she was still unable to afford fashionable clothes and stuck in the countryside, Dong’s hair was the only resource that she could deploy without expense. She had been carefully maintaining her extraordinarily long hair with pride, as a means to express her femininity and individuality, and to challenge her exclusion. Seeking to overcome shame and poverty, Dong went to work in Beijing and hoped to build a new life in the city, Unfortunately, her last source of pride—her hair—became a site where shame was conferred once more, when she was hired as a waitress in a restaurant:

When I joined Yuxin (the first restaurant where she worked), waitresses had to cut their hair short. At that time my hair was very, very long… it reached my bottom. I didn’t want to cut my hair. I cried so many times… I had a huge fight with my boss about the haircut. I don’t know where my courage came from. I just insisted on not cutting it…I just didn’t allow them to cut my hair. You could make me do all kinds of things, but not cut my hair. I don’t know why I hated the idea of cutting my hair. At that time I felt that it would look silly after the haircut. Maybe because of that. I just like my hair. I’d never cut my hair since I was little. It had always been very long. I hated to cut my hair. I felt short hair makes you look neither male nor female. They all had “lanhuatou” (the short bob style). It looked silly. I resisted every day…not
till half a year later, I finally had my hair cut short…after my hair was cut, I kept the cut-off hair... At that time, you could sell hair for money. But I didn’t want to sell it.

(Dong 2006)

Imposing a uniform and short hair is common in many mid-range and up-scale restaurants, and usually justified by considerations of hygiene: short hair is easy to keep clean, and helps to avoid incidents such as hair dropped in the dishes. What underlies this practice, however, is the perception that rural people (those often employed in menial jobs) lack a good sense of hygiene. In order to meet the standards of the urban middle or upper class and serve them, newly arrived rural girls need to be cleaned up. Haircuts are part of the bodily project of managing the labourer: taming and transforming the uncivilized, primitive rural body into the industrialized, disciplined urban working body. In this story, long hair is a site of contestation: for the restaurant owner, its presence symbolizes the defiant, un-disciplined body that needs to be tamed, and for Dong it was a last resort for agency and individuality. While a uniform can be taken off after work, the imposed hair style and the subservience/shame it signifies has stuck with her all the time. The loss of her hair as a distinguishing feature transformed Dong from a special girl with beautiful tresses into an unidentifiable working sister (daogongmei), just one among all the girls working in the restaurant. The “neither male nor female” short hair appeared to her as a violent assault on her individuality, her femininity, and ultimately her pride and autonomy. As well as being a permanent mark of shame, in Dong’s words, it looked silly. It did indeed, as long hair had given her hope of becoming nüxing, of appearing to be at least a potential member of the urban middle class.

After surviving a harsh new environment, the envy and bullying of co-workers, and exploitation by an abusive boss, Dong managed to master the relevant skills and eventually rose
to become a restaurant manager herself. At the end of her life story, Dong saw herself as having overcome her original shame – her poor and rural origins – and made her way in the capitalist market economy. She has every expectation of a bright future as a successful “self-made” urban middle-class woman who owns a home and a business. She recounted how she eventually got her long hair back, after she went to work for a new boss, a university-educated woman with a different management style. She became a supervisor herself in that restaurant, enjoying the privilege of having some room to express her individuality and femininity. When I interviewed her, she had combed her long hair back and put it up in a bun. She can now afford to buy new clothes for herself and enjoys dressing up. She bears her newly obtained membership in the class of successful and attractive women with pride: the pride of having achieved urban middle-class status, and becoming a “real woman”.

As Tomkins states, one can never completely overcome, avoid, or renounce an earlier experience of shame; one is impelled to “keep trying and, characteristically, to keep failing.” (Tomkins 1991: 96). Sedgwick suggests that shame leaves a permanent mark on one’s identity that cannot be eradicated by pride; it is “integral to and residual in the processes by which identity itself is formed, available for the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, transfiguration, affective and symbolic loading and deformation; but unavailable for effecting the work of purgation and deontological closure.” (1993:13). She also points out that shame not only leaves a mark on one’s character or personality, but also institutes durable structural changes in one’s relational and interpretive strategies towards both one’s self and others.

Dong may seem to have overcome early humiliation and to have been driven by shame to overcome obstacles, making the most of her situation. This does not mean she can ever forget
the past and where she has come from. A closure may not be possible for individuals who have experienced shame, but they may project their hope of closure onto others, often the next generation: in Dong’s case, a daughter. Even though Dong does not want to spend much money on her own clothing, she compensates for her own early deprivation by spoiling her daughter. She told me that she bought three suitcases of clothes for her before she was born, and kept on buying her clothes. Now five years old, her daughter is very picky about her clothes and has to make sure her clothes match well every day. Ironically, Dong buys her clothes also to compensate for having to leave her, since she was seven months old, with the grandparents in her hometown, in order to work in the city. Her daughter’s material gain is accompanied by the emotional loss due to her mother’s absence.

_A different strategy: Feng’s story_

Dong attempted to overcome her shame by becoming a _nüxing_, and when that closure turned out to be less than fully satisfying, she sought redemption through her daughter. Feng, also a migrant worker in Beijing, chose different strategy to counter the shame she experienced. Also from a village in Sichuan province, Feng worked in Beijing as a nanny and then a house cleaner. She is not considered pretty by conventional standards, and clothes did not appear to be a central theme in the life story she told. She explained that she always wore hand-me-downs, and had never bought clothes for herself. Feng had also encountered a shame similar to Dong’s, for her lack of proper clothes, and consequently of proper femininity, but she addresses it with a different attitude: disengagement. Knowing that a rural woman like her is not expected to attain the ideal _nüxing_, and that she would never be able to reach it, she rejected it, distancing herself
from that model and rendering it irrelevant to her life. She mobilized a moral discourse about the responsibility of women to discipline their body and their sexuality to justify her denounced from any desire to appear attractive. She emphasizes the potential harassment dressing up might evoke, and claims that beauty from within is better than the superficial beauty of appearance. She counter balances the potential shame of lacking proper clothes with moral pride ad seek to pass this defence on to her daughter:

Huang: Have you ever thought about dressing up?

Feng: Um….me? I have no interest in that. No interest. I can give up everything for my daughter. I didn’t like to dress up when I was little. Since I was little, I wore what my father bought for me, never asked for anything.

Huang: Do you pay attention to matching clothes?

Feng: I’ve no idea how to…actually I would love….but I feel it’s not necessary. I told my daughter that you are still young; you should not pay too much attention to your appearance. You should build up your inner beauty. Society is so disordered, outside beauty may invoke bad attempts, so it is better to wear simple (pushu) clothes. That way no one will come to harass you. You should discipline yourself, and don’t give bad people opportunities.

(Feng 2006)

In her discussion of coping strategies for some overseas Chinese who risk feeling the shame at their inability to speak Chinese, Song Hwee Lim (2007) argues that rather than conforming to expectations by attempting to become (because one cannot simply be) a proud Chinese through searching for family roots or learning to speak Mandarin, a counter-strategy is to unapologetically embrace this shame – to exhibit shamelessness. This response highlights the historical circumstances that result in the inability to speak Chinese and the emphasis falls on
what one is rather than what one “ought to be”, which avoids, resists reinstating the shame/pride dyad (2007:88).

Even though Feng resisted the hegemony of the nüxing model by disengagement and thus avoided the shame/pride apposition that Dong was entrapped in, she nonetheless still seeks an opportunity for redemption through her daughter, not by buying her pretty clothes as Dong does, but by providing her with an education. Living a frugal life, she devotes her labour, her body, and her life to paving the way for her daughter. When Feng’s husband and his family asked her to try to have a son, Feng refused. She uses the Maoist rhetoric of “what men can do, women can do too” to justify her decision that having a daughter is adequate.

When I was pregnant, everybody wanted a son, but it was a daughter. Others say a son is better, but I feel my daughter is very sensible (dongshi)... she is intelligent. She’s got a nice heart....my husband wants a son and wants me to have another baby. I said, “let’s wait to see if my daughter can do well at school or not, it takes money to raise another child.” My husband said he will need a son for old age security, but I don’t think so. Am I not...I am a daughter...I just think... what man can do.... such as being a pilot... women can do too. Such as now, in Beijing, men work in construction, and women work as cleaners and do house work. Their earnings are similar. However, education makes a difference. If you have education, you can do work that is physically easier, such as working in the office...

(Feng 2006)

Feng refuses to have a son not only because she wants her daughter to avoid the discrimination caused by son-preference, to enjoy all the resources and entitlements she deserves, but more importantly, because the redemption of Feng’s gendered shame can only come from a daughter, from another woman’s life lived with autonomy and pride. Feng wants her daughter to be a doctor, an independent woman, no less than a man, whose hopefully shame-free future life will wash away the mother’s shame at being perceived as “less than a woman”.

162
Dong’s and Feng’s stories exemplify the feelings of shame coming from social exclusion that many rural women now experience, and their sometimes elusive strategies of resistance. While Dong has achieved pride by trying to become a nüxing, shaking off her class shame, Feng adopted a strategy of disengagement and turned away from the nüxing ideal. Both women however, put their main hopes in their daughters, hoping they will live a life free of shame.

The narration: dialect as the vehicle for a story of desire

The interview with Dong (as well as with three other participants) was conducted in Sichuan dialect. Dong was confident and articulate during the interview, and the telling of her life story flowed smoothly with few pauses. I hardly needed to ask any guiding questions, after the first few, to keep the narration going, which I think is partially attributable to the use of her native dialect. This opened up a space to challenge dominant narrative language and structure, enabling her to present a different narrative reality. It facilitated the telling of some very personal, sometimes painful or and “trivial,” aspects of Dong’s life as a woman.

As discussed earlier, “Chinese” is an umbrella term for many different forms of written and spoken languages. Spoken Chinese comprises many regional variants, and the English word dialect is used to translate the Chinese term fangyan (literally “regional speech”). Some of the “dialects” are mutually intelligible, while others are not and actually constitute separate languages. In Mainland China, Mandarin is taught everywhere, starting in elementary school, and the entire educational system is in Mandarin. In PRC, government communication, official propaganda, and most cultural products such as movies, television, radio, and music, are produced in Mandarin, or are translated into Mandarin if they come from abroad. Yet for many
people from the southern regions, Mandarin is not their mother tongue or everyday language. They speak their own dialects at home, and often only speak Mandarin at school and on official or professional occasions. Dong learned to speak Mandarin at school. She lives in a dual linguistic reality, speaking her own dialect at home with her husband (who is from Chongqing, near Dong’s home town) and with her co-workers, most of whom are also immigrant workers from Sichuan, and Mandarin with customers in the restaurant and people outside in the street. Mandarin is thus associated with the formal and public realms, Sichuan dialect with the informal and private.

As the “original owner” of Mandarin, Beijingers enjoy a sense of linguistic superiority, and often mock other dialects and people who speak Mandarin with an accent. I was made fun of by my Beijinger classmates and friends for my accent in my early years in Beijing. Dong speaks Mandarin with a slight accent, which reveals her non-local status and exposes her to the judgment of the locals. Speaking the dialect creates a speech environment that functions as a symbolic sanctuary, away from the boss and customers of the restaurant and the city people who often discriminate against rural immigrant workers, bringing a sense of home and safety.

Speaking Mandarin, the official spoken language of the PRC, means using certain terms and expressions typical of a discourse charged with official ideology. Kwai-Chenug Lo (2000) has examined the imposition of a unified written Chinese language based on Mandarin, in relation to the process of “subjection” and re-formation of national subjectivity in post-transitional Hong Kong. He argues that the connections between language use, ethnicity, and cultural values mean that what is suppressed by the imposition of “standard Chinese” (Mandarin) is not only the plurality of dialects, but also alternative ways of experiencing, interpreting, and
representing reality. Since the hegemonic Mandarin production of “meaning” eliminates “deviant” voices and denies the different realities that emerge in other dialects, it is associated with enforced cultural assimilation.

Speaking dialect provides a space outside of the linguistic discipline of the official spoken language, and opens up more intimate narrative potential, compared with using Mandarin, the official language. In the context of Dong’s interview, the use of the Sichuan dialect gives voices to “other” cultural values, feelings, desires, and lived realities that would be suppressed by Mandarin, and therefore has the potential for the subaltern subject to resist cultural assimilation and subjection. Since many vocabularies in Mandarin are different from other dialects, speaking Mandarin also means an ongoing process of translating, and constant efforts to find the equivalent terms. It often evokes a sense of alienation, inadequacy, and inability to tell one’s story. Speaking her dialect, on the contrary, empowered the narrator with linguistic confidence, and encouraged narrative agency.

Furthermore, the use of Dong’s dialect during the interviewing process also broke down the hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the participant (though maybe temporarily and in an illusory way). Rather than feeling interviewed by a researcher in the official language that is associated with the public realm for Dong, speaking in her dialect made the interview more like a chat between two laoxiang (meaning people from the same hometown, which is an important bond for many Chinese people identify). A sense of bonding occurred through the shared language and knowledge and experience of a remote hometown, which facilitated a willingness to share “private”, “deviant” or “trivial” desires.
Language has the power to provoke and change human desire, and the use of dialect may change what desires can be articulated. While the interviews conducted in Sichuan dialect are translated into English in my analysis (and thus have undergone a “linguistic adaptation”), the use of dialect during the interviewing process changed the context and atmosphere of the telling, and to a certain extent shaped what is told in these stories. For example, her life story is constituted of many mini-stories about things that she has lacked and longed for in her life. The memories of her early childhood are made up of stories about how she mistakenly ate the egg her mother cooked for herself, or when the little hut her family tried to build collapsed. As discussed above, clothes and the shame or pride associated with them also appear very often: the old-fashioned quilted jacket, sweatpants adapted from her father’s, the one decent blouse she had and wore every day (washed overnight) for a whole summer, and the PLA sneakers, all brought her shame. She also talked about the first pair of jeans her father bought for her, and the three suitcases of clothes she bought for her daughter before she was born. These mini-stories that convey details often perceived as “trivial” reveal very private emotions, which might not be articulated in a life story, told in a more official setting and in the official spoken language. They provide important information that helps to understand the personal and affective dimensions of Maoist and post-Mao gender performances for non-mainstream women.

However, dialect is not immune from the invasion of official discourses and the infusion of other language influences, and the intervention may limit or enrich the narrative told in dialect. For example, Dong used the term zhishang di (low IQ, or intelligence quotient) to explain her poor performance at school. The term zhishang was translated from English into Mandarin in the 1980s, and soon also used in dialects. By adopting this term, Dong subscribes to an
essentialist idea of innate inferiority that reinforces her low self-esteem. However, she then contested this explanation, by stating that the shame and low self-esteem she experienced prevented her from communicating with her peers and asking teachers questions, making it impossible for her to do well at school.

Just as speaking dialect is not necessarily always liberating, the use of Mandarin is not necessarily oppressive but may at times empowering. Dong used vocabulary coming not only from Sichuan dialect and Mandarin, but also from Cantonese, as well as some foreign concepts that are translated into Mandarin. For instance, in a passage cited earlier, Dong used the borrowed Mandarin term aimei (love of beauty) to explain her longing for fashionable clothes. This term was part of popular discourse in the 1980s and ‘90s, when the phrase “love of beauty is part of human nature” (ai mei zhi xin, ren jie you zhi) was used to criticize the suppression of “human nature” by the “leftist” ideology of the Cultural Revolution, and to justify the right to beautification of life and female adornment. Dong adopted this Mandarin term rather than using expressions that exist in Sichuan dialect, such as xihuan chaoqi (meaning “to dress excessively”) or ai dafan (meaning “to love to dress up”). By appropriating the popular discourse of aimei, Dong situates her desire within the political context of “restoring human nature” and “women’s nature”, and justifies her longing as the right to beautify oneself as part of the publicly sanctioned pursuit of beauty and personal liberation in the post-Mao era. It also indicates her desire to be integrated into the historical trend towards individual liberation, by attaining a nüxing identity. However, when she reflected on her desire to compensate by buying her daughter too many clothes, she used another Mandarin expression to criticize her daughter’s love
for clothes: “she is now very choumei” (literarily “stinky beautiful”, Dong 2006), a negative way of describing an obsession with appearance.

The objects Dong longed for are expressed through an extensive vocabulary related to various clothes styles, which are all new terms translated from English into Mandarin, and then added to dialect vocabulary, some with slightly different phonic variations. For instance, ski jacket (huaxueshan), white tennis shoes (baiwanxie in Mandarin and bewanhai in Sichuan dialect), training pants with stirrups (jianmeiku in Mandarin and caicaiku in Sichuan dialect), and a backpack (shuanjianbei). These new terms for western-style clothes and accessories represent not only a certain fashion style, but also new objects of desire as associated with leisurely, middle-class, urban, and foreign lifestyles. Dong’s acquisition of these new terms enables her to envision her own gendered image and her future life in new ways, beyond what the old Sichuan dialect can convey.

In referring to her husband, rather than using terms in Sichuan dialect such as nanren (man), duixiang (mate), or the more formal zhangfu (husband), Dong called him laogong (literally “senior male”), a term introduced from Hong Kong and Taiwan which situates the couple in a modern urban nuclear family structure, rather than a traditional rural extended family context.

I have always wanted to have my own family… My mother-in-law was very mean to me. So I didn’t want to stay in the countryside…. I want to live outside, have my own family….I am good at strategic planning (hui chehua). I have set out our future plan.. From the bottom of my heart, I don’t want to go back to living on a farm.

(Dong 2006)
In addressing her husband as \textit{laogong}, Dong positioned herself as his counterpart, \textit{laopo} (literarily senior female, usually meaning wife), rather than the usual identity terms for wife in Sichuan dialect, such as \textit{poniang} (literarily wife and mother) or \textit{xifu} (wife and daughter-in-law). The term \textit{laogong} enabled her to evoke a different version of her married life. The ideal of the urban nuclear family embedded in this term provided ideological justification for having her own family and escaping from the fate of being a miserable daughter-in-law living with in-laws in an extended rural family.

In the narrative cited above, Dong also used a business term, the neologism \textit{chehua} (strategic planning), to represent herself as a successful modern woman entrepreneur with savvy business sense, who envisions and implements the blueprint for her nuclear family’s life in the city. Dong’s imagined future is also marked by achievements that symbolize a successful urban life: an apartment in the city, a plan for selling pancakes, a tour of Chongqing city eating all the famous local snacks, and eventually owning her own restaurant before she turns thirty-five.

Even though Dong’s life story seems mainly to be about various objects she longed for, a close examination reveals that there is a central theme that links all the mini stories, as a story of desire. She moves from lack, shame, and low self-esteem, through longing and struggle, to the overcoming of her poor rural origin and the redemption realized through becoming a successful urban middle-class \textit{nüxing}. Her desire for clothes is a manifestation of her desire to become a \textit{nüxing}, to be part of the urban middle class, and ultimately, her desire for self-esteem and respect. Her story exemplifies the exclusion and marginalization many rural women experience and their difficult struggle to enact a own personal gender project that challenges her exclusion.
Conclusion

Dong’s story highlights different forms of exclusion in both the Maoist and post-Mao articulation and imposition of hegemonic gender models, and how the regulation of gender norms operates through the disciplinary power of shame and pride. For Dong, the association of the Maoist gender legacy with the rural proletarian class makes her the bearer of the shame of past history, and assigned her to the status of “non-woman” or “failed woman”.

Her desire to participate in the post-Mao nüxing gender project is reflected in the importance she gives to clothes and the affects associated with them, as well as in her narrative language. Her physical, bodily performance of a gendered self was inseparable from the language and particular interpersonal communication of the interview. The telling of Dong’s life story in her hometown dialect encouraged her to resist the official interpretation and meaning-making that are embedded in Mandarin, and facilitated the sharing of potentially shameful emotions and the telling of a private story of desire.

Being excluded from the urban middle-class post-Mao nüxing gender model by default, Dong’s personal gender project, constructed in and through her narrative, strategically appropriates multiple discourses to claim her right to become a nüxing. Her account is a hybrid product, the result of synthesizing various gender discourses, as reflected in her innovative incorporation of vocabulary from Mandarin and other language sources. On one hand, the fusion of various resources may lead her to resort to master-scripts in representing her experience; on the other hand, the fusion creates a space for Dong to exercise her narrative agency, to challenge
her social exclusion, to re-construct herself as a post-Mao nüxing with a cosmopolitan outlook, and to resist the identity prescribed for her as a rural woman (to remain a docile daughter-in-law in her husband’s family).

Dong’s desire to participate in the post-Mao nüxing project may seem to be an act of conformity, that may reinforces the hegemonic position of the post-Mao nüxing ideal. However, her determination to claim membership in the category of “woman” is itself a challenge to the social exclusion enacted by the nüxing model, and it does inspire her to challenge rural patriarchal prescription for women. By strategically mobilizing multiple discourses, Dong was able to construct her self as a woman whose identity goes beyond a single linguistic and ideological prescription.

---

1 See James (1890) [1950], chapter 10, “The Consciousness of Self”.

2 Dong’s monthly salary in her first year working in that restaurant was 700 yuan.

3 This regulation was further elaborated in 1954 in the State Council-issued “Notice on holiday salary payment for International Women’s Day”, and reiterated in the 1999 “Regulations on National Holidays and Memorial Days.

4 There have been disputes regarding this regulation, but most workplaces obey it.

5 In rural areas, women were often assigned less labour-intensive tasks and received less gongfen. Even if women took up the most intensive labour and did the same tasks as men, they were often still given less gongfen.


7 The poem was initially inscribed on a photograph of Mao standing with a group of women army combatants, published in 1961. See Mao 1972: 98-99. The poem is as follows:

   Early rays of sun illumine the parade grounds

   And these handsome girls heroic in the wind,
With rifles five feet long.

Daughters of China with a marvelous will,

You prefer hardy uniforms (hongzuang) to colorful silk (wuzhaung).

8 Photo source: www.zmdz.com/zu/xueshang1.jpg

9 Photo source: ido.3mt.com.cn

10 The movement to send educated youth down to the countryside brought a new wave of army uniform fashion. All the educated youth went to the Production and Construction Army Corps in Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Heilongjiang wearing green army-style uniforms (without badges on the hat and shoulder), with army sneakers provided by the corps, as did other “sent-down” youth (Hua, 2008). By contrast, rural residents wore civilian clothes, and women often wore the Chinese folk-style side-fastening jacket.

11 See Luo and Hao’s study (2006) on the changing images on the cover of Women of China, the official magazine of ACWF.

12 A female soldier’s uniform and coat are different from the male’s, but army sneakers are unisex-- which means male style with smaller sizes for females.

13 Many ethnic minority people continue to wear their own ethnic-style clothes, but with the army sneakers.

14 Furthermore, gendered shame works in conjunction with heterosexuality, and serves as a regulatory tool that disciplines and punishes queer transgression. See Munt 1998.

15 As Finnane (2008:202) points out, gender and class hierarchies were present within the worker-peasant-soldier triad. Workers and soldiers were often portrayed as male, with workers as the leading class with an international outlook, whereas the peasant is often a female and her Chinese folk-style clothes link her to tradition.

16 Differences between the rural and the urban, physical and intellectual labour, and between classes.

17 Wei was a teenage girl living in Beijing when the Cultural Revolution started.

18 Kwai-Cheung Lo (2000) argues that by unifying the tools of exchange and communication and hierarchizing one dialect over the others, writing serves as the ideological apparatus that helps create the concept of cultural nationalism, and inscribes the mastering subject in its space of articulation (p. 184).
Chapter 4
I am a Rock: Shitou’s Life Story

The previous chapters have demonstrated that the Maoist gender project produced *funü* as the exclusive female subject of the socialist nation through the exclusion of women of certain political and class backgrounds, and “women of the family”. This chapter will explore how the Maoist *funü* was produced and naturalized through a compulsorily heterosexual system and the exclusion of lesbian women’s existence. An examination of the life story of Shitou, a self-identified lesbian artist, and her personal gender project of articulating a distinctly Chinese lesbian presence and lineage, provides a different perspective on how various categories of “woman” have been positively or negatively perceived as overly feminine or masculinized. The Maoist discourse of gender sameness (based on the masculinization of women) may at first glance seem possibly to overlap with some butch-lesbian images, but closer examination reveals that it actually erases the specifically female space and valuation of being a woman that many lesbians seek. The gender-neutralized *funü* does not engage in articulating “herstory”, and any alternative view of history was censored under Mao. However, the Maoist legacy has been selectively and strategically re-appropriated in surprising ways in post-Mao queer politics, both in China and in a transnational context.
Context: female same-sex desire in China

Just like its male counterpart, female same-sex desire has existed in China throughout history, but until recently it has been hidden and largely ignored, compared to literature on male homosexuality.\(^1\) Taoism understands the supply of \textit{yin} (the female substance and / or energy) as unlimited in quantity and regards female self-stimulation as harmless. It discourages male masturbation but tolerates female masturbation, including mutual masturbation between females (Ruan, 1991; Van Gulik 2003).\(^2\) Sex between women, called “\textit{mojingzi\textsuperscript{r}}“ (rubbing mirrors or mirror grinding), existed and was tolerated in households among wives, concubines, slaves or servants in ancient China. It is observed in Chinese literature and art (Ruan and Bullough 1992), but was subsumed under the male mode and rendered inferior, trivial, and harmless in pre-modern China (Sang 2003: 21-22). At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries there were organized same-sex groups of women, such as Mojing \textit{Dang} (the Rubbing Mirror Party) in Shanghai (Zhonghua Tushu Jicheng Bianjisuo 1925), \textit{Jinlanhui} (Golden Orchid Association) and \textit{Zhishu nü} (women vowing spinsterhood) in Guangdong (Chen 1928; Hu 1998 [1935]). As Tze-lan Sang (2003:17) points out, despite a long history female-female sex acts were not considered an independent erotic mode or a personal taste, as was the case for male-male eroticism, called \textit{nanse}. Women in these relationships were not referred to by an integrated category label, but by the traditional categories of sisterhood and friendship.

Between 1910 and 1930 the May Fourth neologism “female same-sex love” appeared, in response to the dissemination of Western “sexual science” which introduced the categories of normality and aberration, and its legitimacy was openly debated. However, literature and the
visual arts in this Republican era represented female same-sex relations as “aesthetic, platonic unions or vacuous”, and ignored the aspect of physical desire (Sang 2003:26).

In the Mao era, homosexuality was declared not to exist in liberated China. The category of homosexuality was erased from official discourse on sex, and all references to it disappeared from circulated print materials (Evans 1997). However, a variety of sources documented the existence of sexual activity and other romantic behavior, both same-sex and cross-sex, in the 1950s to 1970s (see Ruan and Bullough 1992; Sang 2003). In addition, same-sex intimacy was less inhibited and taboo compared with pre-marital male-female intimate relations. Even though homosexuality was not criminalized, it could be persecuted in the name of jijian zui (male-male anal intercourse), an offense punished by a sentence to a labor camp, or “hooliganism” (liumang xianwei), which was subject to criminal and administrative punishments (An 1995; Wan 1996).

In the post-Mao era discussions about love and sexuality, including same-sex relations, have opened up again, along with reevaluation of the Maoist past. These subjects are popular in the flourishing wave of more “liberated” publications and popular media produced in China, and the flow of information from the West includes feminism, sexual epistemology, and a wide range of erotic images. There are strong transnational networks of lesbians and gay men. Many books, magazines, and manuals on sexual behavior, sex education, and the history of sexuality, now include sections on homosexuality. The official definition of homosexuality as a mental illness, “a form of psychological perversion”, in the 1973 version of an official Dictionary of the modern Chinese language, has been de-pathologized and deleted from the latest edition of The Chinese Classification of Mental Disorders in 2001.
Nevertheless, in post-Mao research and discussions on homosexuality, lesbianism was largely absent. While male homosexuals were meeting in parks and bars in the 1980s and early 1990s, lesbians remained largely invisible and did not have such places to meet. The United Nations Fourth World Women’s Conference in 1995 in Beijing contributed to the public visibility of gays and lesbians, and the development of transnational gay networks in China over the past decade has facilitated lesbian and gay activism. In 1995, gay men like Ruan Fangfu, Wan Yanhai, and Wu Chunsheng (Gary Wu) started some activist groups, and organized many tongzhi 同志 (the Chinese name for queer or homosexual) activities, such as parties, and a Tongzhi pager hotline in Beijing; some lesbians also participated in these events and activities (Sang 2003; He 2001). In the summer of 1998, the First National Men and Women Tongzhi Conference was held in Beijing, with thirty participants from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and foreign countries. In October, 1998, the first National Women’s Tongzhi Conference was held in Beijing with twenty participants, and in March 1999, their first community newsletter Tiankong (Sky) was issued (Sang 2003; He 2003). Lesbians in China now have a national organization, Tongyu, their own magazine, Les+, and a club called Lala (a colloquial Chinese name for lesbians) which holds weekly meetings in some large cities, as well as a Lala website.
Shitou’s life story

Outline

Shitou is a self-identified lesbian - “lala” or “nütongzhī” in Chinese. She lives in Tongzhou district, previously a county but now one of the satellite suburb-cities of Beijing, where many artists have bought apartments, since the housing prices are much cheaper than in Beijing. Shitou lives in a two-bedroom apartment with her female partner, Mingming, who works in film production and has participated in many of Shitou’s projects. After we finished the interview, Shitou asked me to give her a copy of the digital recording. “It might be useful,” she said.

Figure 10 Shitou (seated) and her partner Mingming. Photo by Xin Huang, 2006, reproduced here with their permission.

Shitou was born in 1969, in the late Cultural Revolution era, and was 37 years old, at the time of the interview. She grew up in a small county town, Tongren, in Guizhou province in the southwest part of China. Her parents both worked in state-owned work units. Shitou started to learn painting in junior high school. At age fifteen she passed the national university entrance exam and entered Guizhou Arts College to study painting in Guiyuan, the capital city of Guizhou.
After graduation she went back to her home town to teach painting in a college for four years, then she quit that job. She spent some time in the Northwest of China before moving to Beijing in 1992. There she rented a studio in Yuanmingyuan, an artist’s village, and began living as an independent artist. In 1995 the government expelled all the artists from Yuanmingyuan, and Shitou was forced to move to downtown Beijing where she started to join some gatherings in cultural and artistic circles. An English woman living in Beijing introduced Shitou to members of the newly emerging feminist and lesbian communities. Shitou became an active member of “East meets West” group, a feminist research and activist group.

As one of the leading public lesbian figures in China, Shitou has participated in lesbian activities and activism in Beijing from the beginning. She was one of the organizers of the first “National Women Tongzhi Conference” and several later ones, and was the editor of Tiankong. As the first well-known lesbian to publicly come out in China, Shitou often accepts interviews for TV in Hong Kong and Mainland China discussing gay and lesbian issues. In 2000, Shitou and Cui Zi’en (a gay filmmaker and writer in Beijing) came out publicly on the Hunan Weishi (China Human Satellite Television) program, which has 300 million regular Chinese viewers. They discussed same-sex love with sociologist Li Yinhe, for the first time on Mainland Chinese television.

In 2000 Shitou also met her current partner, Mingming, and since then they have lived and worked together in Beijing. Shitou initially did oil painting, and established herself as one of the few successful female painters in Beijing. As well as continuing to paint, Shitou has been involved in multimedia creations including installations, photography, digital video, and documentary film. In 1999 she played the leading role and participated in the production of the
first Mainland Chinese film about lesbian love, “Elephant and Fish” (*Jinnian Xiatian*), which gained international attention, and she also started to make her own documentaries. From 2000 on, she has been involved in other multimedia creations including photography, digital videos, and documentary film. She made a documentary film on the Gay Pride Parade in San Francisco in 2002, and has just finished a new documentary called “Women: 50 Minutes” (*nüren wushi fenzhong*). Currently she is working on a documentary about Chinese lesbians’ lives. Her works have been shown widely both at home and abroad.

Like Lin’s life story in Chapter 2, Shitou’s life story was composed of two parts, a first and second stage of telling. I will indicate the source of each narrative extract, and discuss the effect of this format in Shitou’s case at the end of this chapter.

*Between the Sayable and the Seeable*

Shitou’s paintings and photos filled her living room walls, and the telling of her life story often intertwined with discussion of her works. Through her commentary on her work, I found that her paintings and photographs often reflect her life trajectory directly or indirectly, as she searches for her self, conveys her reflections on life, and represents the feminist and lesbian politics she is engaged in. Her art production constitutes an important part of her life story. Rather than being simply illustrative, her works provide an auto-bio-graphical visualization of the construction of her life and her journey in search of a self that she can comfortably perform.

My understanding and interpretation of Shitou’s life therefore derives from two interrelated sources: the verbal (her narrative) and the visual (her art). Attending to both helped me explore the different interrelations between image and language, and between the “self”
constructed through autobiographical narration and depicted in artistic creation. Furthermore, as a painter and film producer, Shitou is used to expressing herself through visual images: in her narration she often paused, searching for the proper words. The hesitations I observed made me start to understand her resort to visual expression, as a conscious or unconscious choice and a form of resistance. The inclusion of Shitou’s visual creations enriches her life story in a “language” that can express her self the best, and helped me to gain access to alternative ways of understanding aspects of her life, feelings, and thoughts that are hard to convey verbally, and usually go unrepresented in heterosexual/masculine language.

Situating Shitou’s art in the context of her life story elicited a more contextual and deeper understanding and interpretation of these works and their roles in constituting her self. This was also an enlightening exercise for Shitou. For instance, in one of her series of images (which I cannot analyze here because of length constraints), Shitou painted babies, and she commented that these works coincided with the one brief moment in her life when she was thinking about having a baby. I pointed out to her that in the same year her parents both passed away. Shitou was struck by the possible connection between these events, and started to think about her motivation behind these paintings differently. She was very happy with this moment of self-discovery.

The juxtaposition of Shitou’s visual and verbal narratives has helped me to develop new interpretative strategies that combine narrative analysis of an oral life story with semiotic analysis of the paintings, leading to reflection on what is hearable/sayable and what is seeable/showable. In both cases, what is not said, or not shown, but may be implied, provokes a
reflection on the limits of the sayable or showable (or the hearable or seeable), and the relationship between them.

**Being a different “woman”**

Shitou’s personal gender project, which explicitly aims to contribute to establishing a distinct collective Chinese lesbian identity, developed in parallel with the transformation of Chinese society. She has gone from being a woman inspired and encouraged to emulate men in the Maoist era, to a search for strength in female bonding and self-understanding influenced by the celebration of gender difference and femininity in the post-Mao era, to performing a distinctive Chinese lesbian identity in response to increasing contact with the rest of the world in the last decade.

In her discussion of lesbian life in the West in the early twentieth century, Nicky Hallett notes that historically lesbians often used renaming to recreate themselves, and sometimes to enact a preferred male persona. Renaming oneself is one way to designate a self-ascribed identity, and gender is often affirmed or changed through the renaming (Hallett 1999). As Butler points out in her discussion of “women” as the subject of feminism:

> The domains of political and linguistic “representation” set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject. In other words, the qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended. (1990:4)

Butler was warning us about the danger of exclusion in the construction of “women” as a stable subject by feminists. This is certainly applicable to the frequent construction of women as
heterosexual within a binary gender system that excludes non-heterosexual subjects in general.

Many lesbians’ desire to rename themselves is driven by their perception of being excluded from representation by heterosexist language, including naming practices that allocate a person to one side of a binary opposition by assigning a gendered name. The renaming practice allows them to break through the hegemonic heterosexual cultural discourse and contest the limits of gender identities. Self-renaming entails finding an alternative symbolic representation that can signify an alternative identity.

Shitou’s personal gender project started with a gesture of auto-nomy, the signifying practice of (re)naming herself. She discarded her original typically feminine name given by her parents, and claimed a name that seeks to express her “queerness”. This was Shitou’s first self-conscious claim to an alternative identity that contests and extends what a “woman” is:

My original name is Shi Xufei... I felt that name was not good, and at the same time, I felt shi (rock) was good. Because it is close to nature, it is simple, and at that time I also felt, it was hard and solid (jianying). So I called myself Shitou (rock)....I was in Elementary school at that time.

(Shitou 2006, part 2)

Shi, her family name, literally means rock or stone. Xu means catkin flowers, and fei means fly. This given name conveys an image of a beautiful, feminine, vulnerable, and ungrounded female. Shitou, which means a rock or stone, is a masculine name often used for boys, and Shitou’s new name indicates her refusal of the conventional femininity conveyed by her original name. Furthermore, I understand the name “Shitou” as going beyond wanting to be a boy or the denial of being a female. It is a rejection of the dominant heterosexual female gender identity, and an assertion of a different way of being a “woman”— a preparation for the birth of a lesbian identity.
In her childhood, Shitou observed gender inequality, double standards towards women, domestic violence, and socially scripted gender roles. Her mother was a physically fragile but competent woman who could even butcher pigs, but at home, she could not stand up to Shitou’s father.

My mother worked in a food company….She had butchered pigs. You can’t connect her image with what she did. Her health was not so good. She was weak, she was very kind-hearted, and physically weak. But she butchered pigs. It might have been because at that time, whoever was available would do the job…Her personality is very gentle. She is not bold or vigorous (pola). Sometimes even if she wanted to be tougher, to fight for her children’s rights and benefits, I felt that she couldn’t… My father had a very short temper….I felt she couldn’t handle my father any more. My father came home drunk every day. My mom was scared….If I was there, my mother would feel she had company. But ever since I was little, I didn’t want to stay at home.

(Shitou 2006, part 2)

Shitou interprets her “weak” mother’s task of butchering pigs in a matter of fact way, as just doing her job rather than having any gender significance. However, woman-as-butcher was not a popular image before the Mao era, as butchery used to be a strictly male profession among the Han people. During the Mao era, inspired by the slogan “Women can do whatever men can do”, women entered the butchery profession. Shitou’s mother took on the job of butchering pigs as a manifestation of Maoist ideas of women’s liberation. In her well-known feminist novel *The Butcher’s Wife* (1995), Taiwanese woman writer Li Ang tells a story of the sexual oppression experienced by Lin Shi, a butcher’s wife, and the husband’s profession is used to symbolize patriarchal oppression and sexual violence towards women. Ironically, the Maoist concept of women’s liberation, that sought to emancipate women by encouraging them to take on men’s jobs, did not necessarily empower these women in their domestic relationships with men, or
solve the problem of gender oppression that these “butcher women” experienced at home, like Shitou’s mother.

Figure 11 Shitou, Photo with Mother, 1997

Figure 11 was painted in 1997, the year Shitou’s mother passed away. Shitou painted this picture to memorialize her and their bond. In this image, Shitou’s mother’s plain short hair, make-up free face, and worker’s uniform exemplify a typical image of the Maoist funü; yet the red sweater and long bangs reveal some feminine style. Shitou’s Maoist funü mother, whose clothes and behavior reflected the Maoist gender project, inspired Shitou to imagine and admire a strong woman. She seems to have seen something inspirational in her mother’s butchering, as the other side of the submissive wife, revealing her as courageous, powerful, and fearless (not a “squeamish woman”, cf previous discussions). She wants to dig out and nurture that inner strength in herself and acknowledge it as an aspect of female existence. Shitou appears in this painting with her signature bald head, though with girly style clothes—her usual representational technique to convey a queer twist. Another painting of a woman, with a knife as her arm, may reflect Shitou’s childhood memory of seeing her mother wield the butcher’s knife.
Shitou’s gender project initially drew inspiration from Maoist images of strong women. Growing up in the late Cultural Revolution period, she was influenced by the “army uniform” fashion, which was continuously popular throughout the 1970s and ‘80s (see Chapter 3), and took up a masculine or unisex style. She liked to wear her father’s old army uniforms, switching between the old “cool” - army green - and the new “cool”- black - both of which contrasted with the “girly” style (hongzhuang), conveying a rejection of a softer conventional femininity.

When I grew older, I had two styles. One was that I liked to wear my father’s clothes, because he was in the military; I liked to wear his old army things, such as the shoes, the leather boots….I also started to like to be cool. At that time I didn’t know the word cool yet. It just meant that I wore a lot of black.

(Shitou 2006, part 2)

As discussed earlier, the de-feminized image of the Maoist funü in general, and the image of female Red Guards in army uniform in particular, evoked a revolutionary femininity, or a femininity that aimed to measure up to revolutionary masculinity. It overlaps with butch lesbian images to a certain extent, blurring the gender boundaries between men and women on the one hand, and between butch lesbians and heterosexual women on the other. In that era, however, this type of gender style transgression was regarded as revolutionary rather than as potentially indicating queerness. That “style without a name” offered a space for Shitou to deviate from conventional heterosexual femininity while appearing to conform to gender expectations of that time, rather than drawing attention to her queerness.

From 1994 to 1997, during the first stage of Shitou’s career as a painter, she produced her “Weapon Series” (wuqi xilie), which depicts naked, vulnerable female bodies, mutilated and re-assembled with weapons: they become strong by appropriating phallic symbols. The Weapon
Series represents her search for alternative ways of being a “woman”, and reflects the influence of the Maoist gender project. She commented on the symbolism of this juxtaposition:

As for the symbol of weapons, it might be because they symbolize a kind of fearlessness, and a kind of rebellion. It seems that when you face society, face your environment, you need this kind of strong and determined attitude. It’s actually related to warfare, I feel things like arms, in that era, had destructive functions, and a strong effect…The guns…that gun, was very pretty, and delicate, it was a kind of version for collection (ji lian ban), a kind of art or craft, but it is a real gun…. I feel… it is interesting, it’s pretty, but can also kill, it has the power to kill. It’s a real gun. So, don’t think that she [the girl in the painting] is just a “[pretty] vase” [a Chinese expression similar to “window dressing” in English]

(Shitou 2006, part 2)

Figure 12 (left) Shitou, Weapon Series #5, 1997
Figure 13 (middle) Shitou, Weapon Series #6, 1997
Figure 14 (right) Shitou, Weapon Series #7, 1997

Images of women with weapons (mostly female members of militias) were often seen in the posters and propaganda materials of Maoist China (two examples are shown below in Figures 15 & 16). As discussed in Chapter 3, the militarization of civilian life from the early 1960s onwards influenced the popularization of female militancy. The latter was represented in Mao’s poem “Militia Women” (Honig 2002), and stories such as “The Red Detachment of Women
“(Figure 15), as well as state-sponsored posters for militia training for women (White 1989). At that time, images of women with guns symbolized female emancipation, women’s recognized role as citizens of the socialist nation, and gender empowerment.

Figure 15 (left) Revolutionary Model Opera (Ballet Version) “Red Detachment of Women” (1971)
Figure 16 (right) Posters from the Cultural Revolution era

Shitou told me, “I like to paint about power… hope… and something powerful” (Shitou 2006, part 2). Seeking ways to represent women as strong and invincible, she imagined a bodily transformation project for them. The weapons are part of her body, but can also be understood as guarding her body. By saying “don’t treat her like a vase”, Shitou conveys the message, “I am not your sex prey. I am unconquerable. I am ready to fight for myself any time. ”

Shitou’s Weapon Series is linked to the Maoist gender project but is also drastically different from it. Both projects use juxtaposition of women and weapons, aiming to connect them with empowerment. They share the underling assumption that the female is inherently weak and inadequate, and to make her strong and complete, phallic symbols such as a gun need to be borrowed and attached to her. Female power thus does not derive (or not enough) from her own female body, but from a transformed or hybrid body - a body with arms, one that combines feminine and masculine elements.
What Shitou enacts in the Weapon Series differs significantly from the militant images of Maoist women. The floral detail on the gun is not only decorative but evokes femininity, so that the co-existence of weapons and flowers in each picture suggests an ideal of androgyny. The naked female bodies indicate that Shitou has no intention of hiding or erasing the existence of the female body and her sexuality, or of covering up the “female wound” (see Chapter 3). Differing from the Maoist women whose strength was derived from rejecting the feminine and adopting masculine appearance and strength, Shitou imagines a new nüxing here, one who appropriates masculine strength with a positive affirmation of the feminine. The non-traditional, non-realistic style is in line with the message these images aim to convey. The still rare (at that time in China) vanguard portrayal of the naked female body resonates with the post-Mao call for a return to “human nature”, with the body as a site of this nature, and the re-discovery of women’s femininity and sexuality as an important part of it.

**Female bonding and self-discovery**

Shitou’s later experiences as a female artist in a male-dominated field provoked her to conscious criticism of the Maoist “sameness” gender project. Even though the Maoist gender discourse of “women can do whatever man can do” opened up the opportunity for Shitou to imagine her future as a painter and enter the male-dominated profession of oil painting, it could not exempt her from being judged by male standards. In a field dominated by men, Shitou was expected to be inherently inferior because of her gender. Her art would be devalued as “a woman’s art” if it demonstrated a “feminine” style, and she would receive praise for being an “honorary male” if she could erase any trace of “feminine” traits and paint “like a man” (and so ironically prove that the so called “masculine style” is not something inherently associated with male gender).
I found I had been growing up in a masculine discursive environment…. The boys would become competitive, and say that my paintings were too feminine…. I felt awkward and insulted when I heard such comments. But then I thought… I thought I could see things from a nüxing (female) perspective… there are aspects [of female existence] that are very frustrating. I also feel there is a special kind of acuteness [in my work]. I feel this is not a criticism of my work, I turned the criticisms around. Of course there are also people who viewed my paintings and said that they could not tell whether the painter was a nü de (female) or nan de (male), they couldn’t tell. I know that was meant to be a compliment, but I didn’t take it as a compliment (laugh), because they still meant to devalue the other nüxing (female) artists …. Why do they denigrate other nüxing, just because of their gender? Am I not a nü de, standing right in front of you? So I really dislike others judging, using the fact that you are a nü de (female).

(Shitou 2006, part 2)

While Shitou admits that she used to be content to be approved by male critics and regarded as painting “as well as a man”, the acclaimed superiority of a “masculine” style or content makes her desire to convey specifically female and lesbian experiences unrepresentable. After her initial imitation of male models and satisfaction at the result, she realized that she could not pass as male, and decided that she did not want to continue on that path. Shitou started to embrace and cultivate a distinctly feminine/feminist perspective and a style that represented her understanding of life as a woman. Her art obtained its depth and power by self-recognition and self-identification as a woman-centred artist, proud of being female, and after establishing contact with the emerging lesbian circle in Beijing she began consciously claiming a lesbian identity.

Unlike some lesbians who adopt masculine roles and mime male heterosexual attraction in order to be understood and to understand themselves in a recognized binary frame, Shitou’s construction of her lesbian subjectivity rejects maleness/masculinity as its reference point: “We
could learn and borrow from each other, but not by using the male as the standard.” Her rejection of the masculine image of women in the Mao era, and male standards in general, is reflected in the lesbian images she has produced, based on awareness of a women-centred consciousness. This has been influenced by the development of post-Mao feminism in China, and the inspiration and support she has received from her feminist friends, both Western and Chinese:

Getting in touch with the “East Meets West Group” had a big impact on my life; it brought about the biggest change in my life. Because before that, among these people I met….just by categorizing one as male or female, just by using a simple category of gender, they could turn you upside-down. And then, after I met them I had a lot of ….support. And then I understood many, many things. I feel this is the most important thing that happened in my life. Without this….my life felt so heavy…. [without this discovery] I would have had a lot of struggles. It would have been very painful. Before that I had a lot of struggles, so that is the most important thing in my life. . . .

(Shitou 2006, part 2)

As Shitou derived knowledge and strength through identifying with the female body and lesbian sexuality, she rejected the Maoist gender project in favour of a more radical reformulation of sexual difference. Her later works direct her search into a female-only space, and resort more to self-discovery, with the source of strength coming from female bonding and from understanding oneself and other women as women, with less reference to men.

What I painted…was the feeling that nü de needed to build up alliances with other nü de….I felt the male artists had their bond, they had their own groups, but nüxing (women) . . . .in that era, I felt it was very hard for them to support each other….Actually there were very few female artists….I realized that many nuxing were on their own. They were all somehow unique, compared to nanxing (males), they existed in an awkward way. Nuxing also hardly formed a bond. It seemed they couldn’t accept each other…. Actually since I was little, I thought that if nüxing and nüxing could form an alliance…. (laugh) I felt, there is something, when you learn about it, then it seems to open you up.
In the painting in Figure 17, produced in 1993, the women are situated in a cave-like environment—a feminine space. In traditional Chinese cosmology, *yin* represents earth and darkness, thus a cave in the ground is associated with the feminine (see Williams 1976). The thrusting breasts of the sleeping woman suggest admiration for the female body and an unacknowledged dormant desire. The fire, the symbol of love and desire, lights up the darkness, whereas the location of the cave indicates a hidden, secret relationship. The women watching the sleeping woman are waiting for her to “wake up”. In Figure 18(below), in a painting produced in 1997 when Shitou started to get into contact with Western feminism and lesbian circles in Beijing, two women now come out under the sun. They raise their heads high, their hands hold each other’s bodies, and their exposed bodies are completely at ease. They walk confidently, determinedly forward, in harmony, with big steps. A dog or wolf-like beast is left behind, his head lowered, crestfallen, slinking off.
In Shitou’s previous paintings the sexual preference of the women was ambiguous: they assert their femaleness by being comfortably naked, they stay intimately together and admire each other’s bodies, but nothing in these paintings explicitly conveys their queerness. A change has come in Figure 18, in which one woman’s shaved head, highlighted in yellow, gives her a queer twist. The bald head in Figure 18 conveys that these two women are not only outside of the patriarchal order, but are also forming a bond other than just female friendship. The seemingly artificially inserted yellow head suggests a newly acquired queer identity - almost like a mask. It is not yet in harmony with the rest of the body, and is in need of synthesizing, but it is available.

The bald head here is not necessarily an indication of masculinization or male identification. In China, Buddhist nuns shave their heads, as do Buddhist monks. It symbolizes a rejection of a secular way of life, including marriage and parenting. Becoming a Buddhist or Daoist nun has been one traditional sanctuary for women who reject patriarchy and heterosexual
living arrangements. Religious asceticism provides a space outside of the patriarchal order, allowing the development of lesbian relationships. For instance, the “Ten Sisters” community in Guangdong, the origin of the *Mojing Dang* in Shanghai, was founded by a Buddhist nun several hundred years ago. Members of the “Ten Sisters” community lived together as couples and took vows not to marry except among their group (Ruan and Bullough 1992). For these nuns, the shaved head symbolized a double rejection of secular life and of patriarchy.

It seems it was always *nù de* (females) more often being blamed, right? It seems whatever *nan de* (man) said was taken for granted as being true. The standards for *nù de* (females) were very high, right? They had to do the housework, and so on… I felt that was not fair. I felt we should build alliances. This kind of solidarity might not be something material, but political and symbolic. But I felt that at least we should support each other emotionally. So I was like this since I was little… it has been always like this. My attitude towards girls is more…more obvious that I would want to be more tolerant, and take care of them.

(Shitou 2006, part 2)

Patrizia Violi (1992) notes, “the bonds between women are almost always sacrificed when a man comes on the scene; they lose out in the face of the patriarchal order, which in this case takes the form of love between a woman and a man” (1992:173). She further points out that since female bonds have not been symbolized or represented in the public sphere in male-dominated cultures, there are few exemplary stories of female solidarity available, which makes it difficult for women to internalize models of such bonding. In China, this kind of female isolation is reinforced by the traditional Confucian teaching of *sancong* (the three obediences discussed earlier: obedience to the father before marriage, to the husband after marriage, and to the son after the husband’s death), and was furthered by the Maoist gender project. Feminist critiques of the Maoist concept of “women’s liberation” have argued that the Maoist policies that attempted
to erase gender differences also erased the foundation for women’s self-identification as women and collective gender consciousness. They undermined female solidarity, the very ground that women must rely on for articulating their demands and developing a united front. The supposedly pro-women top-down public policies of the Mao era theoretically promoted equality, but also actually cultivated women’s dependency on the state (Lin 2006).

If the bonding between women in general is fragmented and invisible in patriarchal cultures, the existence and representation of lesbianism and the possibility of female same-sex love are even more suppressed and silenced. Even though Shitou did not identify herself consciously as a lesbian in her early years in Yuanmingyuan, she always felt the desire for female company, and experienced internal conflict related to an unidentifiable and unfulfilled non-conformist sense of desire. Compared with heterosexual women, Shitou’s experience of isolation was twofold: as a woman in general, and as a lesbian in the closet in particular. On the one hand, her isolation and lack of solidarity with other women was acutely felt, compared with male homosocial bonding, such as the support among male artists; on the other hand, her isolation from other women thwarted not only her longing for female companionship and emotional exchange but also the desire for female love from other women.

The mood in Figures 19, 20 and 21 is completely different from the Weapon Series, which was heavy, lonely, full of tension and conflict. Cheerful and romantic, the “Mandarin duck and butterfly” series, painted in 2000, represents Shitou’s dream of finding female bonding, which came true when she met her current partner Mingming. Shitou told me that she started to fall in love when she painted this series. She painted her joy in reuniting with her own female self and obtaining a bond to another woman. In a renewed world full of the joy of female love,
water nurtures their pleasure. The lonely faceless female in the Weapon Series is replaced by happy women with smiling faces. The light reflecting on the water is dancing on their faces—each is no longer alone, but enjoys the company of her girlfriend.

Figure 19 (left) Buddha Butterfly, from Shitou, “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly Series”, 2000

Figure 20 (middle) Cupid Butterfly, from Shitou, “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly Series”, 2000

Figure 21 (right) Zhuangzi Dream Butterfly, from Shitou, “Mandarin Duck and Butterfly Series”, 2000

Shitou tries to appropriate different cultural resources to symbolize lesbian love and lifestyle. The titles of the three paintings make reference to Chinese, religious, and Western cultural symbols of love and life, appropriating them to signify a newly visible lesbian love. Caroline Hayden’s (1995) research on lesbian kinship shows that gays and lesbians reconfigure straight cultural symbols and extend their meanings to represent queer kinship. As Andrew Wong and Qing Zhang (2000) have demonstrated in their research on the linguistic construction of the tongzhi (Chinese gay and lesbian) community in Taiwan, the tongzhi have appropriated a broad range of symbolic resources, and reworked and combined them to construct an imagined Chinese
gay community. Shitou also applied a similar strategy. “Mandarin duck and butterfly” alludes to a literary genre popular in the 1930s in China, represented by Zhang Hensui’s novels which mainly portrayed romantic love between men and women.\textsuperscript{12} White-headed Mandarin ducks form couples that stay together, and are often used to symbolize life-long love. Butterflies symbolize a love that even death cannot destroy.\textsuperscript{13} Figure 21, entitled “Zhuangzi Dream Butterfly,” makes reference to the famous Daoist story about Zhuangzi, one of the founding philosophers of Daoism, who woke from a dream pondering which one was real: Zhuangzi dreaming of being a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming of being Zhuangzi. In Daoist philosophy, water is \textit{yin} and associated with the feminine and nourishment, symbolizing female power.

Shitou appropriated heterosexual symbols of love from China (Mandarin duck and butterfly) and the West (Cupid) to represent love between women, and by doing so challenges and extends heteronormative definitions of love and sexuality.

What followed the joy of discovery and fulfillment was a moment of quiet reflection and self-discovery—learning about oneself, and about each other. In the “Together Series” of 2001, Shitou and Mingming indulge in their own bodies, as they reflect and explore themselves and each other. There are two overlapping gazes in this series, the gaze of a woman into herself in
the mirror, and the gaze of another woman behind the camera. These gazes are directed inwards toward oneself, and outwards toward the other woman. The forced transformation represented before, in the “Weapons” series, by assembling a female body with phallic symbols, is replaced by internal reflection and self-discovery. It seems that now Shitou’s empowerment as a woman comes from within, from exploring and understanding the mystery of femaleness that resides within herself and between a female “us”. A new subjectivity based on a different positioning in relation to sexual difference is in the process of formation.

Shitou’s project of discovering and representing female bonding does not stop in the present, or at individual becoming. She is also engaged in symbolizing the re-discovered temporal dimension of lesbian existence by retrieving a hidden history of female bonding, making lesbians the subjects of history by recuperating and rehabilitating a symbolic system of lesbianism signification.

**Recovering “herstory”**

I think nüxing (women) need their own independent history, a history of loving others and self, and a history that doesn’t use men as the reference point.

(Shitou 2006, part 2)

As Violi (1992) argues, the symbolic representation of male relationships has allowed the temporal dimension to be symbolized, and offers a means for men to generalize their individual subjective experience;

… it creates a trans-individual space in which it is possible for men to identify with the collective and to inscribe their individual subjectivity into forms of collective subjectivity…. The symbolic image of Man is constructed through a complex system of collective representations… in the stories that men tell and have always told each other about themselves and about the world. (171-2)
Female bonding and lesbian existence have existed in the past, but never became visible or fully symbolized in male culture and history. The exchange and transmission of stories that make the formation, internalization, and acknowledgment of a tradition of female bonding and lesbianism are now possible. Parts of Shitou’s “Girlfriend Series” and “Advertisement Series” convey her attempts to construct visible, non-patriarchal and non-heterosexual representations of female love and the tradition of female bonds, to recover “herstory” so that lesbians can find an “I” “mirrored and legitimized in the ‘you’ of ‘society’ or ‘culture’” (Docherty 1996: 27).

Figure 24 (left) A Photograph of Chunchun, from Shitou, “Girlfriend Series”, 1997
Figure 25 (right) Childhood Friend, from Shitou, “Girlfriend Series”, 1997

In the “Girlfriend Series” (Figures 24 and 25), the black and white photographic effect is an intentional mimicry of old photos in painting, creating a sense of history. In Figures 24 and 25 Shitou’s shaved head disrupts conventional representation of female friendship and reveals the queerness of this history. As she both uncovers and re-invents a lesbian history, she unveils
the hidden history of bosom friendship, the memory of growing up together with other girls and
the shared experience of becoming women. The bird and corn in the background (figure 24)
suggest a connection with nature and a rural environment, wildness and freedom, the sources of
happiness in Shitou’s childhood. The girl with braids wears Western-style blouse with a floral
print; while Shitou herself is in traditional Han clothes. During the Mao era, many rural women
still wore traditional clothes (as shown in Figure 24), and some urban residents also wore
modified traditional clothes (as in Figure 25).

This project of retrieving a history of female love is also reflected in Shitou’s recently
finished documentary film, “Women: 50 Minutes” (2006), which records women’s lives in China,
exploring in particular the tale of a utopian lesbian town in Guizhou province (Kiang & Chao
2006).

![Figure 26 (left) Karaoke, from Shitou, “Old Advertisement Series”, 2006](image1)

![Figure 27 (right) Commemorate, from Shitou, “Old Advertisement Series”, 2006](image2)

In the “Old Advertisement Series” (Figures 26 and 27), Shitou pursues lesbian history
further back, to the Republican era. In both pictures, Shitou and Mingming wear pink floral
qipao (Chinese gowns) with sexy split sides, and are surrounded by modern commercial logos and symbols. This series evokes, in a queer parody, the old cigarette advertisements and calendars of the Republican Era (1911-1949), which often pictured young “modern” beauties, sometimes with two women together. As Sang (2003) has demonstrated, in the process of normalizing heterosexual romantic love during the May Fourth era, homosexuality was (re)constructed as abnormal and identified as a psychological perversion according to the newly introduced Western sexology. However, this process of making heterosexuality compulsory was also accompanied by a proliferation of neologisms related to sex and love, and the diversification of desire. A term designating the category of female same-sex love (tongxing ai) was introduced and the concept entered the symbolic domain.

Female same-sex love was debated in public: it was seen as a perversion, a fashion, a form of spiritual or platonic love, or a modern version of exclusive friendship. Some deemed it a harmless rehearsal for cross-sex love and marriage, or a fascinating modern phenomenon, or an alternative way of imagining modernity (Sang 2003). Through these debates about it, female same-sex love received unprecedented attention in the media and became a subject of public scrutiny, criticism, investigation, and regulation. As a symbol of the “new women”, sisterhood or female friendship became a popular motif in advertising posters and calendars during the Republican era. For the first time in China, lesbianism or “female same sex love” emerged to the surface and became visible in public images, which then disappeared completely after the communist revolution.

Since the 1990s, a nostalgic sentiment has emerged in post-Mao Chinese popular culture. One version of this nostalgic trend is a search for cultural resources for the construction of
cultural capital and identity in the post-socialist era, by retrieving “traditional Chinese culture”. This includes revisiting the Republican Era, which was criticized, rejected and destroyed by the socialist revolution. As Dai Jinhua (2000) points out in discussing this nostalgic trend, the south, and especially colonial Shanghai with its hybrid, bourgeois urban culture, have been “discovered” as privileged sites for inspiration evoking delicacy, luxury, beauty, antiquity, style and art. Posters and calendars from Shanghai during the Republican Era are now reprinted and sold in flea markets and tourist sites as representing what is believed to the lost “Chinese” past.

Shitou’s intentional parody of the depiction of female beauties in cigarette advertisements of the Republican era pays tribute to the presence of a lesbian tradition in that period. In these photos, Shitou and Mingming impersonate their lesbian ancestors, and recreate a previously hidden lesbian legacy in China. The historical resonance of the advertisement also mocks current materialism and commercialization, and the flourishing contemporary culture of desire and consumption. The daringly queer gesture depicted in the photo challenges the prevailing heterosexual appropriation of the culture and history of the Republican era, drawing attention to its unjustified exclusion of homosexuality, as Shitou intentionally reclaim lesbians’ position in Chinese history.

**Signifying “Chinese” Lesbians**

In Figures 24 and 25, Shitou wears Chinese-style clothes, and in the “Advertisement Series”, both Shitou and Mingming are in qipao (Figures 26 and 27), the Han Chinese costume popular in urban areas in the Republican era. The shaved head, combined with Chinese-style clothes, constitutes a unique image of Chinese lesbianism. In another photograph series (Figure 28),
Shitou showed multiple female couples wearing Western-style evening gowns, as if they are going to a ballroom to dance. The women in these photos have either cropped or short hair, and one woman is holding a silk fan with traditional Chinese painting.

Figure 28: Shitou, “Together Series” No. 4, 2002

The emergence of Chinese gay and lesbian identities and practices is closely linked to transnational networks of lesbians and gays. The United Nations Fourth World Women’s Conference in 1995 in Beijing also contributed to the public visibility of gays and lesbians (Rofel 2007:87). Sang (2003:54) notes that the first few issues of Tiankong (Sky), the first Chinese lesbian newsletter, made no reference to female same-sex practices in Chinese history, and concluded that Chinese lesbians tend to claim a share in a Western genealogy. In the following narrative, Shitou describes the influence of European feminists and lesbians living in Beijing.

I got to know an English… a… a woman, let’s say (nüren ba). Later we became kind of friends (shuan shi pengyou). We went to parties. She felt that the way I talked was a bit unique. She invited me to participate in gatherings at her home… They had a group called “East meets West” (Dongxifang wenhua jiaoliu xiaozu). In fact all those there were nüxing (women), they got together to discuss nüxing zhuyi (feminist) topics. That was in 1995 and 1996. Also at her home, there were gatherings for gays and lesbians [“gays he lesbians” – Shitou originally used the English terms]. I started to get in touch with this kind of, um,
[hesitation] let’s say wenhua ba (culture), about feminism (nüxing zhuyi), more systematically…..Then gradually, we got our nü (female).. nüxing’s …that nü (female)… nü…. so lala’s [the Chinese name for lesbian] , you know about lala, right? Nütongzhi, (female comrade), that is the term, to have some activities. That was because we got to know this friend (the English woman), so many of us could get together. Um, we also would…um, just establish some small groups, and had some lala activities, such as going to movies.

(Shitou 2006, part 1)

Some works on globalization have examined local transnational appropriations of Western gay and lesbian rights and identity ideology. Dennis Altmann (2001a, 2001 b) has argued that there is a spread of Western models of homosexuality, or the “globalization of post-modern gay identities”(2001b: 19). Models of gay liberation that originated in Europe and the United States have become the universal ways of performing being gay, overriding cultural differences. Homosexuals in Asia and Latin America see themselves as part of a global gay community, and for them being openly gay often means being westernized. As Rofel points out, such an approach understands the local and the global as “de-territorialised” and establishes temporal hierarchies. It imagines the West as the point of origin of world history, and “places Asian gays forever in the place of deferred arrival” (2007:91). Ethnographic research on same-sex cultures has demonstrated the complexity of cultural production in interactions between the global and local (Such as Sinnott 2004; Donham 1998; Jackson 1997, 2001; Kulick 1998). Wong and Zhang (2001) demonstrated that gay and lesbian communities in Taiwan selectively borrowed and reworked the language of the gay and lesbian movement in the West to constitute a new discourse of resistance and negotiate community boundaries, giving Western concepts new meanings.
Rofel (2007) argues that in post-socialist China cultural belonging has replaced political struggle and become the site on which citizenship is meaningfully defined, sought, and conferred or denied. Their desire for cultural citizenship has inspired Chinese queers to domesticate the meanings assigned to transcultural practices related to sexual desire and queer identities, and imagine queerness within a Chinese cultural context. Yet their activities and activism undoubtedly form part of a global network. Shitou has participated in various lesbian and gay cultural events in Europe and the United States, presenting her works and communicating with academics, artists, and lesbian activists from the West, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. This experience and the transcultural context of the 1990s have provided multiple cultural frames for her performance and representation of gayness, evoking a particular Chinese lesbian identity which is “neither a wholly global culture nor simply a radical difference from the West” (Rofel 2007: 89).

While she acknowledges the importance of Western allies, the Chinese elements in Shitou’s representations indicate her conscious attempt to claim a distinctive Chinese lesbian identity, rather than simply subscribing to a “universal or global” gay identity. In the illustrations above, this is conveyed through the combination of Chinese elements (the clothes, fan, and names making reference to Chinese folk tales) and the shaved head. This juxtaposition of disparate allusions exemplifies Shitou’s experiment in synthesizing a new hybrid way of performing “being a lesbian”, with hybridity as a response to her encounter with foreign gay cultures, both in China and abroad. Shitou’s performance of her lesbianness is closely linked to that of her Chineseness, and addressed to an audience that includes gay and straight people, Chinese and foreigners. The fact that she initially developed her lesbian consciousness when she
got in touch with foreign lesbians and gay networks in Beijing, and witnessed different ways of performing lesbianness, made her conscious of her Chineseness. She stated during our interview that “Chinese lesbianism is different from the West” (Shitou 2006). Her photo and film projects searching for Chinese lesbian roots are all part of her efforts to establish a separate Chinese lesbian identity.

In the post-Mao era, various Chinese cultural and historical sources compete in representing Chineseness, both in China and abroad. What counts as Chinese is highly contested: which aspects of Chineseness one wants to present to the world in an era of globalization are often individualized and always contextual. Among the group of artists from Yuanmingyuan, of which Shitou was a member, many used elements from Mao’s Red China to symbolize China as the “Other” of the West, and gained popularity among Western collectors. Maoist China has fascinated Westerners for various reasons, being either celebrated as a utopian ideal for Leftists, or condemned as an oppressive authoritarian communist regime by those seeking to reaffirm the superiority of capitalism and Western democracy. Wang Guanyi, an artist from the Yuanmingyuan, was one of the first to succeed in the Western art market, with his Andy Warhol-style political pop “Great Criticism Series”, which combines echoes of Cultural Revolution posters with symbols of Western commercial culture such as Coca Cola bottles and the BMW logo. Many contemporary artists have followed in his footsteps and produced art that appropriates various tropes from the Mao era, reminding the audience of symbols of the “Other” China (Guo 1998:30).

Shitou draws on various cultural resources, ancient and modern, Chinese and foreign, to signify an image of Chinese lesbians. While Maoist images and symbols served as cultural
capital in the global market, Shitou left them out of these representations, although traditional Han costumes are present, the qipao and Chinese-style jacket or blouse, which evoke certain images of China. In Figures 20 and 21 from the “Girlfriend Series”, Shitou and her friends adopted either traditional Chinese blouses or Western-style blouses with floral prints, but not the fashionable costume of that era, such as the army uniform or the red scarf which most children wore (a symbol of membership in the Children’s Vanguard Team, Shaoxiandui, the party’s student organization in elementary and junior high schools). The absence in her work of reference to images of Maoist women (such as the Iron Girl, the Red Guard, the army uniform, red star, red scarf, all the symbols Shitou grew up with), conveys a conscious rejection of the Maoist gender project.

In Shitou’s lesbian signifying practice, Chineseness is represented by traditional Han Chinese cultural symbols, but not Mao’s “red China”. Although the “masculinized” Maoist funü might have appealed as in some ways resembling butch lesbian stereotypes, Shitou found that the erasure of the feminine in Maoist gender discourse made lesbian existence un-representable. The post-Mao project of reviving gender difference, along with the transnational feminist discourse of sisterhood and gay networks, created a better space for her to articulate a lesbian subjectivity. However, in performing a Chinese lesbian identity in the current context, Shitou has two challenges: she must contest the strictly heterosexual construction of the post-Mao nüxing, and counter the invisibility of Chinese lesbians when they are subsumed under a supposedly universal “global gay” identity.
The storytelling

Language: the appropriation of tongzhi

Many western feminist studies of lesbian life stories claim that we can uncover a rewriting of sexual difference based on the rejection of patriarchy in lesbian narratives, and that this rewriting requires changes at the level of language. In her study of early twentieth-century English novels by lesbians, Hallett (1999) makes the case for a distinct “lesbian aesthetic”. She argues that lesbians negotiate a way through masculine and heterosexual discourse, to redeploy the existing language of love, gender, and sexuality. As previously cited, she claims that “In the economy of words, language is borrowed, if only temporarily, and returned with interest.” (Hallett 1999:23).

In Shitou’s narrative there are often pauses and repetitions, and it sometimes seemed that she almost fell into a state of aphasia when it came to defining or describing gender and lesbian-related activities. She was often hesitant in her diction and somehow reluctant to commit to the terms available, but eventually she had to adapt existing discourses in order to verbalize the experiences she wanted to communicate. When she had to use existing Chinese terms produced in a heterosexual language framework, she often used the word “ba”, which can be understood as “let’s call it xxx for now”, or the English “so to speak”. The silences, hesitations, and linguistic negotiation in Shitou’s narration reveal the difficulty of articulating a lesbian existence in a heterosexual language system, as well as Shitou’s conscious resistance to the interference of heterosexual norms in her narrative. In order to verbalize her existence and make female homosexuality visible and recognizable to a heterosexual audience, Shitou has to resort to and revise a range of multi-lingual and multi-cultural linguistic resources. Her narrative practice
reflects Chinese lesbians’ and gays’ specific struggles over language use, in the process of formulating a queer subjectivity by appropriating, extending, and challenging existing linguistic constructions of models of gender difference and sexuality.

Shitou’s contestation of the heterosexual language frame starts with distrusting the linguistic construction of “women”. As Butler (1999) argues, in limiting its field of description, constraint is built into the political and linguistic “representation” of gender. It determines in advance what constitutes, or ought to constitute, the category of women through certain exclusionary practices. The usage of the terms funü 和 nüxing  has already been discussed in previous chapters. Shitou’s narrative reveals that the discursive formation and representation of what a “woman” is, whichever of these two terms is used, “achieve stability and coherence only in the context of the heterosexual matrix” (Butler, 1999:9). Either term can only be appropriated by or applied to heterosexual, male-oriented women. Lesbians, disqualified as the “ultimate candidate for representation” (Butler 1999:4) are denied access to being “the subject”. They therefore have to seek to create a separate symbolic domain and a semiotic system that can signify their invisible and previously un-representable existence. As Violi (1998) points out, language does not merely reflect existing realities, but also creates new ones by innovating, to find alternative representations produced by manipulating powers and competencies (165-6).

Shitou avoids the Maoist term funü (evoking political women, the Maoist subject), to refer to women, and at times she uses the term nüxing, which became popular in post-Mao times (as discussed earlier). Among the two common translations of the English term “feminism” in Chinese, Shitou uses the term nüxing zhuyi 女性主义 (literally the female idea, or feminine-ism)

208
to refer to feminism, instead of the term *nüquan zhuyi* 女权主义 (literally the idea of women’s equality and power, or a feminism that emphasizes women’s rights) (See the quotations from her interview, especially the paragraph on page 194). Nüquan zhuyi connotes the stereotype of an oppressive man-hating woman hungry for power, whereas *nüxing zhuyi* appears less political and threatening, and has more semantic flexibility. Nüxing zhuyi is often used to promote an idea of femininity based on the gender binary, and is more popular among Chinese scholars and various types of “feminists”.

While Shitou clearly does not identify with either the term *funü* or *nüquan zhuyi*, she also has reservations about the term *nüxing*, since it often refers to a return to hyperfemininity denoting compulsory heterosexuality, as illustrated by comments from the women interviewed in previous chapters.

In seeking to find a suitable designation of her own, Shitou used various alternatives to describe lesbian and gay identities. She directly uses the English terms “gay and lesbian” when foreign queers are included, but distinguishes Chinese lesbians and gays by using the Chinese term “tongzhi” (comrade, which has become a commonly accepted term for queers in China). Two terms, “lala” (a Chinese slang expression coming from the “L” for lesbian) and *nütongzhi* (female comrade) are reserved specifically for lesbians, and these are the identity labels that Shitou uses to identify herself. To communicate with heterosexual audiences, Shitou uses “nü de” (女的, a more neutral informal vernacular term used in both Mao and post-Mao times, meaning simply “female” and implying biological sex), to refer to both straight women and lesbians. For instance, the English woman who introduced Shitou to feminist and lesbian circles is a lesbian, and Shitou referred to her as a *nü de* (female), after some hesitation. This was at the beginning
of our interview, when terms such as tongzhi and lala had not yet been introduced, and Shitou was not sure about my knowledge or attitude to the queer community.

The multiple linguistic, cultural, and ideological resources Shitou used to articulate different gender identities and sexual orientations demonstrate the transcultural features of the construction of post-Mao Chinese lesbian subjectivities. Various interrelated, overlapping, and distinctive identities have been formulated, demarcated, contested, and negotiated in this process. These linguistic exercises form a semiotic system that charts a matrix of “gay kinship” — the complex relationships between various gay identities and labels: as Rofel has stated, “The linguistic heterogeneity of terms for gayness” exemplifies the searching for an identity that “refuses the opposition of global and local” (Rofel 2007: 102).

As the above discussion shows, the rejection and appropriation of certain terms always conveys the rejection or appropriation of the ideologies that inform the creation and definition of these terms. Shitou’s rejection of the term funü is associated with her rejection of the Maoist gender project, and her reservations towards the term nüxing reveal her resistance to its heteronomativity. Her adaptation of the term tongzhi is part of her identification and commitment to queer culture and politics in post-Mao China, and the term lala indicates the inspiration drawn from global lesbian and gay culture and identification with it, but also Chinese lesbians’ “sinification” of a foreign term and identity.

Among the terms Shitou used, tongzhi needs further consideration because of its connection with the Mao era. Why would tongzhi be appropriated by Chinese lesbians, while the term funü, from the same era, is rejected? Tong means common, and zhi means will or goal; tongzhi therefore means people who share a common will or goal. These two words were joined
to translate the word for “comrade” from Russian in the early twentieth century, and were initially used to address fellow Communist Party members. Its use was then extended to refer to all members of the CCP, the CCP’s army, and people who worked for the CCP. *Tongzhi* eventually became a widely used way of addressing people in the Mao era. It replaced traditional terms such as Mister, Miss, lady (*nüshi*), master (*laoye, shaoyie*), madam (*taitai*) etc., and was used as a gender neutral and non-hierarchical term to address or refer to socialist subjects, men and women, old and young, people in any occupation, of higher or lower rank (except those belonging to the categories defined as *jieji diren*, "class enemies" (see Scotton and Zhu 1983; Lee-Wong 1994; Hong 1973; Fang and Heng 1983).

Self-identification as a *tongzhi* was an indication of allegiance to the Communist party, and being addressed as *tongzhi* signified one’s recognition as a subject of the socialist state. Women were often referred to as *nütongzhi*, or female comrades, and men were *nantongzhi* or male comrades. As a positive political category, *tongzhi* represented communist ideology and egalitarian ideas. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, along with commercialization and urban life, other older terms of address made their way back into use; the use of *tongzhi* has gradually faded away from everyday life and become reserved for official occasions.

*Tongzhi* was first publicly used in its new sense of queerness in 1989 in the Chinese title of the "First Hong Kong Gay and Lesbian Film Festival" (*Heung-Gong tongzhi din-ying gwai*). There was concern that Western labels such as *gay*, *lesbian*, and *queer* failed to capture the nature of Chinese same-sex desire and relationships, and the need was recognized for an indigenous denotation of same-sex eroticism in China (Zhou 2000). Since then, *tongzhi* has been widely adopted by gay and lesbian individuals and organizations in Hong Kong, and later in
Taiwan.\textsuperscript{19} It aimed to embrace all non-conforming sexual identities, emphasizing respect for shared ideals, goals and aspirations (Chou 1997, 2000; Hsing et al 2001; Wong and Zhang 2001; Wong 2005). It was then reintroduced into Mainland China, and has now become widely accepted and used by Chinese gays and lesbians. It has been transformed from a term that was gender-neutral with no reference to sexuality, to one that singles out people with non-mainstream, non-heterosexual sexualities.

However, why was \textit{tongzhi} selected, among many possible Chinese terms for same-sex love, such as \textit{mojingzi} (grinning at the mirror, referring to female same-sex love), \textit{duanxiu zhipi} (a passion for cutting sleeves, coming from an ancient Chinese tale of male same-sex love), or foreign terms already adopted, such as the medicalized \textit{tongxingai} or \textit{tongxinglian} (meaning \textit{same-sex love}, translated from the English term \textit{homosexuality}), or \textit{ku’er}, the Chinese translation of “queer? Unlike \textit{tongzhi}, \textit{ku’er} does not have an existing Chinese history or equivalent and is simply a phonic translation of the English term: \textit{ku’er} literally means "a cool person", a concept with no concrete Chinese referentiality. While it does not have the negative historical connotations it had in the West, it is a borrowed term with limited usage in China.\textsuperscript{20}

According to Chou Wah Shan, in the context of 1997, Hong Kong queers’ adoption/adaptation as their self-designation as \textit{tongzhi}, “the most sacred term in Communist China”, signifies a desire both to indigenize sexual politics and to re-claim their cultural identity (2000:368). Andrew Wong (2005) shows that the (re)appropriation of \textit{tongzhi} in Hong Kong is reminiscent of the struggles to redeploy words like \textit{nigger} and \textit{queer} in the United States. While \textit{tongzhi} activists in Hong Kong attempt to re-habilitate the term by injecting positive meanings,
some journalists intentionally parody this usage in order to ridicule gay rights activists, which may lead to its becoming seen as pejorative.

Taiwanese *tongzhi*, on the other hand, like to use this term because it suggests the elements of choice and political activism in projecting a sexual identity (Sang 2003: 236). Andrew Wong and Qing Zhang’s (2001) study of the use of *tongzhi* in Taiwan shows that the term invokes the voice of Chinese revolutionaries, calls for respect and equality, and gives a sense of legitimacy to the *tongzhi* cause as a quintessentially Chinese social movement. The association of *tongzhi* with Chinese revolutionaries is clear in the direct borrowing of expressions of combat, struggle, and encouragement in *tongzhi* activities, echoing a discourse of solidarity and resistance.

The adoption or adaptation of the term *tongzhi* in Mainland China shares a similar desire to re-appropriate some aspects of Communist ideology, but it is taking place in a different historical and political context from that of Hong Kong and Taiwan. For *tongzhi* in Mainland China who grew up with memories of the Mao era, this term is not only associated with egalitarian ideals and the revolution, but also signifies socialist citizenship. In the Mao era, gays were labeled “bad elements”, and not entitled to the label *tongzhi*. The re-appropriation of the term thus creates a space for gays and lesbians to reclaim their access to citizenship, and underlines their desire to be recognized as legitimate subjects.

An egalitarian, gender-neutral and politically engaged term, *tongzhi* also offers queers in Mainland China a more direct ideological inspiration than it does for most *tongzhi* in Hong Kong and Taiwan: for *tongzhi* who grew up with a Maoist education, like Shitou, were taught that as the inheritors of China’s revolution they should prepare to devote their lives to greater goals than
individual well-being. For them, identifying with the term can evoke the memory of the revolutionary passion of the Mao era. The goals for today’s *tongzhi* may have changed, from achieving Communism on Earth to assuring gay rights, but the framework of commitment to change through activism remains the same. The term *tongzhi* therefore bridges the gap between politics then and now, and facilitates the ideological jump from fighting for all the poor oppressed people in the world to fighting for all marginalized sexual minorities. It is thus not a pure coincidence that in present-day Mainland China, there are only two disparate groups addressed as *tongzhi*: Communist Party members and queers, who share a similar historical inspiration and aspiration for a utopian equality in spite of radical differences in other respects.

*Narrating in the shadow of heterosexual hegemony*

Feminist criticism of traditional autobiography points out that its form is not only patriarchal and masculine, but also heterosexist. As Sedgwick argued, knowledge is constrained by and modeled on ideologies that support heterosexuality (1990). William Stephenson (2000) notes that traditional narrative systems are dominated by a “heteronarrative” organized around the patriarchal goals of marriage and reproduction, enforcing “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich 1980). Marilyn Farwell points out that the traditional narrative, as an “institution,” depends on “gender and sexuality alignments” and normative sexual expectations: its narrative patterns are the condition of and reaffirm a heterosexual dyad with male centrality (1996: 26, 41). Most literary representations of women have been based on “the plot of heterosexual romance” (Abraham 1996:xix), even those produced by women, making lesbian experiences off limits, un-representable, and invisible (Hallett 1999:79). For Farewell, “one of the ways to open up the
gender boundaries of the narrative system” is by adopting a homosexual perspective (Farwell 1996:41).

A number of feminist critics and theorists have worked on “lesbian autobiography” as a sub-genre. Georgia Johnston (2007) argues that differences in desire change autobiographical narrative’s content and form. Teresa De Lauretis celebrates the lesbian as an eccentric subject who disrupts heterosexual knowledge systems (1990). Lesbian self-representations certainly challenge assumptions about human sexuality and female identity, and recontextualize subjects and objects of desire. Elizabeth Meese (1992) claims that by telling the story of someone who did not officially exist in history or in the symbolic domain, lesbians can disrupt patriarchal narrative conventions through excess, manipulation, and alternative plots, as they narrate “within, under, and beside accepted narratives” (Johnston 2007: 7).

However, in practice the telling of a lesbian’s life to an often ignorant or hostile heterosexual public means that the speaker has to narrate in the shadow of heterosexual hegemony, and often has to explain and justify her “deviant” sexuality in the face of heterosexual interrogation. Can a lesbian in fact tell her story “straight”, as having value in its own right and according to its own narrative logic, or will a lesbian’s story always have to be twisted to make it receivable? This question arose from Shitou’s reaction to my initial invitation to tell me her life story.

Since there are still very few publicly prominent out lesbians in China, Shitou views accepting interviews as an important part of her lesbian activism, and is often approached by magazines or the Internet and TV programs. Through them she wants to reach a wider audience and to facilitate understanding and communication about gay and lesbian issues. Most of the
interviews with Shitou that I could find in magazines, or on the Internet or TV programs, focus on her identity as a lesbian artist. They are often about what lesbian love is, or how her artist creations represent lesbian lives and desire. The interviews are often targeted towards an ignorant and curious heterosexual audience.

Shitou seemed at first to expect this interview with me, a Canada-based Chinese researcher whose sexual orientation was unknown to her, to be like the other interviews she has given - to focus on her “peculiar” life choice and desire. When I first asked Shitou to tell me about her life, she finished her story in twenty-four minutes. She spent less than four minutes to give a chronological account of the first twenty-six years of her life; the remaining twenty-minute narrative dwells on the period after 1995, when she got in touch with feminism and the emerging lesbian culture in Beijing. This story was about how Shitou became a self-defined lesbian, and her lesbian activism. She then stopped and said, “It seems I am giving you a day-to-day bookkeeping kind of account of my life?” She looked at me, as if to say, “So that is my story, that is how I became a lesbian artist and activist, what else do you want me to tell?”

It seems to me that Shitou followed a narrative structure that she is familiar with – a script she has co-developed with her other interviewers. This narrative structure is embedded within an explanatory framework that answers the question, “How did you become (or discover yourself as) a lesbian?” While a heterosexual person never needs to give an account of the “discovery” and justification of her sexual orientation, a lesbian feels the constant expectation or pressure from straight people to explain and justify her sexuality. In this explanatory self-justifying story, Shitou’s lesbian identity overrides other aspects of her self and her life. The result is an imposed narrative structure organized around lesbian sexuality and “difference”, one
that simply affirms something separated out and defined as “lesbian”, satisfies heterosexual voyeurism, and may reinforce the centrality of heterosexuality.

My intention here is not to criticize the narrative strategy Shitou has to take in her social activism, but to contextualize it and question the discursive environment and the unequal terms in which such a narrative exchange occurs. This is the first time Shitou and I met; my own sexuality was still a question, and she was not sure about my knowledge of or attitude to queer politics. Shitou may have told me the first story as a sort of “test run”. In this context, Shitou chooses this way to narrate her story, because she regards the telling of her life as a lesbian to the public as a political act, and her identity is still entangled with the activist community of which she is a part. On the one hand, even though sexuality should not be a person’s defining feature, identity narratives centered on “coming out” (usually based on a sense of oppression) are socially important as strategies for raising awareness. On the other hand, when such narrative exchanges occur on an unequal base, with homosexuality being routinely scrutinized while heterosexuality remains “natural” and immune from the same examination and self-reflection, it may keep the normalization of heterosexuality invisible, leaving heterosexism unchallenged. Furthermore, this type of explanatory narrative practice may internalize and further reinforce the heterosexual hegemony that insists on the “abnormality” of homosexuality and its need of explanation.

In Shitou’s twenty-four-minute initial narrative, I see the shadow of the heterosexual gaze. Politically and strategically necessary as it is for lesbians to account for past experiences, to identify the source of their oppression and to fight it, the question is whether they can constantly perform a narrative that resists day-to-day homophobia, without at the same confirming their own marginalization: Can a lesbian fully narrate her life and by doing so de-centre and de-
naturalize heterosexuality? After Shitou finished her first life story, there was an awkward moment of silence. Motivated by the desire to know more about Shitou’s life beyond the coming-out story, I started by revisiting her childhood. Once Shitou got into this narrative mood, more memories emerged. When she sometimes stopped, I asked questions to help the narrative move forward. In our narrative exchange, Shitou got to know more about me, and realizing that I am not homophobic or ignorant, she felt more comfortable to provide a more comprehensive account of her life in which her sexual orientation is de-centered.

When Shitou retold her life story without singling out and explaining the development of her sexuality, the latter became an organic part of her life that emerges from, and is integrated into, her general development and her broader gender consciousness. Shitou’s lesbian identity was no longer the dominant theme, separated from the rest of her life, rather the narrative focused on philosophical reflections on her encounters with gender inequality and masculinist standards, and on female love and bonding, combined with comments on her paintings and photographs.

Shitou’s life story differs from that of many heterosexual women, in both its plot and the way the story is told. The plot could be summarized thus: her experiences of gender inequality lead to a search for female empowerment, which is achieved through female solidarity and lesbian love. Shitou collects her memories and organizes her story-telling around this plotline. For example, she witnessed her parents’ quarrels, her father’s alcoholism and her mother’s weakness, as well as domestic gender violence in a neighbor’s family, as evidence of gender inequality in everyday life. She connects these memories to her determination, even as a young girl, not to believe in heterosexual love and marriage as her life goal, being protective towards
other girls, and never wanting to have children. In her youth she also experienced isolation as a female artist in a male-dominated milieu, and her work was subjected to judgment according to male criteria. Her art and style were devalued because of their “feminine” aspect. Her rite of passage occurred in 1995, when she met the feminist group in Beijing, and self-identified and publicly came out as a lesbian. Shitou links her past experiences of gender oppression to her longing for female bonding and her present commitment to feminism and lesbian activism.

The development of the plot in Shitou’s life story is thus driven by her resistance to gender inequality and the search for female bonding and empowerment as a means to overcome it—together we become strong, as solid and independent as a stone. In this story, her struggle as a woman against gender oppression prevails over affirmation of her identity as a lesbian. Although her lesbian desire emerges as a natural development from her longing for female bonding and solidarity, the emphasis is less on its physical or sexual aspects and more on the emotional and spiritual ones. Lesbianism is presented as both a personal preference and a political choice. The conflict in this life story is between genders (women vs. men) rather than between sexual orientations (homosexuality vs. heterosexuality). She sees heterosexual women as her allies, because women are all nü de 女的 (female), and share the experience of gender oppression under patriarchy.

The telling of Shitou’s life story turned out to be a collaborative project involving both the researcher and the participant. In contrast to her initial defensive account addressing expected accusations of perversion and abnormality, Shitou went on to speak of her life as a journey that led her to choose a different way of living. As she “deviates” from heterosexual gender expectations and consciously becomes a “transgressive other”, and as the narration of her
life goes beyond the “coming-out” master script, Shitou’s exploration of the meaning and purpose of her life, her sexuality and her identity, like her narrative about these journeys, has no pre-script to follow. The lack of pre-scription leaves her sometimes searching in the dark and narrating with hesitation, but also provides the potential for developing alternatives, in both verbal and visual representations of her life.

**Conclusion**

Specific forms of heterosexual patriarchy in particular contexts determine both the forms that are available for lesbian narrative practices and the shape their resistance takes (Auchmuty et al 1992). Shitou’s gender project and its signifying practices are shaped by the social context of their production, and marked by historical memories. More specifically, it demonstrates the ambivalent encounter of the Maoist gender legacy with post-Mao lesbian lives. On the one hand, the post-Mao transnational context offers multiple cultural inspirations and possibilities for performing lesbianism and the formation of lesbian subjectivity; on the other, the Maoist past nevertheless casts its shadow on the post-Mao lesbian’s self-identification and subjectivity formation—in its persistent re-incarnation (as in the use of the term tongzhi), or in its not coincidental absence (as in the rejection of the term funü as evoking a masculinization of women). Having grown up in the late-Mao era, Shitou’s memories and reflections on the Maoist gender project shaped her imagining of a post-Mao lesbian subjectivity. Her artistic project and personal journey, however, reveal the heteronormative and patriarchal foundation of models of gender in both the Maoist and post-Mao gender projects.
Narrated in a post-Mao transnational context, Shitou’s life story also poses a challenge to the dominance of Western lesbian and gay liberation discourse and a “universal/global gay identity”. Her desire for cultural belonging has led her to seek out lesbian images in Chinese history for inspiration, throwing a different light on shifting models of femininity in the past and their echoes in the present.

The “outing”, in words and pictures, of Shitou’s life story demonstrates the self-conscious formulation of a lesbian gender project, conveyed through alternative ways of performing it, in both oral narration and visual presentation. The juxtaposition of Shitou’s visual and verbal narratives provided a more multi-dimensional self representation, through the combination and interplay of the visual and the verbal. It creates an alternative space that enables Shitou not only to express herself beyond the limits of the narrative form, but also to challenge the limits of heterosexual and masculinist language and narrative traditions, whose normative operation prescribes what qualifies as “women” and as “(hetero)sexuality” and “desire”, delimiting what is visible, comprehensible, and representable. The representative strategies Shitou adopted illustrate various ways an individual gender project can challenge heteronomative gender models, in both their linguistic and iconic representations.

---

1 For instance, Ruan and Chong, 1987; Ruan and Tsai, 1987, 1988, Shamshasha, 1989, Hinch, 1990


4 As explained earlier, another research participant also asked for a copy of her life story interview, because she wanted to give it to her daughter so she could know more about her mother’s life. As part of the research plan, I will also share a summary report of this research project in Chinese with participants who expressed interest in receiving it.
From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, artists came from all over China and formed an artist community, a Chinese Soho, in a village in the northwest part of Beijing near Yuanmingyuan Park. They rented peasant houses as studios and aimed to sell their works to the mushrooming art galleries in Beijing; there was also an emerging interest in collecting contemporary Chinese art overseas. Many internationally acclaimed Chinese artists, such as Fang Lijun and Wang Guangyi, have lived in Yuanmingyuan.

Shitou has kindly provided copies of her work and granted me permission to reproduce them for this research. Since Shitou is a public figure, I also consulted Chinese and English news reports and television interviews with her. They provided background information for my interpretation of Shitou’s life story. Such sources are indicated wherever points do not come directly from my interview with her.

For instance, there was one news report in the late 1950s, where the Changsha Meat and Fishery Products Company encouraged female employees to learn to butcher pigs. This became a national “news story of the year”. See: “Women Butchers in the Meat and Fishery Product Company” (shuican gongsi and nutufu), available at: http://bbs.baixing.com/thread-27650-1-1.html, last accessed November 20, 2008. Note that this discussion is about butchery as a profession. Many women have been responsible for killing poultry, pigs, sheep, and so on for food for their family. Furthermore, butchery as a male profession used to be a tradition of the Han people but not of some minority groups in China, for instance, among the Naxi people, a matrilocal society living mainly in the Southwest part of China, women have always been butchers and were considered better than their male counterparts.


I have highlighted all the terms Shitou used to describe gender identity in italics, which I will analyze in the section on her narrative language.

In Figure 11, Shitou has a bald head, but it was painted in 1997.

For a study of the mandarin duck and butterfly literature, see Chow 1986-87 and Link 1981.

The butterfly metaphor comes from a well-known and ancient Chinese story about Liang Sanbuo and Zhu Yingtai, “The Butterfly Lovers”. Zhu Yingtai, a young girl from a higher class family dressed as a male to attend school (where only men were allowed), and fell in love with a male classmate. Their love ended up as a tragedy because of Zhu’s family intervention. Liang died of desperation, and Zhu joined him in his tomb on her wedding day, avoiding the marriage arranged by her family with another man. After their death, the lovers became two butterflies, happily together, never to separate again. For a study of Liang & Zhu’s story, see Altenburge 2005.

For example, Sang reproduced some of these posters in The Emerging Lesbian (2003), p. 2, 18-19, 57. For a catalog see Zhang 1994.

While that might be true in the early period of lesbian activism in China, a more complex construction of Chinese lesbian identities is now taking place, as Shitou’s works suggest.

Some scholars translate nüquan zhuyi as feminism and nüxing zhuyi as womanism, for example, Lin 2006: 115, Barlow 2004: 49-63. The term womanism is understood as a form of feminism that acknowledges women’s natural contribution to society and has been used in distinction to the term feminism and its association with white women.
This term originated in the U.S. among African American women and has very different connotations compared to nuxing zhuyi in contemporary China.

17 For a discussion of different Chinese terms for “feminism”, see Ko and Wang 2006.

18 I am using this term in a different way from most scholarly discussions of gay kinship, which relate to male gays’ relationships with each other, their family, and with patriarchal culture. On Chinese gay and lesbian and kinship, see for instance Rofel 2007 and Engebretsen 2009.

19 For the adaptation of the term tongzhi by Chinese gays and lesbians in Hong Kong, see Wong 2005, and Zhou 1995, 1997, 2000. For the adaptation of the term tongzhi in Taiwan, see Wong and Zhang, 2001.

20 The awareness of this term in China was increased by Li Yinghe’s translated anthology, Queer Theory: Western Sexual Thought in the 1990s, (2000). It is mainly used in academic context. I use the term queer in this chapter to refer to a broad range of people with alternative sexualities, such as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans-gendered and sexual, and other non-mainstream heterosexualities. In Mainland China the earlier definition of tongzhi as gay and lesbian has been extended to a more inclusive category that embraces bi-sexual and trans people.

21 For instance, Harris and Sisley 1978


23 There was a moment in the year when both of Shitou’s parents died when she considered having a child and started to paint babies, but that idea soon faded.
Chapter 5

The Uninhabitable Place of the Nüxing: Anne’s Life Story

As the previous chapters have shown, the Maoist woman, rural women, and lesbians all appear to be constructed as “less-than-real-women”, positioned as the abjected other of the hyper-feminine post-Mao nüxing who occupies center-stage and is now largely perceived as the norm in post-Mao gender construction. In this chapter, I will investigate the life story of an apparently successful cosmopolitan nüxing, Anne. Like many present-day educated Chinese women, Anne has lived abroad. She obtained an MBA in the UK, married a Chinese American she met in an on-line chat-room, and lived in the U.S. for five years. She returned to China in 2003 and is the General Manager of a multinational company with its head office in Beijing. As a young, attractive, urban woman with transnational experience and a prestigious job in China, Anne seems to embody successfully the post-Mao image of the nüxing – yet she feels unable to inhabit that position. Does Anne, as a cosmopolitan post-Mao nüxing, still carry the specter of the Maoist funü within her as part of her (repressed) identity, when she travels across different cultural, ideological, national, and economic boundaries and gender systems? How has the Maoist past played out in Anne’s personal gender project, in her performance of femininity in a transnational context? Has the Maoist gender legacy, combined with other multicultural and ideological sources, contributed to Anne’s resistance to “various patriarchies in multiple locations” (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994:22)? These are the questions this chapter will address.

In order to better situate the position in which Anne and similar highly educated women find themselves, it is useful to look more closely at the effects of the economic and political
transformations that have taken place in China since the end of the Mao era. They have had major repercussions, not only in terms of the state’s interactions with the global economy and rethinking class identities, but also in the personal lives of individuals who have lived abroad and returned to China. Women, in particular, find themselves torn between competing models of what being a “successful woman” entails.

**Context: economic reform and transnational Chinese identities**

The economic reform which started in 1978 transformed the centrally controlled state economy of China into a competitive, capitalist one, and has brought about rapid economic development and improved living standards for many Chinese people. Growing income translates into increased purchasing power and the desire to consume; meanwhile the state-monopolized production and consumption of the Mao era have been replaced by a relatively free market economy. As a result, a consumer revolution emerged in the 1980s (Bian 1994; Chao and Myers 1998; Davis 2000; Walder 1991). Since the late 1980s, an increasing income gap has created differentiated lifestyles and consumer markets (Hanser 2008; Ikels 1996; Wang 1995; Weiner 1994). A new elite class has emerged, replacing the old political elites of high-ranking CCP cadres, and forming a rising Chinese middle class (Duthie 2005; Goodman 1999; Li 1997; Pearson 1997; Yan 1997; Zhang 2000). Among its members are private business owners, new cultural elites, and professionals working in foreign-invested enterprises.

After many years of isolation from the West (but not from the Communist bloc and some Third World countries) during the height of the Cold War, Deng Xiaoping’s reforms brought
about an “open door policy”, aimed at integrating China into the world economy. This policy attracted foreign investment, and with the presence of foreign businesses came a new generation of Chinese professionals working for them. The tightening of the political environment after the 1989 Tiananmen Square crack-down led to a decline in foreign investment. Deng’s 1992 tour of south China brought about a renewed policy of further economic reform, combining strict state control of domestic political affairs with a more liberal policy towards foreign investment, including many preferential policies to encourage it, from manufacturing to high technology and the financial sectors (Luo 2000). This development created even more demand for a highly educated urban workforce.

In April 1998 an estimated total of 310,570 foreign companies were registered in China, and 17.5 million Chinese were working in the foreign business sector, many of them in middle and senior management (Zhang 2000). As for the city of Beijing, where Anne works, in 1997 approximately 5,000 foreign-invested enterprises (FIEs) and more than 6,000 representative offices were operating, employing more than 300,000 Chinese. The number of FIEs in Beijing has reached 15,000 in 2009, and they have 700,000 Chinese employees (Beijing Municipal Bureau of Statistics, 1997, 2009). Foreign companies offer higher salaries, global prestige, and the opportunity to receive training and travel abroad, providing extensive exposure to the outside world and cosmopolitan lifestyles; all of these elements give people working for foreign companies high social status, and consequently they attract public attention and media coverage (Zhang 2000; Duthie 2005). Margaret Pearson (1997) describes the new elite in the foreign business sector as having high incomes, high educational levels, and prestigious status because of the companies they represent. They are referred to as the “white collar strata” (bailing
jiechen), and those working in middle and upper management positions are referred to as yapishi (yuppies); this Chinese term has connotations of a global orientation, trendiness, and sophistication (Zhang 2005).

Yan Yusheng (2002) mentioned that among yuppie professionals, women tend to perform better than their male counterparts and are more likely to stay with their jobs, and many of them now hold mid-level managerial positions in joint ventures and foreign companies. Different attitudes in corporate cultures to a gendered working environment contribute to women’s excelling in FIEs. Working for a foreign company provides opportunities for many young Chinese women to break out of a traditional career path. Compared to their counterparts working for Chinese companies, those working in foreign ones often hold higher positions and are promoted faster. In the traditional state-owned work unit or enterprise, male dominance is prevalent, especially with the backlash of conservative gender discourse. Many such work units and state enterprises are reluctant to hire female employees, which makes it more difficult for female university graduates to find jobs than their male counterparts. While gender divisions of labour (as well as racial) also exist in foreign companies, the principle of meritocracy (to at least some level) embedded in Western business culture makes performance an important measure for reward and promotion, and gives some women a better chance to compete fairly with their Chinese male colleagues. This is especially evident in those areas that are not traditionally male-dominated, such as the retail trade and marketing of consumer products.

In her study of white-collar women working for multinational companies (MNC) in Shanghai, Laurie Duthie (2005) identifies several reasons for the higher success rate of women in foreign companies. The first is their better language skills, since most MNCs require a good
command of a foreign language for employment at the management level. Because of the common stereotype that women have more facility for learning another language, foreign languages are a female-dominated field of study in Chinese universities. Secondly, men and women have different career paths in MNCs, with men tending to be concentrated in sales, and women working as personal assistants to individuals in higher management levels. Many women work in proximity to expatriate executives and the mentorship they receive helps them move up the corporate ladder. Such opportunities have become more common since the Asian economic crisis of the mid-1990s, when many companies accelerated localization in order to lower costs.

Based on my experience and observation when working for an MNC myself in Beijing in the late 1990s, these women’s success can be at least partly attributed to the intersection between gender and race which creates a niche for women to stay at MNCs and eventually have more chance of promotion. As mentioned earlier, the principle of meritocracy only applies, however, to certain local positions, while higher management levels remain highly racialized on a global scale. Since top personnel, such as CEOs and CFOs, are usually from headquarters and many positions are reserved for expats, who are mostly white or overseas Chinese, there is little chance for Chinese natives to break the racial glass ceiling (see also Duthie 2005). As a result, some mid-level male managers choose to leave after gaining enough experience, going to work for Chinese companies or starting their own business. Many women, on the other hand, have lower expectations and are less ambitious to make it to the top positions, and therefore tend to stay in mid-level positions, though they may transfer from one FIE to another. Furthermore, there is a
stereotype that women in general, and “oriental” women in particular, are more docile than their male counterparts, and more open to adopting a foreign culture and work-style.

Alongside the open-door policy is a strong pro-West trend towards globalization which started in the 1980s. One good illustration is provided by the TV documentary River Elegy (or Deathsong of the River), broadcast in 1988, which criticized Chinese traditional culture and called for westernization so that China can pursue national glory in the modern world.

The shift from the “Culture Fever” and radicalism of the 1980s to the renewed neo-authoritarianism, neo-conservatism, and extreme control of the 1990s was brought about by the gunshots of 1989. The difficult international environment for China after Tiananmen, the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the force of globalization, led to fear of disorder and social and political collapse, resulting in the emergence of neo-conservatism. The rise of a “new Confucianism” in the 1990s coincided with the Party’s need to find a unifying ideology to fill the vacuum left by the loss of faith in Marxist-Leninist ideology. The revival of interest in traditional Chinese philosophy was utilized to attract support from Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and overseas Chinese, with the aim of building a global pan-Chinese identity.

Rather than creating a backlash of total opposition to Westernization and a return to nationalism, as some feared, this shift led to what Yunxiang Yan has called “managed globalization,” in which “the Chinese state has been playing an important role in forming a national consensus, facilitating China’s participation in the globalization process, controlling the direction of economic integration, and balancing the pros and cons of cultural globalization” (2002:20). Globalization is seen as an inevitable stage in China’s modernization and as providing an opportunity for China to catch up with the developed countries. Yan notes that in
positioning themselves as active participants with something to offer to the emerging global culture, and viewing it as a balanced two-way process, many Chinese have demonstrated a strong appetite to accept, localize, and eventually appropriate elements of imported foreign culture. He describes this as a Chinese type of cultural globalization, distinct from the West-centered, challenge-response paradigm of global-local interaction, “a managed process in which the state plays a leading role, and the elite and the populace work together to actively claim ownership of the emerging global culture.” (2002:24).

The manifestations of this Chinese-style cultural globalization in Chinese intellectual life and cultural activities are referred to as the “postmodern phenomenon”. It is seen in architecture with both global and local characteristics that constructs new transnational spaces, and in the double orientation towards the local and the global in Chinese avant-garde art (as illustrated to some extent in the works discussed in Chapter 4; see also Dirlik and Zhang 2000). However, in this managed globalization there is an uneasy tension between tradition and innovation, or what Barmé (1999) calls the “old Chinese-foreign dilemma”, generating a “Chinese narcissism” that reaffirms a sense of national uniqueness and moral superiority, through a trend to “Occidentalism”. These tendencies are also evident in the construction of transnational Chinese identities among Chinese diasporic populations.

China’s open door policy and increasing economic power also provide more opportunities for many Chinese to study and travel abroad, or emigrate, crossing borders and transcending national boundaries. Their transnational experience provides them with new resources to construct and symbolize their new (often hybrid) subjectivities (Barmé 1993; Gold 1993; Yang 1997), and some of them participate in a “Modern Chinese Transnationalism” which
“generates new and distinctive social arrangements, cultural discourses, practices, and
subjectivities” (Ong & Nonini1997:11). As Ong and Nonini argued, the forging of a new
transnational Chinese identity not only breaks down the old East-West binary categories, and
traditional ways of defining Chinese identity based on place of birth or cultural heritage (see Tu
1991, 1994; Wang 1991), but also reconfigures differences of class, gender, race, and
nationality in its articulation of a diaspora-based Chinese identity that represents “discrepant

Ong and Nonini (1997) point out that by asserting a fraternal solidarity, a cultural logic
for Asian capitalism, Chinese transnationalism has decentered Western hegemony and
challenged American and Japanese domination in the Asia Pacific region (see Dirlik 1993; Ong
1997). On the other hand, although Chinese transnationalism is diasporic, fluid, border crossing,
and hybrid, it is not intrinsically subversive of power structures. The alternative Chinese
modernities that it proposes, or the new “imaginaries and regimes of domination” (Ong
1997:195), are based on the essentialization of Chineseness as Confucian, and represent a self-
(re)orientalization, an ethnic self-celebration that ultimately reifies Western concepts of
Chineseness as "other-ness". However, the (self-re-) making of new global Chinese subjects (in
the name of business and commercial profit) casts aside the feminization associated with
Western versions of Orientalism, promoting rather the “hard” masculinity of triumphalist
Chinese capitalism, that reasserts a new global form of Chinese patriarchy over migrant workers,
women, and children.

Ong’s critique points to the importance of exploring how gender plays a central role in
configuring transnationalism. I follow here the use of the term “transnational” by Inderpal
Grewal and Caren Kaplan (1994, 2001), who have criticized how “categories of identity and affiliation that apply to non-U.S. cultures and situations” have been left unexplored (1994:19). They argue that the term transnational, rather than the term international, allows us “to trace circuits that are produced by problematic political, economic, and social phenomena” (1994:73).

Transnational feminist writings have inspired me to investigate the ways in which various patriarchies in multiple locations have collaborated and borrowed from each other in serving their interests and oppressing women, and to “think about gender in a world whose boundaries have changed […] and how women become ‘women’ (or other kinds of gendered subjects) around the world” (Grewal and Kaplan 1994:79). Transnational politics not only maintain and reproduce gender and racial hierarchies across national boundaries (see for instance Enloe 1990), but also restructure the global division of labour along gender, race and class lines (as discussed by Sassen 1999). Yet the gaps, fissures, and ambivalences between multiple, competing patriarchies also open up space for women to transgress not only national boundaries but also gender norms (see for example Freeman 2000).

Anne’s transnational experience, having studied and lived abroad, and her Chinese yuppie social location, as she now works for a foreign company in China, make her story different from those discussed so far. Her experience of a personal project of becoming a cosmopolitan nüxing reveals encounters with multiple patriarchies, as well as disappointments and a resistance that calls on hybrid resources.
Anne’s life story

Outline

I first met Anne in the late 1990s, when I joined a multi-national company in Beijing where Anne was the manager of a department, and we became close friends. Anne was born in 1971, and was thirty-five years old at the time of the interview. Her parents both obtained a university education in the 1950s and worked for the military. Anne’s father was a nuclear missile scientist, and her mother, who studied mathematics at university, joined Anne’s father to work for the army. Anne’s parents moved from a satellite ground station in northwest China to another military base in Shanxi province (in northern China), where Anne was born. On the military base they lived in an apartment building reserved for high-ranking officials (gaoganlou). Anne was brought up by her maternal grandmother (laolao), who lived with them. In 1976, when Anne was five years old, her mother decided to move to Beijing to enable her children to receive a better education and have more opportunities in the future. The children settled in Beijing with their mother, while their father went on working at the northern military base until the 1980s, when he was also transferred to Beijing.  

Anne studied Western financial management at a university in Beijing, and her first job was as an accountant in a state-owned enterprise. Her mother later found her another job in marketing for a foreign company in Beijing. In 1995, at the age of twenty-four, Anne went to the UK to study for an MBA. While she was in England she had a Chinese English boyfriend who was unemployed and stole her money. During her time with him, she had two abortions. She
was also later involved with a man in the Chinese mafia who harassed her. Anne went to a Christian church in England for one year, but became disillusioned with Christianity after a disappointing discussion with a priest.

Anne finished her degree, went back to China in 1997, and joined a U.S. multinational company’s branch office in Beijing as a manager. She first met her husband, a Chinese American, on the internet through a Yahoo chat-room, and they met and fell in love. In 1999, the company offered her a position in one of its offices in the U.S., and Anne got married there. In 2003, she left her husband (the reasons will be discussed later), and went back to Beijing. She initially joined a Chinese company there, but could not fit into that company’s corporate culture. At the time of the interview, in 2006, Anne was the General Manager of the China branch of a multinational marketing services company.

At that time she was in a relationship with a married man (nationality not mentioned). She said that she did not have any concrete goals in her life, and had begun two years before to feel that she no longer had any desire to live. At the end of our interview, Anne said: “I used to feel that I was extraordinary, … but then I found out that I am no different…. So to sum up my life in one sentence, nothing is at all significant. Ha-ha-ha (laughing out loud), that’s it.”

*Three role models*

Anne organized her account of the events and people in her life story around a plotline based on the development of a modern individual self. She interpreted these events as necessary steps to the full development of her current self, and the people as actors who contributed to her current status as an apparently successful cosmopolitan *niuxing*. In her narration, Anne constantly
reflected on how she grew out of certain experiences, the lessons she learned from people in her life, and their impact on her personal and intellectual development.

In the early part of Anne’s life, three people primarily influenced the construction of her gendered subjectivity. They were her mother, her maternal grandmother (called laolao in her northern Chinese dialect), and her father. These three characters represent different attitudes towards life and each influenced some aspect of Anne’s present sense of self. She discussed her relationship with them in different ways, expressing ambivalence towards the traditional female virtues that laolao represents, a positive identification with the utopian communist ideas of Maoist women’s liberation as illustrated by her mother, and total rejection of the Maoist authoritarianism exemplified by her father. Together these three influences provided important sources for Anne’s construction of the nüxing she was inspired to become.

**Mother: the ideal woman who bridges the Mao and post-Mao eras**

Anne’s mother was born in 1934. She supported herself while completing a university degree in the 1950s in a stereotypically male discipline: mathematics. Like the typical Maoist funü, she was devoted to building the socialist nation and put her career before having a family life and raising children. In describing her parents’ lives and priorities Anne used terms which often appeared in state propaganda in the Mao era:

My parents had my older sister eight years after they were married. At that time, they were the “warm-blooded youth” (rexue qingnian) who wanted to “sacrifice themselves” (xianshen) in the cause of national defense. So they devoted their whole heart to their research, and all their energy to their careers (yixin pu zai shiye shang)…. 
Her devotion to the cause and success in her career earned her respect from others, and she still inspires awe in her daughter:

My mother rocks (*henbang*)!....When I was little, influenced by the traditional\(^6\) Chinese educational system…. when we were little, we wrote essays, we wrote about who were our idols (*ouxiang*)… Then…. at that time, what was in their mind was that they should be like all those famous people, the great men (*weiren*). I remember very clearly…. I said that my idol, or the most important person who influenced my life, was my mom. Why my mom?.... I just felt that my mom was extraordinary (*liaobuqi*), and she was a person who existed in real life…. I could see every bit of her impact on my life…. my mom is the person I respect the most in this world, because at work she is very successful, and outside of the home she is a very outstanding person too.

(Anne 2006, part 1)

In Anne’s narrative, her mother is the perfect woman, well rounded, excelling both at work and in the home. In many families on the military base, where women followed their husbands who were moving around in the army, wives did not have their own career but were *jiatingfunü* (stay-at-home housewives). In contrast, Anne’s mother worked as a scientist at the base. The family’s dual income made them better off than many others with only one breadwinner, and having a Maoist *funü* mother was a source of pride for Anne. In addition, her mother was also good at crafts. She made clothes and knitted sweaters with nice patterns, in trendy styles, and embroidered bedcovers, curtains, and tablecloths that made their home pretty and cozy. Anne remembered proudly that after class her teachers would gather to look at her sweaters, and want to know how they were made.

Anne’s narrative about her mother deviates from stereotypical representations of the one-dimensional, masculinized Maoist woman, who is the brainwashed political victim of communist
ideology. Anne presented a multidimensional image of a Mao-era woman who is both successful in her career and a caring, feminine wife and mother, enjoying her life at home and at work. I asked Anne how her mother could manage to do so much while working full-time; she replied that her mother’s hands were fast, and she was always occupied. What Anne did not mention is that her laolao was taking care of the housework and looking after Anne, her sister, and their male cousin who also lived with Anne’s family for a while, so that her mother could afford to spend time on crafts and home improvements. While conforming to many characteristics of the Maoist funü, Anne’s mother was also different from the peasant/worker image because she was well educated and had a jiatingfunü mother at home helping to lighten her “double burden”.

In Anne’s narrative her mother is presented as extremely open-minded, free spirited, and daring in pursuing what she sees best for herself and her family. She is depicted as a free agent who has her own opinions and an independent mind, rather than merely an obedient subject under an oppressive communist regime, or subservient to her husband.

My mom saw that for kids growing up in our big courtyard, what was the best prospect? ... boys join the army, as for girls, the better option was to become a military doctor, or be a communications soldier (tongxun bin). So my mom said, education is a big issue, and kids have no prospects for the future here. And at that time, she already thought that joining the army, that is to say, staying in the army, would mean a lot of limitations. My mom is actually a person with a very, very, very open mind (kaifang). And then, she felt that those conditions would constrain the development of her kids, for their future, and their happiness. So she didn’t want her kids to be in this environment, she hoped that they could have freedom, could have their own free thoughts, and free development. So when I was five years old, my mom, by herself… at that time, there was no such thing as resigning. But she resigned…. her supervisor was shocked. So she took my sister and went to Beijing, just by herself, looking for a job.
Anne uses the post-Mao term *kaifang* (open) to describe her mother, and explains the motivation of her mother’s decision using the discourse of the modern, free individual, who aims to take advantage of every opportunity in life to achieve everything possible in terms of happiness, and for whom personal development is essential. However, there is a gender dimension in this story that Anne does not explicitly acknowledge. The military base was a male-dominated workplace where women were usually in dependent positions or supporting functions. Even though Anne’s mother achieved exceptional success there, she wanted to find an environment where her two daughters could compete equally with men and fulfill their potential.

Rather than becoming out-of-date in the post-Mao era, Anne’s mother is a winner in both the Maoist socialist-collective era and post-Mao market competition. She adjusted quickly from working in the state bureaucratic system to the market oriented economy, and earned enough money to be able to send Anne to study in the UK:

> After she retired, she went to work for a business (*xiahai*)…. People there all respected her a lot. She did very well, and helped the company earn a lot of money….there are many things in our home that were earned by my mom. So her career was very successful. In the government, there is a lot of politics, interpersonal relations (*renji guanxi*) and bureaucracy. She dealt with them very well…. My father went to a military company after he retired, and it felt very painful for him. Nothing could meet his values or expectations there (*kanbuguan*), because their practices and value system conflicted with his previous experience. But my mom didn’t… she learned very easily to deal with the business environment, and was very successful. My father criticized my mom’s adaptability as being “cunning”, which I disagree with. (Anne 2006, part 1)

Anne emphasizes that her mother is very “avant-garde” and “open-minded”. In Anne’s view she represents the perfect woman who conquers all, transcending history and achieving success on
every front, in both eras. This exceptional Mother provides a source of positive gender identification and a role model for Anne, who said: “My mom shaped who I am…. I feel that I am very lucky, because of the assets my mom gave me.”

Anne’s mother’s story sheds light on two aspects of women’s success in the Mao and post-Mao eras. One the one hand, her success was sustained and subsidized by Anne’s grandmother’s free domestic labour. On the other hand, the success of some post-Mao nüxing like Anne is built upon the often taken-for-granted legacy of Maoist women’s liberation. It could be said that those who are socially privileged often remain privileged even though regimes change; however, even as the daughter of a widowed mother with no male in the family, Anne’s mother managed to receive a higher education and was able to compete with her male counterparts and excel. While individual aptitude and efforts were definitely involved, the broader environment of the Maoist agenda for women’s liberation or equality was also crucial. The Maoist gender project did provide increased access to education for many women, encouraged women’s participation in the public labor force, and made it possible for many women to enter or to imagine entering traditionally male-dominated occupations. This example shows that the Maoist funü and post-Mao nüxing are not necessarily separate, conflicting, and contradictory subjects but may share the same roots. Some aspects of both can be synthesized, or transplanted from one to another, and can even be embodied in the same woman. As for the post-Mao generation, some of them received a two-fold legacy from the Maoist agenda for women: on one hand, the goal of equality with men laid an ideological and social foundation for many women to participate and succeed in the post-Mao market economy; on the other hand,
some of their Maoist mothers and mentors provided positive role models and inspired them to become successful career women.

While Anne clearly recognized her mother’s influence, since her early childhood, it was only on reflection that she also acknowledged her grandmother, laolao, as an important figure in her life: “Laolao did not consciously attempt to shape me, but when I think about it, it could be said that her influences are there.” (Anne 2006)

**Laolao, the “traditional Chinese woman”**

Anne’s maternal grandfather, a traditional Chinese-style schoolteacher who was a Christian, died when Anne’s mother was seven years old. Laolao, her maternal grandmother, was illiterate. She remained a widow, living with her mother-in-law and facing through a lot of hardships, but she managed to send Anne’s mother to school. When Anne’s mother married she became her housekeeper and lived with Anne’s family from the time Anne’s older sister was born. Laolao was a Christian, following the faith of her husband. Even though she could not practice Christianity during the Mao era as it was banned, she often sang religious songs to Anne when she was little, which Anne remembered. Laolao was ninety-nine years old when I interviewed Anne, and under twenty-four-hour care from two hired caregivers, since she suffers from Alzheimer’s disease.

She [laolao] insisted that my mom receive an education. At that time, it was still very feudal (fengjian), that was before the liberation (jiefangqian). Actually she received a lot of pressure to get remarried. As a widow, with no man in the family, she had to be very strong (jianqiang), and….actually she had many rebellious (fanpan)…aspects in her personality (gexing)…..It is only over the last two years that I have started to realize that there are many aspects of my personality that are deeply influenced by my laolao as
well as my mom... I can see the commonalities among us … I don’t have those traditional (chuantong) aspects that my laolao has, but there are some common personality traits (gexing), such as being persistent, or not caring about what others think. In the West they emphasize this, in Western culture, there is the idea of being people-oriented (yiren weiben) and humanism. But in China, they were very much against it. But my laolao, in that kind of feudal environment, actually had a lot of ideas that were people-oriented Now I can stick to my own ideas….For me, it is natural; it is the way it is. It is something in the blood. My mom too is like this. So in this aspect, I am really like them.

(Anne 2006, part 1)

In this narrative, Anne imagines a female family tradition of courage, rebellion, and independent mindedness that is “in the blood” and carried on through the maternal line, across three generations of women. This sense of history, of an on-going female heritage, facilitates positive identification with a certain model of femininity. However, Anne’s narrative also reflects her critical adaptation of this heritage, revealed in her selective and partial identification with laolao, rejecting her “traditional” elements. Compared with Anne’s fully positive identification with her mother, Anne’s attitude towards laolao is more ambivalent, complex and often charged with sorrow and guilt.

I recall that when I was little…I often drove laolao crazy. I remember very clearly that once I made my laolao so upset that she cried. …I was not nice to her…. I didn’t listen to her, I talked back to her…um…[crying]…also, I feel…. [crying]…laolao was really very lonely….When she was in the countryside, maybe she used to have her sisters and people she lived with, but since she came to live with my mother… those were actually environments she was not familiar with at all. Also, to be honest… even though they are mother and daughter, the gap between them is very, very big. My laolao didn’t have much education…. she was illiterate, because she didn’t go to school [crying], so, I feel maybe, with my mom, maybe the communication… such as… in this… that… in this civilized…in the city, with those intellectuals….she felt… she must have felt “out of place” [originally in English], you know, and with my
mom, there are many things they couldn’t communicate or understand about each other…so actually she was lonely in her heart… [crying]… even later, like when we had a TV… she watched TV, but she didn’t fully understand. …. [crying]… and then she would often ask “what’s going on?” … But then she interrupted us watching, and I felt annoyed, and didn’t ….it is not that I didn’t explain to her, sometimes I did, sometimes I didn’t. She felt we… well, she didn’t want to ask anymore, she was afraid of us being annoyed.

(Anne 2006, part 1)

In Chapter 2 I argued that the construction of the Maoist funü operated through the exclusion of jiatingfunü, or “women of the family”, by prohibiting them from entering the realm of gender representation. These “other” women are not only the constitutive other against which the Maoist funü is defined, but their illegitimate existence is often ironically crucial for sustaining the Maoist funü’s “liberation”. Just as in Lin’s story in Chapter 2, the Maoist funü mother’s participation in the paid labor force and her success in a career were made possible by exploiting an other jiatingfunü woman of the previous generation’s domestic labor. If Anne’s laolao had not come to live with Anne’s family after her older sister, the first child in the family, was born, Anne’s mother’s would not have been able to devote all her energy to the cause of national defence and her career. Her success as the “perfect woman” was at the expense of another woman’s acceptance of a different, less glorious role.

Anne’s initial lack of acknowledgment of her grandmother’s contribution reflects the marginalization and alienation, even invisibility, that these jiatingfunü experienced. Because she was illiterate and economically dependent, laolao’s traditional status as a senior deserving of respect was often challenged by her little granddaughter. She was also alienated from her well-educated daughter, isolated in the community, and sometimes cold-shouldered in the family. Although she now recognizes the important role laolao played, Anne learned the lesson when
she was little that being a *jiatingfunü*, a traditional woman, would not be valued and respected; rather, she had to become a *funü* like her mother, ambitious, well-educated and independent. Being indebted to *laolao* places Anne in a moral dilemma, since she rejects her model of femininity and the “traditional values” she embodies, yet neither both Anne nor her mother could have the lives they have without her.

Anne’s sense of guilt was revealed in long silences as she narrated, hesitation in her diction, and even weeping. Her narrative conveys the unequal power relations and even exploitation between three generations of women. The alienation between *laolao* and Anne’s mother came not only from the gap in their educational levels and different lifestyles, but also because they were positioned differently by the Maoist gender discourse, and their opposing social positions left their mark in family relations. While Anne’s mother enjoyed the successful life of a state-approved woman, as a productive socialist subject, *laolao* became the abjected but necessary other, relegated to the invisible background and denied value. This relationship between the normative and the abject, casts a long shadow over what is otherwise a tale of strong intergenerational female bonding.

Anne feels guilty, not only because she unconsciously participated in the marginalization of *laolao*, but also because of the unequal exchange between *laolao* and herself, since she cannot give back the same love and devotion to *laolao* now that she needs it. Anne’s ambivalent attitude to the self-sacrificing traditional women who went before is shared by many modern *nüxing* (as well as older Maoist *funü*), since their own success depends on rejecting and abandoning the role they had. Anne takes ownership of this guilt without hesitation, as the price of success for women in her family.
Now, in retrospect, .... [crying].... um... from a certain perspective, she is happy.... She lives in her own world, and her spirit is happy. But.... [crying] ... I was not nice to laolao before ....now you can be nice to her... but what good can you do to her? She doesn’t need much materially, and then, as for emotional aspects, even if you could give something, she couldn’t enjoy it any more. To be honest... my feelings towards laolao are very true, but if you really asked me to take care of her.....right now, who is taking care of her? It is the young caregivers we hired. Well I can pay the money....But this is worth nothing. If you really asked me to....don’t even mention quitting my job to take care of her, even just to stay with her for one day… to take care of her from morning to night, by myself, I can’t do it. Sometimes I doubt ....really, you see this love…feeling…is….I can talk about it, I can cry about it, but, but why can’t I do it?.... I feel deeply self-blaming. I feel human beings are so hypocritical. I can’t care for her, just, just, I am not a good person...

(Anne 2006, part 1)

To give the same level of love and sacrifice back to her grandmother would require Anne to be the same kind of “traditional” woman that her grandmother was, to adopt a role neither she nor her mother is trained or qualified to play. The “guilty daughter” therefore can never repay her debt, and there is no redemption. Ironically, Anne’s and her mother’s strategy for easing the guilt is to exploit “other women” who still fulfill the tasks assigned to laulau: the caregivers Anne has hired. In the city it is often rural migrant women and laid-off female workers who work in the informal care-giving sector. It seems that in order to become “successful” women, whether the Maoist funü or post-Mao nüxing, guilt is inevitable as this success is at the expense of consuming the undervalued services of abjected “other” (non)women.

This guilt, however, is not usually shared by men. Traditional gender norms in China (as in the West) ascribed the role of default caregiver for family members to women, and this did not change in the Mao era. Even though women were now expected to work outside the home, they
were still responsible for most of the domestic work and for the children. This gender-based discrimination is still inscribed on Anne’s interiorized gender map, and relates to attitudes conveyed by her father as well as her mother and grandmother.

_Father: the symbol of Maoist authoritarianism_

Anne hardly mentioned her father in the first part of her life story, and I asked her to tell me more about him in my follow-up questions. Her response revealed that the absence of her father in her narrative reflects a rejection of what he represents and resistance to his influence in her life. Anne started her narrative about her father by asserting that “he has no impact on me”:

> My father? He has no impact on me. No, not no impact, but a negative impact. He is a man who always obeys the rules. My mom encouraged me to think freely, but my father tried to control me with rules. So those are the rules I want to break. My father was a military officer…. You know, in the army…. also “authority” [originally in English], you can’t … if someone ranks higher than you, then whatever he says is right…. When I was little, his requirements for me were like military-style management, and like the way a military officer commands his subordinate…. My father is a military man, and that is in every cell of him, in the way he walks and so on…. My father is very traditional, orthodox, and very honest. He wouldn’t have the kind of courage my mother has, the kind of open mind or progressiveness (xianjinxing). He has none of that. When my mother left the army and came to Beijing looking for a job, he didn’t agree. He was strongly against it.

(Anne 2006, part 2)

In this narrative, Anne’s father is constructed as the opposite to her mother, and as a typical, obedient, loyal Communist. During the Cultural Revolution, official propaganda interpreted the history and current state of the PRC as an “on-going two-line struggle” (liantiao luxiang de douzheng): socialism vs. capitalism, and revolution vs. revisionism. In Anne’s
narrative, this dual ideological struggle is also present within her family, divided by gender:
Anne’s father represents a rigid, masculine way of being and thinking, including rules and
discipline, hierarchy and obedience, and blind loyalty to the party and authority; whereas mother,
laolao and Anne represent a feminine attitude that is liberal and open-minded, independent and
rebellious, and in line with the principles of Western individualism and humanism. Anne takes a
clear stance in this two-line struggle at home, by strongly identifying with her mother and
rejecting everything her father represents.

Her father is constructed as oppressive throughout Anne’s narrative, and she attributes
the ruin of her first love to his power and status, although he himself was not even aware of the
situation. She recounts how she fell in love with her father’s driver, when she was a first-year
university student.

I was seventeen years old, and he was twenty. Um…He felt that my father would kill him, because he
didn’t go to college… we only dated three times… He was too scared…. so we ended it….One or two years
after that, I felt really low… I didn’t have any energy for anything. Then suddenly, one day, I wanted to get
out of it. I started to study English like crazy…. The result was that I forgot him, became happy again, and
my English…. significantly improved.

(Anne 2006, part 2)

It is no surprise that the father came to represent the powerful and repressive patriarchal system
that rendered Anne powerless. He personified what she had to overcome, in order to become an
autonomous woman living the life she wanted. Her decision to study English was instrumental
in allowing her to escape from her father’s shadow. She not only acquired a useful skill, but
gained access to a different world that her father’s power could not reach. English opened the
door to the Western liberal thinking that empowered her to challenge her father’s “authority”.
The English language and Western thought provided ideological tools for Anne and her mother to challenge her father and the regime he represents. In Anne’s narrative, two opposite and incompatible ideological stances are constantly in conflict, and since they exist in different languages it is impossible for them to communicate and understand each other. The Chinese system represented by her father and the openness associated with the West represented by her mother become parallel to a stereotypical conflict between a supposedly masculine,” “logical” way of reasoning, and a “feminine,” transgressive way of challenging that model. Anne privileges the “feminine” over the “masculine”:

We have tried to communicate… We tried one or two times, and then gave up. Why? Because in the end, his conclusion is that there is no way for the two of us to communicate, because the way I think is messy, chaotic….So there is no way for us to understand each other. I feel my logic is very good, that is the cause, and then … I reach a conclusion. He said that is not right. It should be like this. So it is totally different…..Also my father is not very good at communicating and expressing himself. So very often, when we were together, we didn’t have much to say. He also doesn’t have much to say.

(Anne 2006, part 2)

As Ann Anagnost notes, “Oppositional pairs have a deeply ideological function in all systems of meaning, this is especially true in totalizing systems of meaning in which alternative coding is repressed or the intent is to obliterate prior coding through a revolutionary transformation of values” (1997: 103). Anne’s narrative construction of the domestic “two-line” struggle exhibits the characteristics of the political culture of the Mao era, in which oppositional pairs of “shì” (right) and “fēi” (wrong) are used to encode social realities and understood as irreconcilable.
The domestic gender divide is extended to and reflected by the “two-line” struggle outside the home, which continues in the post-Mao era. Father’s “out-of-date” orthodox Maoist belief system and rules of conduct made him unable to fit into the post-Mao market economy and corporate culture, whereas the progressiveness of Anne’s mother’s liberal thinking is manifested in her smooth fit with the post-Mao business world. The divide between father and mother resembles the two-line struggle in the early stages of the reform, between the democratic elite and the conservative “elders”, as described in Merle Goldman’s book *Sowing the Seeds of Democracy in China* (1994): her father’s “closed” ideas resonated with those of the anti-reform conservative Communist Party “elders”, while her mother’s “open” ones echoed those of the enlightened proponents of reform. The victory of the feminine/liberal side eventually arrived in 1989, when the Tiananmen event led Anne’s father, a long-time loyal Communist Party member, to want to resign from the party, which meant denouncing the beliefs he had lived for. Her father’s forfeit of his political stance also brought about a possible reconciliation with the women in his family, since the masculine element became willing to listen, and learned to listen, to the feminine voice. Anne said that her father has changed in recent years, and they can finally talk a bit more.

The absence of her father in Anne’s initial narrative reveals an important but hidden constituent in the formation of her gender subjectivity. Her father and the patriarchal authority he represents formed the reference point against which she established her ideal of being a woman, as opposed to it, as against everything that he stood for. Mother and father played out a gender dichotomy with no middle ground or commonality. This is in line with the post-Mao re-essentialization of gender difference, but it is also more than that, as it intertwines with the
conflict between political ideologies. Being self-consciously feminine therefore becomes for Anne a gendered political act of resistance, affirming and valuing qualities that challenge the repressive, patriarchal Maoist regime that suppressed human nature and femininity.

Transnational experience: from “communist heaven” to “capitalist hell”

The construction of Anne’s gender subjectivity was further shaped by her first transnational experience, when she left in 1993 to study for an MBA in the UK. She considers her time there as a rite of passage, enabling her transformation from the suppressed, old (false) self to an enlightened, reborn (true) self. Anne felt a genuine sense of liberation in living abroad:

What….changed my life, and made me find the direction of my life, was when I went to study in the U.K….. Getting into that environment made me suddenly feel that… I felt like a fish who just got back into the water (ruyudeshui). I was really in a place where your mind can be free, where you can develop yourself…when you go to school, the way they teach is totally different from China. I suddenly felt like , Oh, this is… is… is very comfortable, you know….Studying like that was very easy, and very meaningful….When I studied in the UK, I learned a way of thinking, ….um….that is the way of thinking, that lets you think freely, but there is also a main theme…. So…so… that, is… I had space for free thinking, and released the true nature (benxing) that’s inside…inside human nature. Also, I could be myself. Because in China I couldn’t be accepted by others, because others can’t accept my candid way of talking. But over there, my style of thinking…. that was suppressed in the Chinese environment, gained big, big development, it was a big opening up! um….After I came back from the UK….I realized that I was more true-speaking than before. I am even more able to… to not care about others’ opinions and finger pointing. I am even more true to myself. More into myself (ziwo). By “into myself” I don’t mean selfish or self-centered. I mean being true to oneself, and true to one’s feelings.

(Anne 2006, part 1)
This account clearly conveys Anne’s sense of needing to be liberated from an oppressive regime (and her father’s authority), which discouraged free thinking and candid speaking, forced social conformity, and suppressed “human nature” and individual freedom — all of which prevented her from being “true to herself”. This description is in line with cultural critiques since the 1980s aimed at the Maoist regime, as well as at “traditional Chinese culture”, for suppressing what is claimed to be human nature. Attitudes in the UK are described, in contrast, as open, encouraging free thinking, and nurturing individuality.

While this criticism is supposedly about a shared, general “human condition”, the suppression is nonetheless gendered, with stricter control exercised over women, particularly their bodies and sexuality. As a woman, the pressure for social conformity was higher, in light of the on-going power of a traditional model of modest, docile “Chinese” femininity, even during the Mao era (see earlier discussion). Anne, following in her mother’s footsteps, obviously had no desire to match such a gender prescription. Her “liberation” narrative indicates the feelings some women from oppressive regimes initially have when they first go to the West (as described by Julia Kristeva in *Strangers to Ourselves*); the patriarchal control exerted at home loses its hold on them when they cross not only national or geographical boundaries, but also cultural ones regarding gender and sexuality.

However, Anne’s joy in her newly gained freedom is overshadowed by the unexpected economic reality she had to face in the UK, where she experienced social disadvantage for the first time in her life. Anne grew up on a military base, to a certain extent a miniature, utopian communist society isolated from the outside world and the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. Many goods and services were provided for free by the danwei, the work unit, from house and
furniture, food and clothes, to school and employment for offspring. Even the lowest ranking soldiers had their basic needs met, everyone had a job and contributed according to their ability, people all knew each other, and all conformed to a common set of rules and code of moral conduct:

That town was built up by the army; it is a military town…. Kind of like the…in the U.S., like a university town. Also we were deep inside the mountains… and the villagers couldn’t come in…..It was very free. The environment I grew up in was a bit like an ideal communist society (gongchanzhuyi). It is really like “ye bu bihu, u bu shiyi”, that one need not lock the door at night, and people would not steal/take the things you left on the road. So I never needed to worry….The area was remote. The air was fresh and the environment was very beautiful.

(Anne 2006, part 1)

Anne uses both the Marxist term “communism” and the traditional Chinese saying “yebubihu, lubushiyi” to describe the place where she spent her childhood. The latter comes from a myth of the past, while the former points to a utopian vision for the future of humanity: both imagine a paradise on earth. The “datong” (“great harmony”) society described in Liyun (The conveyance of rite) chapter of Liji (The Book of Rites), one of the classics of Confucianism, is in many ways similar to the dream of a utopian communist society. Although Anne’s family moved to Beijing, her memories of that idyllic, safe, and harmonious military base have always remained with her, and set the foundation for her understanding and evaluation of people and life. Coming from a privileged family, she had an easy transition from high school to university, then to the workplace, and her family status had always protected her socially and provided economic security.
When she first arrived in the UK, Anne experienced a dramatic downward movement of her social capital, her ability to work and to be recognized, and she lost the sense of privilege and entitlement to which she was accustomed. In the beginning, she did not expect to experience economic disadvantage as a student from a developing country. She described her early experiences in the UK as ‘falling from heaven to hell’:

In the UK, because I still didn’t have any concept about money, and never thought at that time about the official exchange rate being 1:13, I spent as if I was still in China…. After just one month, I had spent 3000 pounds. … because when I was in China…my salary was about RMB3000 a month. So I didn’t think, that when you spend money here, you have to multiple by 13... I had no concept, to such an extent that I didn’t even think that I was there to study, and how much the tuition fee was….When the school started in September, I had already run out of money. When I left [China], my mom gave me 7000 pounds…. Also, when I left China, I thought, well, I could go find a job. I could go wash dishes. I didn’t feel that this would actually be a very difficult thing….By September, there were only 600 pounds in my bank account….. how could I manage? I couldn’t. I thought I’d better go home, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t just mess up for three months, spend all the money, not even start school, and then run away. So….so….I was dumbfounded. So …I made an excuse, told my mom that I lost my money, and asked her to send me the tuition fee. But I could only ask her to send me tuition. By then, I started to think that 1800 pounds, equals how much in RMB, and then think about how much my mom’s monthly salary was. It might be that the 7000 pounds she gave me was her savings of many years. I finally thought about that, and felt very, very guilty. I couldn’t ask her for living expenses anymore…. So I was so broke. There was one week, I had only 5 pounds left…. Very miserable….this was a big change in my life; it changed my attitude to money; I started to realize that it is not easy to earn money.

(Anne 2006, part 1)

The financial disaster Anne experienced in her first three months could easily be interpreted as the story of a spoiled kid learning a lesson about real life once she was away from
her parents’ protection. However, Anne was not really being excessive in her spending - she just lived the same way as she had in China. If a young girl from the UK went to China to study and did the same thing as Anne, she would not run into any financial trouble, instead she would find herself suddenly thirteen times richer, and would be able to enjoy a luxurious lifestyle. For Anne the experience was descending into hell, because she found herself for the first time being treated as a second-class citizen (facing economic and racial discrimination), and had to learn to live a life of frugality.

Part of Anne’s financial trouble was also caused by the differences between China’s and the UK’s educational systems. Before 1997, university education in China was free, the government provided an allowance that covered most living expenses for students coming from poor families, and employment was guaranteed after graduation. Anne went to university in the early 1990s and took advantage of the free university education provided by the socialist system in China. When she went to study in the UK she was unprepared for the high tuition fees she had to pay. Since it was her parents who made the arrangements, and the procedures were handled by an agency that provides services for overseas study, Anne was not involved in all the details or aware of the need for budgeting. Her financial crisis was therefore partially caused by the transition from a socialist welfare system that provided universal education, to a system where education is only available to those who can afford to pay (at least for foreign students).

Not only was her purchasing power suddenly devalued by a factor of 13, but she also suffered a blow to her social status and self esteem. Anne’s Chinese credentials and experience were not recognized, and she had no worth in the UK labour market, even as a physical laborer:
Then what was I going to do about it? I had to … so, do a labouring job, to earn money…. But I got my nose bloodied, job hunting. That is, I couldn’t find a job. I didn’t mean to find an office job. I meant to go to a restaurant, to Chinatown, to be a waitress. I asked everywhere, they didn’t want me…So.. I was very frustrated…. 

(Anne 2006, part 1)

Ironically, after escaping from patriarchal control at home, Anne had to resort to Chinatown, which embodied “oppressive, traditional” Chinese culture, in search of employment. Eventually, it was the transnational Chinese diasporic network that lent Anne a helping hand, when a male friend from Shanghai, who owned a Chinese restaurant in Chinatown, gave Anne a waitressing job to help her out.

Having escaped the shadow of her father’s social status and patriarchal control over her love life, Anne enjoyed freedom in dating in the UK. However, she was not prepared for the dangers associated with this freedom, when exposed to Chinese transnational patriarchy. Working in a restaurant in London’s Chinatown, she encountered and dated a man who was involved with the Chinese Mafia. When Anne broke up with him, she had to run and hide, creating a situation that eventually caused her friend to close his restaurant.

Since I was little, I had been in the army environment. It was a very pure environment. I trusted people very much. No matter what, I would not be suspicious towards others. I also couldn’t understand why someone could be bad. But that… taught me a big lesson…. In the beginning, I really liked him. I didn’t know that he was Mafia…. But I only saw the surface, that he brought you to dine and have fun everywhere, that was very happy. Later I found out that this person was actually ….for a person, you need not only to look at these things, but also need to look at other aspects. Because of these things, I… for a while, I was drifting around, I had to move very often, and so on.

(Anne 2006, part 1)
Having escaped from this gangster, Anne then met another man who exploited her both economically and sexually:

That boyfriend, I stayed with him for a long time, and I had abortions twice. I didn’t know about contraception,\textsuperscript{11} I learned that later. I wanted to marry him. I was 24, and he was 20. He had no job. I didn’t look at that, I knew nothing about him. Just because he was nice to me…..He stole my money. He’s a rascal. Silly me! He asked me to marry him, and I said yes. I thought I could sacrifice myself, and save him; he was talented in music. We went to clubs…..he was a nice person by nature; he didn’t intentionally hurt others, but couldn’t help it…. I thought I could touch his heart and save him… that I could die a heroic death (\textit{yingyong jiuyi}).

(Anne 2006, part 2)

Growing up, Anne not only lived in a protected environment economically and socially, she also inhabited a milieu in which gender inequality and sexual exploitation were not acknowledged or considered relevant to her life. With the Maoist propaganda that “men and women are now equal”, she was unaware of the disadvantages of being a woman in a male-dominated society. Totally innocent about potential male sexual advances, she had no concept of the need for self-protection as a woman, and no knowledge at all about safe sex or contraception. Unprepared for the gender politics of the West and sexual exploitation by men, this innocent girl from the pure communist world fell into capitalist hell and became the prey of men.

Anne did not mention the ethnicity of either of these two men, but the context suggests that they were probably both ethnically Chinese Englishmen living in England. Anne’s experience with transnational Chinese patriarchy taught her a hard lesson about female disadvantage and gender oppression, but rather than regarding herself as a victim in these incidents she portrays herself as a martyr, implying that she would still opt for pursuing freedom with risk rather than being controlled and protected by her father. Anne said that she did not hate
these men; rather, these experiences made her grow and become stronger. The term she uses, “to
die a heroic death” (yingyong jiuyi), is associated with revolutionary Communist martyrs who
sacrificed their lives for the cause. This metaphor portrays her journey as a heroic act—on the
road to freedom there will be sacrifices.

The construction of a cosmopolitan nüxing identity

Anne finished her degree, and made it back to China “in one piece” (originally in English, Anne
2006), terms that imply a victorious return. Having survived her transnational adventure, she
regained her social status in China with increased human capital. As a woman with a foreign
degree and experience of living overseas she obtained a job working as manager for a
multinational company in Beijing, becoming a member of the emerging professional elite. Once
established in her well-paid job Anne embarked on a new gender project: a transformation from
“girly girl” to a sophisticated cosmopolitan nüxing, with increased consciousness of her
femininity and sexuality.

As Rofel (2007) points out, the call for liberation of human nature from the oppressive
political regime of the Mao era necessarily anticipates the construction of new citizen-subjects:
cosmopolitan “desiring subjects”, whose emergence depends on the acknowledgement and
elaboration of people’s sexual, material, and affective self-interest. Cosmopolitanism is one of
the key nodes that bind citizen-subjects to the state and to transnational neo-liberal policies in the
post-Cold War world, and is central to the constitution of a “desiring China”. Rofel argues that
this cosmopolitanism consists of two aspects in tension with one another: transcending the local,
and renegotiating China’s place in the world.
Anne’s cosmopolitan identity is first reflected in her English name. Unlike European personal names, which usually come from an existing name repertoire with etymological meanings, Chinese names can be made up of any morphemes in the Chinese language and usually have a literal meaning. Many Chinese people have more than one name, each used in different circumstances. Often a nickname (xiaoming) is given at birth, and used by family members and close friends, while a formal name (daming) is used for school and public or official usage. Traditionally, those at the lower end of the economic ladder, like women, might have no real formal name, or only names that verge on mere designation. In contrast, upper-class men often had a multitude of names - courtesy names, pen names, studio names, style names. Traditionally many educated Chinese also had pen names or title names (indicated by the prefix "zhi", or "hao") used for literary and artistic endeavours. Many people change the names given by their parents when they grow into adulthood, in order to reflect their new identity, values, and circumstances (see, Blum 1997: 364). It is not unusual for a Chinese person to have more than one name simultaneously, and replace their old name with a new one. People are accustomed to being addressed and referred to by an assortment of names, and they do not necessarily retain any of them as their "real" name or as the one that they feel reflects their identity.

While replacing a given name with a pen name (biming) or art name (yiming) is common for writers and artists, changing names is not a practice reserved only for these people. A change in name is often associated with the changing construction of an individual identity (as discussed in Shitou’s case), which shifts and grows along with personal development and the historical cultural context. In twentieth-century China, three waves of name changes can be observed. The
first started with the May Fourth movement in the early twentieth century, when many young educated Chinese adopted new names conveying “modern” meanings to replace their more “traditional” names. Many leading intellectuals and cultural figures during that period, such as Lu Xun (original name Zhou Zhangshou, later Zhou Shuren, zhi Yushan), or Dong Ling (Original name Jian Wei, zhi Bingzhi), adopted new names to indicate their intellectual and political pursuits. The second wave came with the Cultural Revolution, when many people abandoned names that were considered reactionary and adopted new ones associated with revolution, communism, and the military, such as hong (red), jun (military), or bin (soldier). The third, more recent, wave is characterized by acquiring an additional English name.

Since the 1980s, with the implementation of the “open door” policy, the “studying foreign language cult” (xue waiyu re) has become widespread (Ross 1992, 1993), and most Chinese students are asked to adopt an English name when they study English, either at home or abroad. Similarly, many Chinese working in foreign-invested businesses also use English names at work. For these professionals, using English names makes it easier for foreign bosses and customers to remember them; it also signals their openness to Western influence and compliance with the company’s corporate culture, as well as willingness to participate in “international” business culture. It presents them as the same as the foreigners on the “symbolic” level, thereby decreasing, if not erasing, the distance between them marked by cultural otherness.

There are multiple reasons for Chinese people to choose to adopt an English name (or not to); these decisions can be interpreted as strategies of compliance or resistance, and the individuals concerned as victims of cultural and linguistic imperialism or as cosmopolitan free agents. What concerns me more here is how the adopting of an English name contributes to the
construction of a gendered cosmopolitan identity. I do not know how Anne picked her English name, which means “loved”, or when she started to use it. What is certain is that with the birth of a new name, a new identity emerged, and became Anne’s primary identity in her professional life. Anne never uses her Chinese name in the workplace; it is used only with family and old friends outside of her current social circle.\textsuperscript{16} Her Chinese given name \textit{Jin}, meaning progress, is a typical politically charged Mao-era name. By adopting an English name for the workplace, Anne put aside her Maoist background as manifested in her given name, as well as the Chinese patriarchal root in her father’s family name, and enacted and performed her new identity as a cosmopolitan \textit{n"{u}xing} named Anne, an international businesswoman and a global citizen. This naming practice thus transforms her from a “woman of the family” and a “woman of the nation”, into a “woman of the world”.

In discussing the emergence of a cosmopolitan self, Rofel (2007) notes that both locality and time are transcended through the formation of a new “consumer identity”. Consumption is not only about pleasure and freedom, but also a postsocialist technology of the self through which Chinese individuals and the Chinese nation can transcend the specificities of place and period and become part of the “world”. Bodily practices of food consumption, sexual activity, and wearing fashionable clothing, become major sites for constructing the desiring subjects who inhabit the transcendent global consumer market. Language use is another central signifying element, one that Rofel does not discuss in detail. These are the major areas that embody Anne’s gender project of becoming a cosmopolitan \textit{nuxing}. Two colleagues and friends from one company where Anne worked, Jacky (a mid-level female manager) and Floyd (who had a relationship with Anne), mentored her on the “technology of the self” (Foucault 1988) in two
specific areas: fashion and sex. Both are Chinese, born in China, but took on English names, as did Anne. Jacky has worked for various foreign-invested companies, and dated mostly expats. The person who made me change is Jacky; she has rich experiences… I love being pretty, but I didn’t pay attention to how…. how to make others think you are pretty—not that I care about others’ opinion, but it is a kind of “hit two birds with one stone” (yishi erliao)—or paying more attention to being a woman. I used to have a kind of “little girl” style, but now I pay more attention to matching clothes and to underwear. Jacky helped me to do shopping and to dress up, and told me to read fashion magazines. It was fun. It is not just about following the trends, but also about finding out what suits you. You then have some fashion elements in your style, so you can also be accepted by the masses (dazhong)…Not only dress, but also make-up. She brought me to a place to have my eyebrow tattooed. I didn’t think about those things before.

(Anne 2006, part 2)

By introducing Anne to fashion and the cultivation of a personal style, Jacky helped to produce Anne’s physical metamorphosis from a naïve provincial young girl into a sophisticated cosmopolitan nüxing. The gendered signifiers marked on the surface of the body—tattooed eyebrows, careful make-up, sexy underwear, stylish clothing – are part of her performance of a new consciousness, showing a new awareness of the other’s gaze associated with her own exploration of gender and sexuality.

“Jacky”, the stylish woman, taught Anne the technology of fashion; “Floyd” (which sounds the same as Freud in Chinese), the sex expert, taught her the pleasure of sex. Floyd was born in Shanghai, emigrated to the U.S. with his family when he was a child, and came back to work in China after finishing his MBA. Anne dated him when they both worked for the same Company. Floyd is in many ways a totally westernized Chinese American, who seeks to be assimilated into the melting pot and to become part of the mainstream. Anne criticizes Floyd for
his lack of personal style and for his attempts to fit the stereotype of the middle-upper-class American businessman, but credits him for opening up the world of sexuality for her:

He made me realize that I needed to change…. He didn’t say that my style was not good, but…when I was with him, I would want… how to say it… I realized the importance of “sex” (originally in English): what role it plays in a relationship between two persons. I never realized it before, and didn’t pursue it -- that is, the pleasure of sex. I didn’t understand and was totally ignorant. Even though I had [sexual] experience, I didn’t understand it. And because of him, I would, I would... you know,, um, start to pay attention to my feminine side (nurende)... I believe that he had a big impact on my later “sex life” [originally in English] and “love life” [originally in English].

(Anne 2006, part 2)

In her book *Women and Sexuality in China*, Harriet Evan (1997) notes that even though the emphasis on a good sex life for marital harmony has existed in traditional Chinese discourses, attention to female sexual pleasure emerged only after the 1980s. In post-Mao China, with the re-introduction of Freud’s theory of sexual desire as fundamental to human identity and sexual practice as at the core of psychic life, the concept of free expression of the body’s desires re-emerged in Chinese discourse on sexuality. Sexually explicit novels, films and images exploded in the 1990s and are now prevalent. As Wendy Larson (1997) points out in her discussion of Chen Ran’s writing and the discourse of desire in post-Mao China, sexuality has become an area of escape from a restrictive government. The modern individual desiring subject is prominent in post-Mao literature and popular culture, while the Mao era is represented as an era of sexual repression. In the 1990s, “erotics-as-liberation” emphasized sexual desire as the key to personal and national emancipation, and as crucial for the reinvigoration of the Chinese subject (generally but not exclusively male). Western feminist discourses about female desire, including the glorification of female erotic subjectivity or jouissance and theories of the body as a site of
resistance to gender-based oppression, have also influenced China, especially in fiction by women writers. Rofel (2007) also notes that contemporary discourses about sex in China regard it as not only about pleasure, but also about “normality”, and sexual “liberation” is seen as a measure of China’s progress towards “humanity”.

Gender consciousness, a positive evaluation of gender difference and femininity, and the open pursuit of sexual pleasure are key elements that distinguish the post-Mao nüxing from the Maoist funü, and they become critical constituents of a cosmopolitan nüxing subject. The latter is sexually “enlightened”, open to discussing her sexuality, and takes pride in her ability to enjoy her body and the sexual pleasure it brings. This is reflected in Anne’s open and proud assertions about her sex life, and her enjoyment of her sexuality, including her comments on her current partner who is a married man: “Our relationship is the kind that combines both body and soul… how to say it, um… he is my best ‘sex partner’” (Anne, 2006). The use of English terms in this “sex talk” is part of the performance of a cosmopolitan identity, as language emerges as inseparable from the body in Anne’s story-telling.

The meaning of life and the end of the desiring subject
While she was working for the American company in 1998, Anne met W through an internet chat room. Their internet affair led to Anne’s transfer to a branch office of the American company and marriage with W one year later in the U.S.. W, a Chinese-American with an English name, introduced Anne to the American ideal of middle-class family life, far from the economic disadvantages she had experienced as a student in the UK. Anne seemed to have obtained most of the goals a desiring consumer-oriented female subject can imagine: a good job
in a good environment, a loving husband, a big house, and even a dog. It seemed to be the American dream - come-true. While all her material goals were achieved over time, the ideological vacuum proved less easy to fix. In 2003, Anne left W after five years of marriage and went back to China:

His expectations for life are very simple; we have a 3000 square foot house with two garages, and one dog. His goals are that next I want a bigger house with three garages. The third garage will be for his hobby of remodeling antique cars, and then, what comes after that is to change to a house with five garages, because he likes three kinds of antique cars. And then, we will have two kids. And then, right, have one dog, that is enough. Those are his expectations for life. And then, he’d go to work every day, go travel on vacations and holidays. But, as for every day, he thinks life is about routines, such as working around the house on the weekend... That’s his pursuit, an insipid life, an ordinary life, and a down-to-earth kind of life. That is totally different from me. As for me, don’t even mention five garages, I don’t want even one garage, and don’t want a 3000 square foot house….So for me, these things don’t have much meaning or value, or in other words, owning them does not make me feel happy. So actually, our value systems, our pursuits in life, and definitions of life, are different. So his kind of happiness…I don’t approve of it. I just can’t live that kind of life with him. As for things I want, he could not give them to me…[the differences…] some are on the surface, some are essential….  

(Anne 2006, part 2)

Although Anne is describing W’s ideal of family life and his role in it, this narrative projects a gender prescription for his wife: she should be a good wife (and potentially mother) who centers her life on the home, and finds satisfaction in being a consummate consumer: the heart of an American middle-class nuclear family.

The Maoist women’s liberation project re-oriented women’s loyalty from the patriarchal family to the Communist state. It is still a subject of debate whether that shift liberated Chinese women or actually subjected them to state patriarchy; the shift nonetheless provided the
possibility for women to find meaning and fulfillment outside of marriage and the family. Just as it is hard to put “liberated feet” back into shoes designed for three-inch bound feet, it is also hard to convince women who came to see the purpose and meaning of their lives as connected to something outside and greater than the family to “return to the home” and find complete fulfillment and satisfaction there. Furthermore, the post-Mao discourse of personal development and individual fulfillment, combined with a wide range of career and life possibilities opened up by the market-oriented economy and open-door policy, provides greater space for women to imagine possibilities in life beyond being a devoted wife and mother. While some women celebrated the newly found/returned possibility of the joys of domesticity, others such as Anne, who grew up expecting more, have found that marriage and family life cannot provide fulfillment.

Anne did not have any children, but did have a job in the U.S.: the same American consulting company that she worked for in Beijing. However, in her narrative she did not mention her job and career in the U.S. This omission indicates that working in the U.S. for an American business did not provide a meaningful life goal for her. Anne explains her return to China as being mainly for personal reasons: “I wanted to go back to China. I felt the uncertainty, and I felt that I wanted to be with my family” (Anne, 2006). I understand “family” here as signifying her country, the place where she feels she belongs. She did not have a sense of being part of a family, nuclear or extended, in the US.

Anne initially came back to work for a Chinese company, but found herself unable to fit into its Chinese business culture. She felt the gap was so big that it was not productive for either side, and soon moved back to the American company where she had worked before. She has
been working for foreign companies every since. Her initial decision to work for a Chinese company might have been out of her desire to use her expertise to contribute to the development of China. Going back to foreign companies indicates the failure of this ambition; it was an act against her will, and she admitted that she could not find fulfillment in her current job. She felt that the company and its business could carry on without her; it is a job but not a career.

Even though Anne is one of the rare women who have become a General Manager in a foreign company, this achievement does not really bring her satisfaction. In the Mao era, working outside the home not only provided women with a job, economic independence, and a social life, it also gave new meaning to work and life. For instance, Anne explained that her mother did not have a child for eight years after her marriage because she devoted her whole heart and life to the cause of national defense. Compared to her mother’s work and life, that were connected to a “grand endeavor”, working to earn money for a foreign boss has little connection to the “meaning of life”. The post-Mao nüxing gender model tries to compensate for such loss by re-emphasizing the value of family and children, but many women like Anne have found this an unsatisfactory alternative.

Feeling unfulfilled in her career and uncomfortable with conventional family life, where else could a post-Mao nüxing search for meaning in her life? Anne has sought sanctuary in heterosexual romance outside of marriage:

I have never felt fulfilled…. What I have now, what I own, others may admire, but I could give up all of it…What haven’t I got? What are the things I pursue? Um, what I care the most about in my life is love….

The kind of love that combines spiritual and physical love (Linrou de jiehe). I have had a lot of boyfriends. Each time, I am totally devoted to him, but in the end, sometimes, you find that there are places that you don’t coordinate well, and this is often the case. Sometimes you find that it might be in harmony, very
happy, but it stops there, not moving forward, then at a certain point, you feel it’s not satisfactory any more. 
Or, sometimes I moved forward, but the other party didn’t.

(Anne 2006, part 2)

Anne seeks fulfillment in love, but it is often elusive, short-lived, and unable to provide a long-term sustainable source of satisfaction. She went on to tell me a story about a couple who had been waiting and searching for each other for over forty years. She said that she used to think that the way she loves was “grand” (weida), but compared to their faithful, everlasting love, her love is nothing.

If legendary everlasting love is unattainable, and love in real life is too elusive to hold onto, what else can Anne rely on and derive meaning from? She developed an understanding of the goals in her life from the business training she received at a company she worked for:

What is the motivation of my life? I suddenly found out in a training program I attended for leadership. We were asked to find out how to motivate our teams. One of the exercises was to find out your own “motivation” [originally in English]. I realized that for me, it is the sense of being needed. Two years ago, I first had this thought, and thought… what is the point of living? What is the “objective” [originally in English] in my life…I feel I don’t have concrete goals. I live for feelings (ganjue). I pursue feelings… but I have experienced everything, from the most glamorous moment, to the lowest time of living on 5 pounds a week. I might meet different people, but the type of feeling will be what I have already experienced. There will be nothing new. Why should I continue? I have had them all, I have been there, done that. I would just repeat my life…. Recently, I am down to the bottom again, because I feel no one needs me.

(Anne 2006, part 2)

For many who grew up in the Mao era, shimingga, or a sense of mission, is what gives their life a purpose and meaning, and that mission used to be to devote one’s life to the achievement of Communism. Compared to terms such as shiming, which indicate a larger meaning and goal for
life beyond the individual, the term “motivation” conveys a liberal construction of self that emphasizes individual fulfillment.

When Anne told me about her feeling of not wanting to live, I felt the need to intervene, as both a friend and a researcher. The last hour of our interview switched from Anne’s life story to a discussion of how to find possible goals for her life. Even though I felt myself to be using clichés, I nonetheless asked about conventional options such as having a child, doing charity work, or helping others. However, Anne rejected these options. She does not feel ready, psychologically, to take on the responsibility of having a child. As for charity:

I am sponsoring children who have dropped out of school. At that moment, I feel happy, but it lasts for just one moment. They don’t enrich my life. It is done, and then past. That is a process, it happens, but it doesn’t really make me happy.

(Anne 2006, part 2)

As Rofel (2007) points out, the construction of the new cosmopolitan Chinese identity is defined in terms of what are assumed to be nonpolitical and benign activities, such as forging a consumer identity through the acquisition of possessions, or remaking body images through freedom to explore sexual, material, and affective individual well-being. The embrace of personal desires as positive has been accompanied by a rejection of more dangerous political passions and engagements. Anne’s sense of affliction and loss, when she apparently has everything, reveals the ideological birth defect of the cosmopolitan “desiring subject” and the limited promise it can offer. To sustain a desiring subject, desiring objects have to be constantly supplied. For Anne, the objects of desire have run out—she has fulfilled all the promises, and is still not happy.
On reviewing the record of the interview, I realized that Anne did convey what she really wanted to do, but felt unable to achieve: that is, to facilitate change, to have an impact on people and on the world, a desire which is, interestingly, driven by a sense of mission—responsibility for the well-being of others, rather than her own:

I know people don’t change, but I still want to change others, to facilitate change. People have said to me, “Accept it, that is the way things are”, but I can’t accept it— I used to not even admit it. Now I admit it, but I want to change it. Such as people I love, they are not happy. I tried to change them, but they refused. That made me sad, and I don’t understand why. In the past two years, I experienced a lot of this kind of situation. Why do people refuse to be better and happier? They don’t even try….I feel very …“helpless” [originally in English]. That there is nothing you can do about it (wunengweili). Then why would others need me? You can bring about change, you can see how; you have the experience, and can foresee…I can see it. So I feel sad, I am not patient…. I want to write an autobiography or make a film about my life, so that it can impact a lot of people.

(Anne 2006, part 2)

Having lived in the West and come back with rich experiences, Anne thinks that she has learned a lot of lessons and has something enlightening to offer to others, although she has not found happiness herself.

Anne’s sense of mission, and dissatisfaction with material and personal success, may be related to the influence of Christianity, initially from her laolao. Anne went to a Christian church with an older English lady she met in her first year in the UK. She later had a disagreement with the priest of that church, stopped going there, and decided to stay away from institutional practice and keep her beliefs to herself. Anne’s religious tendency may lead to her desire to seek a meaning in life and a certain altruism, concern for others, and wish to control or save them.
However, Anne is frustrated as her desire to change the people around her (and China) has encountered rejection both at home and in the workplace. The clash of values led to her leaving the Chinese company, a conflict with her sister, and tensions with many others who refuse to accept her “help”. Working for a foreign company in China and occupying an in-between space between China and the West, Anne feels privileged but also simultaneously dislocated and disconnected by this positioning. Serving foreign companies makes her feel she is not directly contributing to her own society, and her attempts to instill her values directly by communicating with Chinese people have been met with hostility. Unable to fit into a western mould, or to contribute to Chinese society in a meaningful way, Anne has lost all sense of direction in her life. She finds the intermediate and shifting place of the Chinese cosmopolitan desiring female subject uninhabitable.

I initially felt frustrated with my inability to help her out or to suggest a solution, as either a friend or a researcher. However, as Rofel (2007) has argued, public discourses of desire in China are open-ended. They are fields of experiment that not only close down but also open up possibilities. People are exploring their own ways of becoming or un-becoming desiring subjects. Some pursue material well-being or divert their energy to raising the next generation. Others seek enlightenment through self-development and personal liberation, while experiencing the joy of subversion by breaking down boundaries, including gender definitions, and exploring new territories. When I was in Beijing in 2007 doing fieldwork on the development of grassroots NGOs in China, I met some young people who work for foreign companies. They use their spare time and money to set up their own NGOs and engage in various kinds of social activism. I see the renewed passion of idealism and the desire to bring about social change in
these young people, and a new-found meaning in life in their endeavors. I realized that it is not my responsibility to answer Anne’s questions - she has to work through her situation and find her own way.

**The storytelling: hybrid language and the cosmopolitan Chinese woman**

The interview with Anne was conducted in Mandarin, which is her mother tongue since she grew up mainly in Beijing. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the standard spoken Mandarin in Mainland China, called *putonghua*, is derived from Beijing Mandarin or *Beijinghua*, a variety of the northern Mandarin dialect group spoken in the Beijing area. *Putonghua* shares the same phonetic inventory with *Beijinghua*, but filters out many local expressions and phonological features characteristic of Beijing. Although Anne now lives once more in Beijing, she speaks *putonghua* rather than *Beijinghua*, adopting what Qing Zhang (2005) calls “cosmopolitan” Mandarin. Anne does not speak with a Beijing accent, but she is familiar with Beijing slang and occasionally used it to enhance the dramatic effect of her narration, as in “my mother *henbang*” (rocks). Anne’s narrative language primarily exhibits a distinct linguistic style that is tied to her *yapishi* (yuppie) identity, a label that refers to those working at middle and upper level management positions in foreign-invested companies, as explained earlier (Zhang 2005).

The signifier “Mandarin” in English encompasses many varieties both within and beyond Mainland China. These include *guoyu*, spoken in Taiwan, *hua* in Singapore, and the Chinese spoken by foreigners (the “white man’s Chinese”), who mostly learn Mandarin (Chow 2000). As Zhang Qing (2005) argues, in order to participate in the transnational Chinese
linguistic market and construct a new cosmopolitan professional identity, Chinese yuppies employ a cosmopolitan variety of Mandarin that incorporates multiple Mandarin varieties from overseas, as a common medium for communication with their Chinese colleagues or supervisors coming from outside Mainland China. This way of speaking represents socio-linguistic capital and becomes a source of distinction. Anne’s cosmopolitan Mandarin language style situates her as simultaneously belonging to Beijing, China, and to a transnational Chinese community, and is an important constituent feature of her cosmopolitan nüxing identity.

In spite of this, Anne’s narrative was sprinkled with expressions associated with an earlier stage of her life and her parents’ political affiliation to Maoism. Two distinct sets of Chinese political vocabulary are deployed in her narrative, coming from different ideological sources, evoking both the Mao and post-Mao eras. For instance, she refers to the Communist periodization of Chinese history to map political time onto her individual life. The concept of xin/jiu zhongguo divides twentieth-century Chinese history into two halves, the old and new China, with the turning point in 1949 when the PRC was established. The term jiefangqian (before the Liberation), which Anne used, interprets the period before 1949 as a dark age of suffering for China under the “Guomindang” (the Nationalist Party), and the time after 1949 as a bright new era under the Communist Party’s rule. Anne also uses the Marxist term fengjian (feudal) to ground her sense of history as a linear process of progress, evolving from slavery to feudal and capitalist regimes driven by class conflict, and eventually reaching its teleological apex: Communism. The term “Communist society” is used in Anne’s description of the military base where she lived in her early childhood, to evoke a paradise on earth.
Anne also used vocabulary from the Mao era to interpret her parents’ lives, when she explained that they postponed having children because they devoted all their youth to the communist enterprise. She shifts to political terms associated with a different evaluation system, that of the reform era, in comparing her father and mother: the increasingly negative term zhentong (meaning orthodoxy) is used to describe the former, and the positively construed kaiming (liberal or open-minded) to refer to her mother, who also represents a quality conveyed by a post-Mao neologism, Xianjinxing (progressiveness: see the narrative passage cited on page 21). Xianjinxing is political jargon, derived from the former CCP general secretary Jiang Zemin’s formulation in early 2000 of what he called the “Three Representations” (sange daibiao). This slogan claimed that the Party’s legitimacy in leading China to modernization derived from its ability to adapt to an ever-changing environment and to reform itself from within, so that it still “represents the demands for the development of advanced social productive forces, the direction of advanced culture, and the fundamental interests of the greatest majority of the people”. One of the strategies for implementing Jiang’s Three Representations was “education of CCP party members so they can maintain their progressiveness” (baochi gongchandangyuan xianjinxing jiaoyu).

In the political context of renewing the legitimacy and relevance of the CCP in the new millennium, maintaining xianjinxing (progressiveness) meant being flexible and incorporating both traditional Chinese and modern global culture into the Party’s ideological foundation for continuing to rule, rather than dogmatically clinging to Marxist theory. Anne appropriated this term to highlight her mother's ability, as a party member and Maoist funü, to keep up with the times by reinventing herself in order to retain contemporary relevance in a new era. Her use of
this term reflects Anne’s recognition of some Maoist funüs’ ability to transform and reincarnate themselves, and her positive appraisal of their resistance to obsolescence.

While Anne’s yuppie Mandarin manages to incorporate these echoes of the Maoist past, implying the on-going influence of some Communist ideas, the presence of many English expressions in her narration was even more noticeable. Her use of English terms (as quoted above in several extracts) requires special attention, as it constitutes an important dimension of Anne’s interpretation of reality and the construction of her identity. Anne is one of three of the fifteen women I interviewed who had studied or lived outside of China. Her use of English words is partly attributable to the fact that both she and I speak English. We both have experience working for foreign companies, and have studied and lived abroad as a result of the increasing transnational flow of Chinese people. Since the 1990s, with increasing numbers of Chinese employees in FIEs (foreign-invested enterprises) and Sino-foreign joint ventures, a new phenomenon of “Hybrid Chinese” has emerged (zhajiao zhongwen) (Xiaofei Zhinan 1997, cited in Zhang, 2005: 431). Just as many Chinese people have adopted English names, those who have studied or lived abroad and/or work for foreign businesses often mix English with Mandarin (or with Cantonese and Taiwanese in some cases) in their everyday speech.

There are various approaches to understanding the phenomenon of hybrid language use. It can be seen in light of Bourdieu’s ideas on the construction of a linguistic market as part of the larger symbolic domain where cultural and commercial linguistic exchanges take place (see Bourdieu 1977, 1991). According to Bourdieu, the linguistic market, as part of the larger socio-cultural symbolic system, assigns different values to various linguistic products. It legitimizes certain uses of language which come to designate the dominant class and the norm; material and
symbolic rewards go to those who master the legitimate language (Bourdieu 1977). This idea is helpful in order to understand the political economy of language, the social and economic conditions of linguistic practice, and the power relations between language users. It is also obviously relevant to the current hegemony of English in the global market place. In the case of hybrid Chinese, the flow of language is largely from English (the market centre) to Chinese (the periphery), indicating an unequal power relationship and the broader global context in which such unequal exchanges occur. Speaking English, for the Chinese as for many others around the world, generates a form of highly valued symbolic capital.

The mixing of English with other languages can also be understood as a result of global transcultural flows (Appadurai 1996), prompting questions related to communication, community, identity, and self-performance, including gender and age as factors that are often present in language. Many studies have taken on the task of investigating the complex relationship between language and identity. Rampton (1995) discusses the phenomenon of “crossing”, when members of certain groups use forms of speech associated with other groups. He argues that the citation of “foreign” terms may be a way of “styling the Other”, a means to “appropriate, explore, reproduce or challenge influential images and stereotypes of groups that they don’t themselves (straightforwardly) belong to” (1999:421). Deborah Cameron (1997) suggests that rather than assuming that people talk the way they do because of who they (already) are, we should recognize that we see people as who we think they are because (among other things) of the way they talk (1997:49). Alastair Pennycook (2003) takes up Butler’s theory of gender as performativity, and suggests that we think about people’s use of language as making them who they are, by performance, rather than revealing a pre-existing self. In his insightful
analysis of the use of English in Japanese rap music, Pennycook (2003), sees the use of English as a way of “styling the Other” and links it with identity-fashioning and performance. Since both Anne and I are native Chinese speakers, the use of English in her narrative is not for “international communication”, but serves, as in Japanese rap music, to signify her identification with certain cultural affiliations or unconscious contamination by them. Rather than understanding the adoption and adaptation of English in Anne’s narrative as showcasing her symbolic capital or simply reflecting Western values, I see it as an act of “semiotic reconstruction” (Pennycook 2003); its result goes beyond linguistic adaptation and becomes a project of performing, inventing and (re)fashioning a hybrid cosmopolitan gender identity that crosses linguistic and geographical borders (Walcott 1997). On the one hand, the incorporation of a different language is linked to the mobilization of different ideological resources that inform those linguistic constructions, and fulfills the purpose of constructing and performing a hybrid identity. On the other hand, the use of English locates Anne as part of the imagined global community of English users, as a participant in transnational culture, and as a cosmopolitan subject and global citizen. Furthermore, even though Anne actively constructs her cosmopolitan identity by picking and choosing a wide range of linguistic and ideological resources, her choice is pre-conditioned by the unequal power relations between China and the English-speaking world which structures the linguistic capital market. English (conveying Western values) is accepted as the language of the dominant class, and it is necessary to learn it to be part of the “international”, global flow of language (see Pennay 2001:128).

Anne’s “hybrid Chinese” also indicates a hybrid construction of her gendered identity as a Chinese woman, drawing simultaneously on linguistic and cultural sources from both beyond
her mother tongue and the culture she still primarily belongs to. The use of English words provides Anne with resources necessary not only to challenge and criticize certain values and practices, but also to interpret and construct a new vision of femininity based on a hybrid subjectivity. For example, Anne uses English terms she learned in her business training to defend her way of doing business and to interpret social relations. She describes herself as a “people person”, and discusses the “motivation” of her life. Rather than using the conventional Chinese term guanxi (connections) to refer to her development of relationships with her clients, she sees this type of networking as “building rapport”.

In her discussion of modern Chinese transnationalism, Ong (1997) points out that while family and guanxi networks are part of the flexible tactics of accumulation among Chinese transnationalists, they have been taken as authentic features of an essential “Chinese culture” and fetishized as objects of cultural analysis. As Ong argues, both “Chinese ‘family’ and guanxi are central discursive constructs within the newly self-confident regional imaginary of a ‘Greater China’ and ‘the glow of Chinese fraternity’” (1997:21); they are used as “explanatory elements within the postwar celebratory narratives of Chinese business success associated with the economic rise of the Asia Pacific” (1997:89) (among them, Berger and Hsiao 1988; Tai 1989; Hamilton 1991). Guanxi is also associated with amoral tactics of domination, violence, exploitation, and duplicity, and often operates as an exclusionary practice privileging specific kinds of people. It excludes those who do not have access to it, and legitimates the exploitation, discipline, abuse and cheating of the latter.

In China, guanxi provides people with access to inside information and opportunities, and is believed to be crucial to Chinese business operations (Yan 1996 a,b; Yang 1994 2002; Müller
et al, 2007 and others). Guanxi is utilized by both men and women in China, yet there is often a gendered difference in its practice. Rofel (1999) notes that the main qualities associated with the private sector include the ability to take risks, to mix with a wide array of people, to travel and make contacts, all identified as male attributes. In business, women in general lack access to the well-established male-dominate business networks and may be at a severe disadvantage if they are unable to foster guanxi in order to facilitate success (Korabik 1994). In her study of guanxi in China, Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (1994) looks into the influence of gender on guanxi, and argues that most women use it for “small things” whereas men are often involved in the more complicated exercises of guanxi that involve travel or greater interaction with people outside of the immediate circle of family and friends (1994). She also notes that since the majority of big or important favours are asked of men, sometimes women have to play on the attraction between the sexes, to use their female ‘charm’ or offer sexual services, to get men to assist them. Women in business often face pressure to use their “charm” to get contact with powerful and important men.

Guanxi often implies an exclusively masculine business practice in China today, used by both Chinese and some foreign businessmen who participate in “old boys’ club” activities such as dining and drinking together, going to karaoke bars where they flirt or even buy sex with young girls. These activities, which build a sense of male superiority and solidarity by exploiting female sexuality and degrading women, exclude (or are refused by) female businesswomen like Anne. Anne’s preference for the English term “building rapport” indicates her rejection of the so called “Chinese” mode of interpersonal relationships and a masculinist business culture based on fraternal networks, and her identification with a more “professional”
way of doing business for businesswomen. Clodagh Wylie’s (2004) research on white-collar women in private enterprises in Beijing and Shanghai shows that they take a more “professional” approach than men to guanxi in business, one that is more forthright, honest and straightforward. Anne’s choice of a term with different connotations represents her effort to carve out a space within the “Chinese” business culture that a female businesswoman can inhabit with dignity.

The inclusion of English words in Anne’s narrative provides opportunities for her to challenge some of the sexist and heterosexist cultural aspects of modern Chinese transnationalism on the one hand, and to disrupt conventional Chinese gender prescriptions on the other. She uses many English terms when talking about gender and sexuality, love and relationships, such as “sex life”, “love life”, and “sex partner”. These words evoke desires and practices that are still regarded as “unspeakable” or have negative connotations for many mainstream Chinese. The use of English not only makes the articulation of these elements possible, but also legitimatizes those gendered aspects of women’s existence which have not yet gained popular recognition and wide acceptance in Chinese language and society. For instance, Anne uses the English term “physical attraction” in talking about her criteria for male partners. Compared to Chinese terms such as waibiao (appearance) or waizaimei (external beauty), which imply a superficial judgment based on physical appearance, “physical attraction” contains the aspect of sexual attraction which is not conveyed by these Chinese terms. The use of this term conveys Anne’s reversal of the desiring gaze onto a male partner, a gaze usually projected onto women by men. Anne refers to the married man she was having an affair with as her “partner”, admitting that their love could not be understood and accepted by society. Her use of this term is not just to euphemize the extra-marital relationship, but to set it on equally dignified and
legitimate ground as those of married “partners”. The use of an English term here does not just reveal the influence of a Western life-style and concept of relationship in Anne’s interpretation of her life; more importantly, it supplies an alternative vocabulary of gender for her to subvert existing gender norms and envision a different gender project.

**Conclusion**

Anne’s personal gender project of constructing herself as a cosmopolitan nüxing involves challenging various forms of patriarchy in multiple locations and resisting their gender prescriptions, as she trespasses across cultural and national boundaries. It is a journey in search of a space in between the traditional and modern, the Chinese and Western, for the possibility of building a unique gender project: one that draws upon multiple gender models while subverting them also. Rather than viewing one model as oppressive and all other as liberating, Anne’s relationship to various gender models is complex, as she rejects certain aspects but nonetheless derives inspiration and resources from each model, consciously and unconsciously. For instance, she attempts to escape the Maoist orthodoxy, as represented by her father, and its control over her personal life and sexuality, by resorting to Western liberal humanism, as embodied by the English language and the UK. However, echoes of the women’s liberation discourse of the Mao era, and the positive role-model of her Maoist funü mother, as well the more subtle influence from her Christian grandmother’s self-sacrificing altruism lead her reject being the wife in an ideal American nuclear family dream. Her dissatisfaction with material and personal success
leaves her lacking a sense of mission, or a goal to archive. The Maoist legacy from which Anne initially sought to escape nonetheless serves as a reference point for her uncertain future.

Anne’s difficult search for meaning in life as a woman is constructed and performed through conscious construct of her body, appearance, and life-style, as well as through the hybrid language narrative she uses to convey her story. The use of multiple cultural and linguistic resources in her narrative illustrates her efforts to translate, synthesize, and appropriate the different ideological components of her life, in order to challenge normative gender prescriptions from both the past and the present, from home and abroad. Anne’s gender project is transnational, inseparable from her experience of living abroad. Such experiences, made possible by the current global context are still available only to well-educated women from privileged backgrounds. She appears to have achieved the dream of many Chinese women, as an affluent, liberated, successful, cosmopolitan nüxing. Yet her own personal dissatisfaction exposes that dream as a dangerous illusion, and confirms the on-going power of earlier models, both Maoist and pre-Maoist, to haunt the present.

---

1 For discussions of River Elegy (or Deathsong of the River), see Richard Madson, 1995, Chapter 8; Fewsmith, 2001, chapter 4.

2 Ong and Nomini define modern Chinese transnationalism as a distinctive postcolonial social formation rooted in the history of European colonialism and developed within the strategies of accumulation of the new capitalism throughout the Asia Pacific.

3 For a critique of Tu’s theorizing, see Ang, 2000.

It is and has always been common for Chinese couples to be separated for long periods of time, for the advancement of career, education, the well-being of family members, especially for the children. During the Mao era, couples were often separated for “the demands of their work” (gongzuoxuyao), and personal and family needs were considered subordinate to the needs of the work, the Party, the revolution, and the nation, which were often perceived as interchangeable.

Anne uses the term “traditional” to refer to the Mao period and earlier, as in “lao lao has traditional Chinese things”. In this narrative, the “traditional” education system refers to the system in the Mao era.

During the latter part of the Cultural Revolution, it became a national fashion for women to knit sweaters and make their own clothes with a sewing machine. This fashion gradually entered urban families. People had not much to do at their workplace besides participating in political study sessions; women would bring their craft items to the meetings, and to work, as a pastime. That was a period when national production stagnated. The military was also affected by the Cultural Revolution; professional development and production were rendered secondary to political struggle. This meant Anne’s mother had time and energy to explore and enjoy family life.

This is not to say that the military base was power-free and without hierarchy; for instance, Anne’s parents were “gaoji zhishifenzi”, meaning highly educated intellectuals, and lived in the gaoganlou, a building for high ranking officials.

The original text is “大道之行也，天下为公，选贤与能，讲信修睦。故人不独亲其亲，不独子其子，使老有所终，壮有所用，幼有所长，矜、寡、孤、独、废、疾者皆有所养，男有分，女有归。货恶其弃于地也，不必藏于己；力恶其不出于身也，不必为己。是故谋闭而不兴。盗窃乱贼而不作，故外户而不闭。是谓大同。” In 《礼记·礼运》(The Book of Rite : The Conveyance of Rites), see 礼记注疏：礼运第九。台湾：中央研究院历史语言研究所，重刊宋本十三经注疏附校勘, p. 413－1, http://hanchi.ihp.sinica.edu.tw/ihpc/hanjQuery?@2^1358589461^802^5^5010100100060010@@2118103245. Last accessed: September 10, 2009.

In 1989, the government started to charge for university education; tuition was 200 RMB per year, while the average annual income for rural residents was RMB 1376. In 1997, all public universities in China charged tuition fees, and the average was 3000 RMB a year. Currently, public university tuition fees range from RMB 4000—6000 with the highest reaching RMB 10,000 a year.

In the 1980s and 1990s, presuming that women did not have sex before marriage, knowledge about contraception was given to young women when they registered for marriage, in a training session for newlywed couples. Even though condoms were available in drug stores, it was perceived as embarrassing for women to go to the counter. For the purpose of population control, free tools for contraception were mainly distributed by the personnel in charge of birth control in one’s work unit, who were responsible for preventing unplanned births or outside of quota.

For instance, Mao Zedong’s (毛泽东) formal name (ming) is Zedong (泽东), while his “zhi” is Runzhi (润之); he also had the nicknames Shitou and Shishanyazhi (石头、石三伢子), and he used more than ten pen names such as Mao Shanshi 毛三石、Zedong 泽东、Runzi 润之、Yan Ziren 杨子任.

Edward’s (2006) research found the majority of students adopted English names as requested by their English teachers, under the assumption that having an English name would facilitate language learning. It also demonstrates that Chinese students used various strategies in response to the conflict between retaining cultural identity and adopting an English name. While some accepted the name suggested by their English teachers, some made the
choice on their own. Some students safeguard their Chinese identities by choosing a name that is similar in sound to their Chinese names, or refusing to adopt an English name and using their Chinese names.

14 Like the English speaking teachers in Edward’s (2006) study, many foreign business people in China are incapable of remembering and using their Chinese colleagues’ (mostly subordinates) and business partners’ names (or unwilling to).

15 Edward (2006) shows that even the using of an English name can be a strategy of resistance—by having the teacher address her with an English name which appears to be her personal name but actually is not, the student resists the teacher’s request for symmetrical solidarity and intimacy.

16 It is also the case for Jacky and Floyd, and many others working for foreign invested companies. As a former colleague, I never got the chance to know their Chinese names—intentionally or unintentionally, their Chinese names were never mentioned.

17 For instance, in Zhang Xianliang and Su Tong’s novels, and Zhang Yimou’s film.

18 For instance, by female writers such as Chen Ran, Lin Bai, Wang Anyi, and Wei Hui, Mian Mian.

19 For a detailed analysis on Three Representatives, see Holbig, 2008, also see Gilley and Holbig’s (2009) research for a quantitative–qualitative analysis of 168 articles published in China on the question of regime and party legitimacy.

20 For critique of Bourdieu’s overemphasis on the unified nature of the linguistic market and the exploration of more nuanced approaches taking into account different values of local varieties and different segments of the linguistic market, see Woolard 1985; Milroy & Milroy 1992; Haeri, 1996.

21 Pennycook (1998) distinguishes three different interpretations of such language flow in the study of sociolinguistics: the liberal accommodationism stance assigns to English a role of global communication; the linguistic imperialism paradigm views the “English linguistic hegemony” as an uncritical endorsement of capitalism, the Americanization and homogenization of world culture, reflecting the ‘structural power’ of English; finally, the heterogeneity position applauds the notion of world Englishes and the creation of different varieties of English around the world, and speculates on the “implications of pluricentricity” and “hybridity of Englishes”.

22 For the social significance of guanxixue under state centralized economy, and a discussion of power relationships and their social and symbolic expressions, in the guanxi system, see Yang 1994, 2002. For discussion of guanxi in business, see Tsang 1998; Peng and Heath, 1996; Xin and Pearce 1996; Müller et al 2007. For guanxi in the social life, see Chu and Ju,1993; Yan, 1996a, 1996b; and Kipnis1997.
Conclusion

The Maoist gender project and its legacy

This research on the Maoist gender legacy began with an assumption that Chinese women of the post-Mao generation were raised and educated by parents and teachers of the Maoist generation. I therefore expected to pay particular attention to the “Maoist Mother” as an influence on later performances of gender roles. However, in listening to the participants’ stories, I realized that another very important protagonist with considerable influence was overlooked in my original research design: the jiatingfunü (housewife) or stay-at-home grandmother. Many women talked about being brought up by their grandmothers rather than their mothers (who were away working), and the deep connection they developed with them as their primary caregivers, which often exceeded their affection for their parents, and their mothers in particular.

The usually unacknowledged presence and significance in these stories of the silent grandmother (who had been raised in an earlier gender project as jiatingfunü) drew my attention to the role of “abjected others”, those who are ignored or neglected, but whose contribution enables others to exist and prosper. For Butler, homosexuals are the abjected others whose absent-presence confirms the hegemony of heterosexuality. Extending the concept of abjection to “other” types of performances of femininity (those which no longer elicit public approval) became crucial in my re-conceptualization of both the Maoist gender project and its legacy in China today. These women’s stories highlighted the existence and importance of a category of
women who were largely invisible in the representation of women in that era and illegitimated by the Maoist discourse of “woman as socialist labourer”. The normative Maoist funü’s existence in fact depended on the on-going unrecognized labour of “discarded” women, such as these grandmothers, whose unacknowledged existence defined and sustained the funü subject. For the modern nüxing who has no time for housework or childcare, mothers who were formerly funü may, ironically, now be expected to perform this supportive role, as they become grandmothers. For instance, like most of the female migrant workers who leave their children with their grandparents or other family members in the countryside, Dong also sent her daughter back home to live with Dong’s mother, the former Maoist funü, while she works in the city to pursue her dream of becoming a nüxing.

While Butler’s theorizing starts from the abjection of homosexuals in the construction of heterosexual subjects (and vice versa), and she focuses her exploration of the constitutive relationship between the two, I extend this idea to the construction not of one heterosexual gender norm, but of several competing heterosexual gender norms. Butler’s theorizing treats heterosexuality as a unified hegemonic entity, and even though her later work tries to integrate the analysis of race, it does not revise her initial framework of the hetero/homo divide. In fact, this effort is not entirely successful, as some critics have pointed out (see for instance, Salih 2004). While it is true that heterosexuals generally enjoy structural, symbolic, and social privilege, there is a hierarchy within heterosexuality, particularly where women are concerned, which varies from place to place and from time to time. These variations grow out of the intersections of class, race, age, and different types of (hetero) sexual activity, when one performance of being a woman is granted normative status. While this is probably true in most
social contexts, it becomes more evident in a political climate (as in China) where ideologically motivated state propaganda promoting one model of femininity was obvious and physically enforced, as when bourgeois women were “sent down” (like Lin) to the countryside to learn to be peasants.

Highlighting the abjected others helps to deepen our understanding not only of the construction of the Maoist funü, but also of the post-Mao nüxing, which ironically allocates the Maoist funü to the position of the abjected other (as experienced by Dong). The Maoist funü, class-encoded as represented by women workers and peasants, have become stigmatized as “non-women” in the post-Mao reformulation of “women” as consumer-oriented, urban, middle-or upper-class nüxing. While the abjected other in the Mao era, the jiatingfunü, subsidized the Maoist funü with their unpaid domestic labour, the cosmopolitan nüxing now purchases the cheap labour offered by the newly abjected other of the post-Mao era (migrant rural women, poor urban women workers, the previous funü who now become grandmothers (like Dong’s mother), who take care of the young, the old, and the sick (like Anne’s grandmother).

The status of the Maoist funü as the new “abjected other” is reflected in the ambivalent and complex relationships many of the women interviewed have with the Maoist gender legacy. For Lin, the ambivalence is reflected in her attitude towards being a “strong woman”, and her nostalgia for a certain revolutionary femininity. In the case of Dong, we are reminded of the legacy in the bonus she received for working on “Women’s Day’, but the legacy brings this rural migrant woman a shame that she cannot wait to get rid of, just like the PLA sneakers she had to wear. In Shitou’s imagined “her-story” of Chinese lesbians, the funü emerges as an absent-presence, while the revolutionary ideal of equality echoes in contemporary Chinese queer
politics through the appropriation of the term tongzhi. Mao’s legacy hides in the initial omission of Anne’s father, the symbol of Maoist authoritarianism, in her life story, as well as in her interpretation of history and her persistent search for a meaning in life, beyond being a successful consumer with sexual freedom.

Stories told about or by the abjected others reveal that the instituting of normative gender models, in both the Mao and post-Mao eras, has been carried out through the manipulation of affects such as pride and shame, which are attached to femininity as expressed by both appearance and language, along class lines. Anne’s stories about her grandmother revealed her experience of marginalization and alienation, and Dong’s narrative about her clothes conveys both shame and resistance to social exclusion. Each woman narrates the sedimentation of rival and conflicting models of femininity reflected in domestic power struggles between Maoist funü mothers, jiatingfunü grandmothers, and (would-be) nüxing daughters.

**Gender as project, situated subversion, and diverse strategies**

The introduction of the concept of “gender as project” as well as performance has been fruitful in various ways. Firstly, it helps to distinguish and name the unique and situated aspects of formulating and signifying gender at the public (national) and private (individual) levels, which do not always correspond and shift across different historical periods, with considerable overlap. Secondly, it highlights individual women’s formulation and performance of their own ideas of an appropriately gendered self, each in her own context, in which dominant discourses may be resisted as well as espoused. Thirdly, the accounts analyzed here allow a contextualized assessment of how individual women have formulated and modified their own gender project in
response to the models proposed, to accommodate their particular social and economic conditions. For instance, this is reflected particularly in their degree of material access to the means to change their physical appearance (through fashion, hair, make-up etc.) and to the level of education or social contact required to modify their speech and behavior (use of dialect, of English etc.).

The idea of gender as project not only enabled me to understand better how gender subjectivity is formulated and performed, but more importantly, it guided me to explore various strategies of gender subversion. According to Butler, since the categories of gender and sex are linguistically constituted, gender subversion and transformation need to attack the root: language and signification. As Jagger Gill puts it, Butler’s agency is a “‘discursive’ or ‘linguistic agency’” (2008:8). Performance of gender has both physical and linguistic components. These women’s life narratives provide rich resources to understand their discursive subversion, and the concept of gender as project helped me to look into the underlying structure and interconnection between various gender signifying practices (verbal and visual, bodily and discursive). Each story illustrated how alternative strategies are formulated within or beyond, across or amid, different gender models and means of presentation. For instance, Lin’s efforts to synthesize the post-Mao nüxing and Maoist funü femininities are expressed through an ideal hairstyle, whereas Anne legitimizes her love affair with a married man by borrowing the term “partner” from English, to refer to him in her narrative.

As stated in the introduction, I chose to focus on these four women’s life stories because of the range of their social positions. Their stories are complementary and contribute to an understanding of the formulation of individual gender projects and subversive strategies in a
range of different ways. Those discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 tell two sides of a story about class and gender in the changing context of the Mao and post-Mao eras. Coming from an elite class background, Lin was forced to "become" a peasant/worker/funü, whereas Dong, regarded as a genuine funü, dreamed of becoming an urban middle-class nüxing in spite of the glorification of her background (in fact she experienced that glorification as a false discourse). Both women’s stories have elements of nostalgia as well as revulsion in relation to the Maoist model for women. Both seek to achieve the post-Mao nüxing model, or something closer to it, even though they were in one way or another associated with the Maoist funü ideal, and thus are positioned as the abjected other of the nüxing. Lin and Dong’s stories illustrate how women from different class backgrounds have navigated through the historical process of shifting gender models and have sought innovative ways to challenge their exclusion.

The third and fourth stories complement the previous two in that Shitou and Anne have both been abroad, and are familiar with western feminism and women’s lives in the west. While both Lin and Dong are married and each has one daughter, neither of them talked about sexuality in their narrative. In contrast, Shitou and Anne have refused marriage and motherhood, though for different reasons, and positioned their sexuality as an important element in constituting their gender subjectivity. Shitou’s story revealed the heteronomative nature of both Maoist and post-Mao gender constructions, and her distinctive strategies for queering both, with a backdrop of global queer politics. Anne’s story is illuminating in a different way: the sometimes confusing and painful process of reconciling between a wide range of discourses. Whereas in other’s eyes she seems to have achieved the Dream, she is disillusioned and still searching in the dark. Staged in a transnational setting, Anne’s story/performance also demonstrates the process of
constructing a hybrid gender subjectivity and envisioning new subversive strategies, interacting with a wide and transnational range of discourses. These four women’s life narratives reflect their vacillations between seeking to achieve and resisting dominant gender models, as they deploy hybrid strategies in negotiating a self-image or projection that conveys their uniqueness as well as the on-going influence of state-approved changes in those models.

**Feminist research and alternative story-telling**

This research explored various ways in which a feminist approach that values women’s own stories, told in their own voices, can document and theorize gendered experiences and subversive strategies. The innovative interview method of “telling and retelling” their life stories facilitated alternative ways of telling women’s “other” lives, encouraged narrative agency, and highlighted discursive subversion. It brought out elements of their stories of which the narrators were not themselves aware, or which they did not initially consider important. These helped to discern to what extent gender performance, for them, is an unconscious or conscious following of prescribed models, or an unconscious or conscious resistance to them: whether their behavior, dress, and speech are iterations of interiorized collective imperatives, or individual choices. They were frequently ambivalent, or provided two seemingly different accounts. For instance, Lin’s first telling demonstrates how class provided the “meaning-frame” that structured the representation of her life, whereas the retelling enabled her to reflect on many previously ignored aspects related to gender rather than class, revealing a more complex self and creating room for narrative agency through reflection. Shitou’s retelling of her life story became a collaborative project between the participant and the researcher, producing a complex story that disrupts the
“coming-out” script that appeals to a heterosexual gaze, and enabling her to explore alternative ways of narrating “her-story”.

The use of dialect or hybrid language in the interviews also conveyed ambivalence, and the often uncomfortable co-existence of different models. One of the strategies many women employed is what I have called “term-borrowing”. Various linguistic resources are appropriated from official discourse of both the Mao and post-Mao eras, according to the speaker’s individual experience and purpose, as well as popular vocabulary conveying regional allegiances or exposure to foreign sources. For example, Shitou adopts the Maoist term *tongzhi*, and Dong borrows the term *laogong* (husband), coming from Hong Kong and Taiwan, to construct her *nüxing* image, situated in a modern/urban nuclear family. Very often the borrowing happens when the narrator needs alternative terms related to gender. This term-borrowing draws attention to gendered experiences that are unrepresentable in the current language, disrupting existing prescriptions and challenging gender norms.

The juxtaposition in some cases of oral narrative and visual representations, in the form of photos or artwork, added another dimension. The inclusion of Shitou’s artwork enabled me to explore the interrelationship between the discursive and visual construction of gender subjectivity, and the multiple ways of formulating subversive strategies in an individual gender project. During my fieldwork several participants showed me photographs of themselves at different times to illustrate the changes in their appearance, but I was unable to include these visual records in my analysis because of various constraints. I plan in future research to extend the primarily narrative inquiry of this study to an examination of visual representations of changing gender roles and performances in China, by comparing public and private images that
construct and reflect the bodily project of transforming Chinese women from Maoist funü to post-Mao nüxing. The inclusion of younger women in a follow-up study will also reveal contemporary modifications of the nüxing model, as gender difference is questioned anew by "unisex" fashions and ambivalent, hybrid performances of femininity/masculinity. As I have demonstrated in a book chapter I prepared for Asian Popular Culture (Huang, forthcoming), the popularity of androgynous images among many young Chinese women indicates a new trend in gender construction in contemporary China, in which alternative notions of gender and a new range of possibilities have been imagined. The fascination with androgyny conveyed by many young women can also be understood as a strategy of resistance to the current over-sexualisation of women and the gender subordination associated with the emphasis on gender difference in the post-Mao nüxing discourse. Alongside the increasing visibility of queer communities, many previously hidden or denied gender identities are now being named and given some legitimacy, and the androgynous trend indicates the desire for diversification of gender expression in the current sociial context.

My decision to analyze four “situated” individual gender projects in-depth entailed sacrificing a wealth of material provided by the eleven other stories that were recorded. I originally intended to demonstrate parallels, contradictions, and supplementary examples drawn from the other stories, but time and space constraints prevented me from doing this in a systematic fashion. I also hesitated to do so because of the risks of misrepresentation in pulling out elements of a woman’s life story, without providing the context. Rather than seeking to present a comprehensive picture based on all the stories, or extracting fragments from each to illustrate certain arguments or themes, I chose to seek a more holistic understanding of each of
these four women’s lives, which represented four very different situations. In future research I hope to return to the other stories, to look more closely at the similarities and differences between them, particularly in relation to visual materials that may be available. I would like to focus more on the next generation, the children of the women discussed here, especially their daughters, who have new gender models to contend with. Another area that deserves exploration is the representation (or lack of it) of male family members such as fathers, partners, brothers, and sons. Changing constructions of femininity and challenges to them need to be considered in relation to parallel shifting notions of masculinity and gender relations.

Foreign influences are obviously important in looking at gendered roles and images, and my future research will relate the oral and visual aspects of the stories and images collected to existing research on the role of the media, as well as official discourses. In the West also there have been significant changes in terms of what women are expected to do and be: war-time posters depicting Rosie the Riveter may seem comparable in some ways to the Maoist funū, as women were encouraged to undertake “men’s work” in response to collective needs. The “feminine mystique” of the 1950s exposed by Betty Friedan may be similar in some ways to the nǔxing model. However, in China these changes were presented as deliberate and state sponsored projects, as part of an open agenda based on shifts in political ideology, and imposed by propaganda and state intervention in much less subtle ways than the “manufacture of consent” in most Western societies. They therefore provide an exceptional context to examine the interplay of class, age, and gender, of conformity to gendered scripts and subversion of them.

This research project was driven by the belief that rather than being passé, the Maoist gender project is still relevant to Chinese women’s lives today. I have argued that not only can
we not understand gender in China today without acknowledging and reassessing the
significance of the Maoist legacy, but more importantly, this knowledge can shed light on how to
formulate subversive strategies to challenge the now dominant, class-encoded, narrowly defined
and normative gender model of the post-Mao nüxing. The stories conveyed here indicate the
presence of a gender landscape in China that is becoming more diverse and democratic, allowing
for an ever-broadening range of personal performances and projects.
Bibliography


Altenburger, Roland. 2005. Is it Clothes that make the Man?: Cross-Dressing, Gender, and Sex in Pre- Twentieth-Century Zhu Yingtai Lore. 64 :22 *Asian Folklore Studies* 64, : 165-205.


Anne. 2006. Life story interview, Beijing.


Barlow, Tani. 1991. Theorizing Women: Funü , Guojia , Jiating [Chinese Women,


Benhabib, Seyla, Judith Butler, Durcilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser. 1995. *Feminist*


Bourdieu, Pierre, and John B. Thompson. 1991. Language and Symbolic Power [Ce que
parler veut dire.]. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.


*Journal of Contemporary History* 43, (2) (04): 279-304.


Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.


Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.


———. Historical and Cultural Exploration of Gender in China (Zhongguo Shehui Xingbei De Lishi Wenhua Xunzong). Tianjin, China: Tainjin Academy of Social Sciences Press.


Fang, Gang. 1996. *Zhongguo Bianxinren Xianxiang (the Phenomenon of Chinese


Harvard University.


Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.


Irigaray, Luce. 1985. This Sex which is Not One. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.


———. 1997. Women's Work in Rural China: Change and Continuity in an Era of


Columbia University Press.


Li, Xiaojiang. 1999. With what Discourse do we Reflect on Chinese Women? Thoughts on Transnational Feminism in China. In *Spaces of their Own: Women's Public*


Link, Perry. 1981. Mandarin Duck and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth-


332


## Appendix I  
### Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name Code</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Experience living and studying abroad</th>
<th>Rural urban origin</th>
<th>Brought up by other family members other than mother</th>
<th>Marital relationship status</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Sexual orientation</th>
<th>Interview language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shi</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Waitress</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>Single, has BF</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guo</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Actress</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>u/r</td>
<td>Partnered **</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dong</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Restaurant supervisor</td>
<td>Junior High</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Daughter</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Sichuan Dialect</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liu</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Actress</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>u</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ni</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Sales, FIE*</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>u</td>
<td>Grandmother</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Mandarin (with some English)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xu</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>General Manager, FIE</td>
<td>MA (Canada)</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>u</td>
<td>Part time by Grandmother</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Mandarin (with some English)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shitou</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Artist and film maker</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>u</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yang</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Magazine editor</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>u</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Mandarin (with some English)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Status</td>
<td>Relationship Details</td>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
<td>Language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>General Manager, FIE</td>
<td>MBA (U.K.)</td>
<td>u</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>Grandmother, Divorced, has BF</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Mandarin (with some English)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feng</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Self-employed house cleaner</td>
<td>Junior High</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>Sister-in-law, Divorced</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Sichuan Dialect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tianlan</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Restaurant dish washer</td>
<td>Junior High</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Sichuan Dialect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Restaurant owner</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>u</td>
<td>u</td>
<td>Grandmother, Partnered</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wu</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>r</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sister, Married (with disability)</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lin</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Clerk, small Chinese company</td>
<td>College diploma</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>u</td>
<td>Grandmother, Married</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wei</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Chief editor</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>u</td>
<td>Mother was a housewife</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* FIE: Foreign Invested Enterprise  
** Partnered: living with a partner
Appendix II  Checklist and Questionnaire (English and Chinese)

As explained in Chapter 1, I have divided the life story interview into two parts. In the first part the research participant tells her life story straightforwardly. In this part, I used a checklist of questions adapted from the sample life-story interview questions provided by Atkinson (1997:43-54), with some revisions. I made notes when I listened to each life-story, and invited further commentary on any aspects that seemed to be missing. In the second part, I used a questionnaire of open-ended questions I developed, involving reflection and assessment of her life and gender related questions.

Part 1 Life Story Checklist

This checklist is just for reference rather than a strictly followed blueprint. Depending on each participant’s specific life context, some further questions emerge and some are skipped.

Birth and family origin

The time of birth, historical background

• Anything unusual about your birth?
• Remember your Grandparents?
• What do you like about them?
• Your parents, describe
• Mother’s personality
• Father
• What do you think you inherited from them? Best thing, least liked thing?
• Earliest memory

Cultural setting and traditions
• Background of your parents
• What was your hometown, neighborhood, or the village like?
• How was your family different from your neighborhood?

Social Factors
• Who raised you?
• What do you remember about growing up with sisters, brothers?
• What relatives do you remember?
• Did you get along with family members?
• Were your parents around, and do things with you?
• Before age 12, what is the most significant event in your life?
• Friends?
• Were you athletic?
• School?
• What did you do for fun or entertainment?
• What was your first experience of leaving home like?
• What special people have you known in your life?
• Who are the heroes and heroines, guides and helpers in your life?

Education
• What is your first memory of attending school? Did you like it?
• What do you remember most about elementary school? Favorite teacher? How did they influence you?
• What are your best memories of school?
• And worst memories?
• Accomplishments you are most proud of?
• Final education level?
• What organizations or activities were you involved with in school?
• Courses you took in school, most important, most enjoyed?
• What was the most important book you read?

University
• Study
• Extracurricular activities
• Classmate and friend
• Books read
• Diary?

Love and work
• When did you first realize that you were a girl and were different from boys?
• First date? First boyfriend/girlfriend?
• What made you fall in love with him/her?
• Describe your partner, what do you like about him/her?
• Children, what make you decide to have or not have children?
• What value or lessons do you try to impart to your child, especially your daughter?
• Best and worst parts about marriage/relationship?

• Dreams and ambitions as a child? And adolescent?

• Where did they come from?

• What did you want to be when you were in high school?

• Hopes and dreams for adulthood?

• What kind of jobs have you done?

• What is your favorite job?

• What does work mean to you?

• How much do you earn?

Transition and life change

• What is the biggest change that ever occurred in your life?

• How many times have you moved from one place to another; what changes were they?

• When did you first leave home? Where did you stay? How did it feel?

• Death of family members

• Illness, how did that change your life?

• Childbirth, abortion, and other bodily experiences

• Accidents

Historical events and periods

• What was the most important historical event you participated in?

• Important days in your life?

Retirement

• How do you feel about your life now?
• What will or do you do when retired?

**Part 2 Reflection and gender related questions**

**Inner life and spiritual awareness**

• How would you describe yourself as a child?
• Do you think you had a happy childhood?
• Did you feel loved as a child?
• What was it like to turn 30, 40, 50, 60?
• What changes have you undergone since 30, 40, 50, 60?
• What primary beliefs guide your life?
• What values would you not want to compromise?
• What do you see as the purpose of life?
• Do you feel you are in control of your life?
• What was your most joyful experience?

**Major life themes**

• What were the crucial decisions in your life?
• Have there been any mistakes in your life?
• How do you handle disappointment?
• Are you satisfied with the life choices you have made?
• What has been the happiest time in your life?
• What was the least enjoyable time?
• Has there been a special person that has changed your life?
• What have been your greatest accomplishments?
• How do you feel about yourself at the age you are now?
• What is your biggest worry now?
• What has been the greatest challenge of your life so far?
• What matters most to you now?

Dressing and make up
• How would you describe your dressing style, what kind of style you like? Where do you buy your clothes?
• Do you wear make-up or jewelry?
• What are the hairstyles you have had? Why do you like them?
• Are you happy with your body?
• What is your ideal image of women?

Life as a woman
• What are the most important events or elements in your life as a woman?
• Would your life be different if you were not a woman? In what way?
• Has any individual woman (parent, teacher, colleagues, other significant persons) played a role in your life and identity as a woman?
• What are your expectations of yourself as a woman -- your ideal gender images, your life goals, and how to achieve them?

Vision of the future
• Is your life fulfilled yet? Have your goals in life ever changed?
• What is your view on death?
• What do you want most to experience before you die?

Conclusion
• How would you conclude your life, in one or two sentences?

• Is there any thing we left out?

Thank you!
第一部分 生活故事清单

家庭和出生:
- 出生时间，历史大环境
- 第一个孩子？
- 对祖父母的记忆，他们是谁，什么家庭，见过，一起住？是否喜欢他们？
- 对父母的记忆，父母的背景
  - 母亲的情况，性格
  - 父亲的情况，性格
  - 你比较像谁，继承了父母的那些特点，您认为父母遗传您的最好的东西，及不好的遗传。
- 最早的记忆是什么？

生活环境
- 所住的村镇的环境，对那里的记忆
- 您的家庭在当地的什么，有和特别之处？
- 父母的宗教信仰对您的影响，您参与父母的宗教活动？
- 那些早年的生活环境对以后的生活一直有影响？

社会因素方面
- 谁带大的您？
- 关于小时问妹妹和哥哥（弟弟）相处的记忆
- 您能记得哪些亲戚？最喜欢（不喜欢）谁？
- 同家里人相处的怎么样？跟谁最近？不喜欢谁？
- 跟父母的关系，跟父母一起做哪些事？
- 童年时感到最困难的是什么事？
- 家里如何处罚错误的孩子？
- 12岁之前您生活中发生的最重大事件是什么？
- 童年时的玩伴是谁？同学？
- 您小时候爱动吗？最喜欢做什么？最喜欢的娱乐是什么？
- 动物？宠物？

教育
- 上过幼儿园吗？
- 什么时候开始念书？
- 还记得第一次上学时的情景吗？
- 喜欢学校吗？
- 对小学最清晰的记忆是什么？
- 如何继续念书的？最后的受教育情况
- 你最喜欢的老师是谁？他/她如何影响到您？
学校给您的最美好的记忆是什么？最糟的记忆呢？
您在学校最感到骄傲的成就是什么？
在学校参加的活动或组织？作过学生干部吗？
在学校里最喜欢的课程？课本的内容？
您在学校读过的最重要的书是什么？

大学的经历
学习的情况，
课外活动，
同学和朋友，
看的书，
记日记吗？

爱情与工作
什么时候意识到自己是女孩，与男孩不一样吗？
您第一次约会是多大？跟谁？
挑选男 / 女友的标准是什么？
怎么跟现在的伴侣认识的？喜欢他 / 她什么？他 / 她的背景，性格，
为什么决定要（或不要）孩子？孩子在您生活中的角色？
您希望教给孩子（尤其是女儿）哪些价值观和生活中的教训
婚姻 / 伴侣关系中最好的部分？最不满意的部分？
童年时的梦想是什么？少女时的梦想呢？
这些梦想从哪里来的？
您上高中时想成为什么样的人？
成年以后的梦想是什么？
作过什么工作？
喜欢什么工作？
工作的重要性和意义？
报酬？

生活变迁
您生活中发生过的最大的变化是什么？
您变换过多少次工作 / 生活 / 学习的地方？
还有那些变化对您的生活是很重要的？
第一次离家的经历，为什么，住在那里，经济来源，做什么？感觉怎样？
亲人的去世
疾病，生过的大病，如何影响到您的生活
生孩子，人工流，及其他身体经历
发生过的事故

历史事件
第二部分 反思及与性别相关的问题

内心生活及信仰
➢ 您认为自己是一个什么样的孩子？
➢ 您的童年快乐吗？
➢ 你还是孩子时谁最疼您？
➢ 您在30岁是什么样？40岁？50岁？60岁？
➢ 您40岁以后的生活有什么变化？50岁以后？60岁以后？
➢ 支撑您的生活的最主要的信仰是什么？
➢ 您绝不会妥协的原则是什么？
➢ 您认为生活的意义（目的）是什么
➢ 您认为你的生活是自己说了算吗？
➢ 您生活中最快乐的经历是什么？

主要生活要点
➢ 您一生中最关键（重要）的决定是什么？
➢ 您生活中有重大失误吗？
➢ 您失望不开心时怎么办？做什么？
➢ 您对自己的生活满意吗？
➢ 您生活中最快乐的时候是什么？
➢ 最不快乐的时候呢？
➢ 您生活中有没有什么人对你很关键，改变了你和你的生活？
➢ 你认为自己一生最大的成就是什么？
➢ 您对现在的自己和自己的年龄的感觉是什么？
➢ 你现在最担忧的事是什么？
➢ 您生活中遇到过的最大的困难是什么？
➢ 对您来说什么是最重要的？
➢ 您认为您达到了自己对一生的期望，您的理想有没有改变过？

穿衣及打扮
➢ 您的穿衣风格？喜欢什么样式？哪里买？
➢ 化妆吗？戴首饰吗？
➢ 您都梳过什么样的发型？为什么喜欢某种发型？
对身体满意吗？
您理想中的女性是什么样的？

生为女人
您作为女人的一生中最重要的事件或因素是什么？
如果你不是女人，你的一生会不一样吗？哪些方面会不一样？
有没有女性（如母亲，老师，同事，其他人）在您作为女人的一生中起过重要的作用？
您对自己作为一个女人有什么期望？——如理想的性别形象，您的人生目标及如何达到这些目标。

对未来的展望
您认为自己的一生完满了吗？
您对死亡的看法？
在离开人世之前你最想经历的事是什么？

结束语
您对自己的一生最想说的三句话是什么？
您还有什么要补充的吗？

谢谢！
Appendix III University Behaviour Research Ethics Certificate of Approval

The University of British Columbia
Office of Research Services and Administration
Behavioural Research Ethics Board

**Certificate of Approval**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Investigator</th>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Raoul, V.</td>
<td>Women's Studies &amp; Gender Rel</td>
<td>B06-0790</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Institution(s) Where Research Will Be Carried Out**

Other

**Co-Investigators**

Huang, Xin

**Sponsoring Agencies**

**Title**

The Legacy of the Maoist Gender Ideology in Contemporary China

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approval Date</th>
<th>Term (Years)</th>
<th>Documents Included in This Approval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Certification**

The application for ethical review of the above-named project has been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Approved on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board by one of the following:

Dr. Peter Suedfeld, Chair,
Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair
Dr. Arminee Kazanjian, Associate Chair
Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Associate Chair

This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the experimental procedures.