The Legacy of the Maoist Gender Project in Contemporary China

A feminist research on women's oral life narratives

Xin Huang
University of British Columbia
September 22, 2010

Painting by Shitou, “A Photo with Mother”, 1997
The Mao Era (1949-1978)

Funü 妇女 (women)
The Post-Mao Era (1978--Present)

Nüxing 女性 (female sex/gender)
Research questions

The Maoist gender legacy in China today

• Relevance
• Individual experience
• Political significance

Painting by Shitou, “A Photo with Mother”, 1997
Theoretical Framework

• “Chinese” conceptualizations of gender
  • A hybrid product of Chinese-Western interaction

• Judith Butler: gender performativity
  • Gender as constituted in and through discourse
  • Zone of uninhabitability
  • Discursive formulation and subversion of gender

Painting by Shitou, “A Photo with Mother”, 1997
Theoretical Framework

• Gender as “project”
  • Gender as a consciously designed and performed “project”
  • Emphasizing women’s active role as agent

• Feminist Narrative Studies
  • Gender and self-narration
  • Feminist criticism of traditional narrative forms
  • “Women-centred and women-defined discourse”

Painting by Shitou, “A Photo with Mother”, 1997
Research Methodology

- “Women-centred and women-defined discourse” and alternative narrative strategies
  - Dialect and hybrid language
  - “Telling and retelling” interview method
  - Visual records

Painting by Shitou, “A Photo with Mother”, 1997
Research Data

• Snowballing recruitment
• Two to three hour interview
• Fifteen women’s life stories
• In-depth analysis of four women’s life stories

*Photo release was obtained

Painting by Shitou, “A Photo with Mother”, 1997
Linyi: The Gender Project

• Growing up between *jiating*funü (*housewife*) grandmother and Maoist *funü* mother

• Rejection of the “proletarian” femininity

• From *funü* to *nüxing*: negotiation and revision
  – Taming the Maoist *funü*
  – Incorporating the *funü*
Linyi: The Narrative

- First telling: Chinese master-script of “speaking bitterness”
  - Prioritizing class over gender
  - De-gendered representation

- Retelling and “go beyond the ending”
  - A more complex and conflicting self
  - Narrative agency
Dongqun: The Gender Project

- PLA (People’s Liberation Army) Sneakers: a story of shame
- Clothes: a story of the desire to become a nüxing
- Hair: a story of resistance against exclusion
- Daughter: a story of redemption
Dongqun: The Narrative

• Dialect and narrative agency
  – Dialect and symbolic sanctuary
  – The articulation of “private”, “deviant” or “trivial” desires
  – The fusion of different language resources
  – A self constructed beyond a single linguistic prescription
Dongqun: The Narrative

- “Aimei” (loving beauty)
  - The publicly sanctioned pursuit of beauty and personal liberation in the post-Mao era
  - Signifying a post-Mao nüxing identity

- “Laogong” (husband)
  - Situates her marriage in a modern urban nuclear family context

A self constructed beyond a single linguistic prescription
Shitou (石头)
The Gender Project

Interpreting Between the Sayable and the Seeable
Weapon Series, 1997
Re-imagining the Female Body
Together Series, 2001

Female Bonding and Self-discovery

Girlfriend Series, 1997
Old Photo Series, 1997
Recovering “Her-story”
Calendar Series, 2000
Signifying “Chinese” Lesbian
Shitou (石头): The Narrative

- Resisting the hegemony of heterosexual language
  - Silences, hesitations, and narrative negotiation
  - Self-conscious linguistic exercises
  - Multi-lingual and multi-cultural resources
  - The appropriation of tongzhi (comrade)
The Politics of “Women”

“Women” as a state category in the Mao era
• Funü 妇女, a politicized revolutionary subject

“Women” within a heterosexist female/male binary in pre- and post-Mao eras
• Nüxing 女性, a sexualized modernist subject

“Women” as a vernacular social category
• Nü de 女的, female
Shitou (石头): The Narrative

- The transcultural construction of post-Mao Chinese lesbian subjectivities
  - *Gay and lesbian* (in English)
  - *Tongzhi* 同志 (people who share a common will or goal, comrade)
    - *Nü tongzhi* 女同志 (female comrade)
    - *Nantongzhi* 男同志 (male comrade)
  - *Lala* 拉拉 (lesbian)

The appropriation of *tongzhi* (comrade)
Amy: The Gender Project

- Maoist *funü* mother and her foil character, the *Jiatingfunü* grandmother
- Resisting masculinist Maoist authoritarianism: the father
- Rite of passage: study in the UK
- The construction of a cosmopolitan *nüxing*
- Searching for and finding limits of the promise of the *nüxing* subject

Painting by Shitou, “A Photo with Mother”, 1997
Amy: The Narrative

• Yuppie Mandarin: a cosmopolitan Mandarin language style with Mao and post-Mao eras political vocabulary
• English terms: performing, inventing and (re)fashioning a hybrid cosmopolitan gender identity
• “Hybrid Chinese”: alternative “language of gender”

Painting by Shitou, “A Photo with Mother”, 1997
Conclusion

• The Maoist gender project and its legacy

• Gender as project, situated subversion, and diverse strategies

• Feminist research and alternative story-telling

Painting by Shitou, “A Photo with Mother”, 1997