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II. Young activists, new movements: Contemporary Chinese queer feminism and transnational genealogies

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In 2012, in response to victim-blaming statements by the Shanghai Subway System online, two young feminists appeared in Shanghai's subway, wearing headscarves, short skirts, and metal bras, carrying signs saying "I can be flirtatious, you can't harass," as a resistance to social control of women's bodies (Phillips, 2012). This small performance inspired a storm of national media coverage and public discussion, giving unprecedented public visibility to the issues of women's sexual expression and sexual assault. Being part of a broader milieu of young Chinese feminists protesting through various forms of public performance arts in the past two years, the Shanghai Subway protesters, in particular, were queer feminist activists with years of involvement in lesbian communities.

As young, diasporic feminist activist-scholars involved in queer feminist movements across China, Taiwan, and New York City, we reflect on the emergent "new" queer feminism in China today, with its amorphous cohesion and dramatic impact, as highlighted by the subway protest. Drawing on transnational feminism, we are part of this latest "new" response to growing global inequalities and

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neo-colonial feminist discourses that calls for a critical re-engagement with global politics (Grewal & Kaplan, 2001). However, as activists who center our political involvement in Asia, “transnationalism” is not only a vision, but an already existing state, as we see our movements converge under international pressure coming from both radical and neoliberal forces. Though exhilarated by this moment of possibility in Chinese feminism, we argue that our practices as young feminists and the “newness” of the movement we identify with must be situated and examined in the ambivalent genealogy of feminism in the Chinese Communist past, the hegemonic Western feminist discourse, and transnational politics.

We situate our discussion in the context of transnational feminism not only because we believe this partially constitutes the new Chinese feminist movement, but also due to our own positionality as diasporic scholar-activists constantly shifting among multiple cultural references. Along with Swarr and Nagar (2010), we understand transnational feminism as a commitment to address the socio-political inequalities accumulated and accelerated in the process of globalization and a post-colonial critique of the Western dominating power of knowledge production as well. In the following paragraphs, we will present our ideas through the triangular dialogs among the three authors on the history, present formation, and the debate of transnationalism in the Chinese feminist and queer movements.

The ghosts of the Chinese feminist past

Ma: The Chinese “past” is an ambiguous background against which our current feminist endeavor is understood and conceived, where the forgotten history of women in the imperial era, state-sponsored socialist feminism, and the Western notions of women’s rights are present to us at the same time. After 1949, China declared gender equality to be a fundamental state policy. The campaigns promoting “radical sameness” between men and women created exemplary “iron girls” across the country (see Evans, 1997; Jin, Manning, & Chu, 2006). After the Open Door Policy brought profound change since the 1980s, a backlash followed that reinstated “Chinese tradition,” “femininity,” and “natural difference.” The appearance of gender sameness achieved during the Cultural Revolution quickly vanished. Although gender equality and the emancipation of women still has a place in the ideological discourse of the government, many people find it necessary to reinstate a traditional “femininity,” and even the official discourse starts to contradict itself in this fissure. For instance, the All-China Women’s Federation labels unmarried women over twenty-seven years old as “left-over women” and pressures them to marry (see Fincher, 2012). It fosters a demonized imagination of feminism; even the terms “women’s issue” or “equality” itself may arouse the unpleasant connection with the history of Cultural Revolution for some people.

Huang: Today’s feminist activists in China do not locate themselves in relation to this past, since they feel very ambivalent about this state-sponsored “tradition.” Communist and socialist feminism led to emancipation in some aspects of public

life, but also ignored many others and enabled simultaneous oppression, especially in the domestic sphere. Since the beginning of China's experience of modernization in the early 20th century, we find that men have always been in charge of women's liberation in China. Liberation was always handed to women in the name of a greater cause, whether that is modernity, socialism, or nationalism.

Ma: Indeed, there is also a reluctance to examine the Communist era due to an eagerness to break away from it, which unfortunately leads to the hesitant attention of our contemporary feminist studies on some interesting feminist trends. One example is the call for a new imagination of domestic life in the leftist literature in the 1950s and 1960s. Another one is the Soviet Union's influence on China's official promotion of women's equality that permeated through Chinese political and social life. My grandmother always fondly recalls her fashionable "Russian dress" that she owned in the 1950s, when the image of the "liberated" Soviet women had a huge impact on Chinese people's conception of "new" women in the "new China." (see Zang, 2010). In a sense, this influence can be seen as a preceding wave of transnational feminism, only that it is not from a "capitalist West," but a "communist East."

The desirability of transnationalism

Liu: This reconceptualization of feminist history indicates that transnationalism is not new to China, but neglected by a hegemonic capitalist perspective. Transnational feminism in the US often describes its scope from the post-1990 capitalist globalization, while Soviet internationalism was ignored. Interestingly, one of the demands of transnational feminism is precisely for non-Western feminists to *re-imagine* a feminist lineage in their own locality. But practice of localization is always already part of transnational politics that has a specific interpretation of history and national boundaries. Therefore, the question of whether transnational feminism is "necessary" or "desirable" for Chinese feminism, as if it is purely external to our political practice and imagination, is quite unfitting.

Huang: For Chinese activists, globalization appears as a given, and transnationalism is an unavoidable reality. It is indigenization and originality that are challenging to achieve. You could interpret Chinese urban youth's embrace of "Western" ideas as one manifestation of ongoing colonialism, but I think reality is more complicated. Feminists with a post-colonial awareness might be concerned with power inequalities within transnational flows, while Chinese queer and feminist activists approach this issue more strategically. They investigate a new theory's practical outcome and feasibility in China.

Liu: It seems that "transnationalism" is already a Western construction even though it demands to break away from Western hegemony. As migrants in the U.S. we all find ourselves inevitably tied to the Western feminist legacy, and operating and

struggling with its muddy boundaries of geopolitics. However, while enacting it to movements at home, the question of authenticity usually emerges. For instance, when I was involved in queer activism in Taiwan, local activists challenged me for not knowing Taiwan enough and drawing too much from my experiences in the U.S. This critique is not merely personal, but part of the local effort against the uncritical enthusiasm of some LGBT groups toward “internationalization,” which is embedded in the neoliberal corporate regime that superficially showcases Taiwan’s modernity instead of deepening the work in local grassroots movements (see Wang, 2001).

Huang: I always find local activists in China, on the contrary, very enthusiastic about learning theories and practices from the U.S. When involved in queer activism in China, I often ended up being resistant to the introduction of Western ideas. Ironically, I, the diasporic returnee, also cannot claim this prerogative to determine that what local activists want is unsuitable. The assumption of power here is an overestimation of my own knowledge. Extending Sedgwick’s (2003) idea of paranoia reading in queer theory, we can also see the post-colonial paranoia that often arises out of our own positionalities as marginalized diasporic subjects. The issue at hand isn’t just the age-old split between political action and academic paralysis. Both activism and academia can be constructive, and what we manage to piece together from the tainted genealogies of Chinese socialism and Western feminism is a truly reparative project.

Ma: It seems to me that the emerging feminist activism in China in recent years is looking for a new starting point and does not want to be associated with the official narrative of women’s emancipation of the Chinese state any more. In my observation, the “newness” these activists claim is related more to their being conscious of their locality, than a new knowledge learned from the Western feminism; they claim to be new, not because of an ideological narrative of a temporal relation to any past, but because they are a new force to engage in the specific problems of gendered discrimination such as domestic violence (see Wang, 2014).

“Young” as a form of privileged historicity

Liu: Here we attempt to complicate the “newness” that current Chinese feminist movements claim. But the linguistic choice between the “new” and the “young” also has geopolitical meanings: whereas, the “new” is the emphasis in contemporary Chinese feminism, “young” is the focus of reflection for this special issue of *Feminism & Psychology*, directed at English speakers. “Newness” attempts to break away from a past already deemed to be “dead,” marking the Chinese communist history as discontinuous and irrelevant. While the concept “young” is employed to rejuvenate the Western feminist movement that is regarded as too “old” to be moving forward or unnecessary by the contemporary anti-feminist culture.

Ma: It is also noteworthy that the feminist activists we mentioned earlier are all relatively young women and that they are aware of the generational gap that helps locate them in Chinese society. “New” is emphasized over “young” in their self-narrative because the implication of generational discontent of “youth” is presumed. It is precisely within this young generation that a call for “newness” may have its appeal, since the emphasis of newness declares the break away from the official feminist discourse, considered “dead,” “inefficient,” “untimely,” and mobilizes potential radicalism within the generation.

Huang: Chinese feminism doesn’t enjoy the privilege of historical continuity, but this can also be a blessing, in that social rupture may also enable real transformation. To unearth and reclaim a past can also incarcerate and limit our movement. Thus, Chinese activists today are sandwiched between two not-so-ideal lineages: the Chinese past and the Western present. Chinese feminism is over-burdened by its history of collision with various grand discourses such as Communism and nationalism. But the under-documented lesbian past is not even ready to be claimed yet. Queer activism in the West emerged in response to a long history of oppression, and without that counterpart lineage of queer oppression in China, we have to draw largely from the West but also to be creative. So far, activism involves a lot of borrowing from here and there, but what looks like mere copying might turn out as experimental ground for something new.

Chinese queer feminism as a new political configuration

Despite the ambivalent relationship to the Chinese socialist past and Western theory today, there is a distinctively new development of Chinese queer feminism. In December 2012, a group of anonymous queer feminists engaged in fierce online debates with gay male activists, drawing heavily from queer theory to challenge what was seen as the latter’s conservative biological essentialist views on sexuality and the rampant sexism that excluded queer women activists from LGBT political spaces and silenced feminist agendas. This incident demonstrates the radically divergent politics that can emerge from transnational borrowings: while the gay male activists relied on the authority of Western scientific research to advance their own conservative agenda, the queer feminists drew from critical queer theory to radicalize the movement. Transnational flows have no definitive trajectory, and supposedly Western ideas can acquire new and conflicting meanings in the Chinese context.

Though the online debate over essentialism and sexism subsided after a few months, queer women activists in China grew tremendously through this debate as they unprecedentedly, collectively articulated a new political stance. Drawing from the lessons of intersectionality, identity politics, and homonormativity from American feminism and LGBT movements, queer women activists via transnational exchange, took the movement to an awareness breakthrough in the conservative, gay male dominated political scene. They emphasized the need to build the movement beyond a biological essentialist agenda on sexual identity and advocated for the

fluidity of sexual and gender categories, bridging alliances with the existing feminist activism on the ground. This solidarity between straight feminists and lesbian activists was also enabled by intentional strategies and historical contingencies we witness in the West. Vaguely mapped, while many straight feminists currently focus on street politics, local appeal, and media promotion of women's rights, many queer women activists strive more to radicalize the movement and to constantly reflect upon the still-becoming identity politics. If we observe these different emphases, we believe that the tension among multiple focuses should be always preserved, encouraged, and vitalized. The different temporality that characterizes queer and feminist movements in China also means that it is a new political configuration, emerging out of intertwining global and local currents, becoming an unpredictable force of its own. The "newness" of this milieu should not be immediately read as an entry of Western thoughts into a new territory, but instead, a new political synthesis embedded in simultaneous transnational genealogies, past and present.

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Author Biographies

Wen Liu is a PhD candidate in Critical Social Personality Psychology at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. She draws on queer theory, diaspora studies, and critical psychology in her academic research. She is a scholar-activist in the LGBT studies and the co-director of the Institute for Tongzhi Studies, a NYC-based organization that facilitates the transnational queer dialogues among Taiwan, China, and the Chinese diaspora in the U.S. She is currently teaching at Sarah Lawrence College.

Ana Huang is a PhD student in Cultural Anthropology at Duke University. Her current research focuses on Chinese queer women's activism and the politics of affect and temporality. Her earlier research explored masculine and feminine gender roles within Chinese lesbian culture. Ana has been a key figure in the growing queer movement in China. She served on the organizing committee of the Chinese Lala Alliance from 2008 to 2012 and serves on the editorial board of Queer Lala Times, an online publication.

Jingchao Ma is a current doctoral student in Philosophy at Villanova University. She is interested in forming a feminist understanding of subjectivity, social power, and bodily experience, and thereby creating new ways of imagining political futures. Her research draws from various resources, including phenomenology, existentialism, post-structuralism, and psychoanalysis. Besides her academic work, she has participated in a feminist theater work in her college in Shanghai, and currently serves as a board member of Chinese Lala Alliance.