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CHINESE FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY: PHILOSOPHIZING CHINESE FEMINISM IN TRANSCULTURAL CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT: *This paper aims to develop a Chinese feminist philosophy while positioning a transcultural approach as an alternative to transnational and national feminism. It focuses on Chinese feminist scholarship from the mid-1990s to the present. My main argument is that the intellectual development of Chinese feminist scholarship in the past three decades has been significantly influenced by U.S.-centric global feminism and international feminism, while at the same time being drawn from an existing history of feminism in China and reflections on the complicated relationship between global influences and local Chinese conditions. Transcultural feminism is something I see emerging out of the work of Chinese feminists over the past three decades. I intend transcultural feminism as a framework for understanding what Chinese feminism is, as well as what (in my view) it should be. I believe the transcultural approach not only helps us understand the intellectual pathways of Chinese feminism but also is useful for decentering the U.S.-centric internationalization of feminism. For this reason, this paper can contribute to a constructive and inclusive understanding of feminisms in other cultures as well.*

Keywords: *Chinese feminism, Chinese feminist philosophy, comparative Chinese feminist philosophy, internationalization of feminism, transcultural feminism, transcultural feminist solidarity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Scholarship about Chinese feminism and gender issues in China has gained more visibility in recent years, but the idea of "Chinese feminist philosophy" has yet to be explicitly conceived. To help imagine a "Chinese feminist philosophy," this paper provides a philosophical reflection on the existing scholarship about what Chinese feminism is (descriptive) and what it should be (normative). Feminism can be generally understood as a range of socio-political movements and ideologies that aim to define and establish gender equality and the challenges to women's oppression. Feminists

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have both identified unacknowledged kinds of oppression and have challenged them both intellectually and politically. Following the socialist tradition, women-centered issues are often referred to as "women's work" or "women's problems" in China. The term "feminism" is not commonly used because it suggests an explicit demand for rights (therefore a "Western" idea), which is transgressive in the specific political context; the literal translation of "feminism" in Chinese is "principles of women's rights" (女權主義). Feminism carries importance in Chinese history because women are main stakeholders of many state policies and social changes (e.g., revisions of marriage laws, family planning, and state welfare reforms). Ironically, women's voices are often underheard and their agency is often overlooked even though they are stakeholders of the matters.

The goal of my scholarship is to develop a Chinese feminist philosophy that follows a transcultural approach. This reflects aspects of feminism that have emerged in China in the past three decades. Indigenous Chinese feminist theories, practices, and textual traditions are moving toward understanding specifically Chinese concerns using methods that are not originally Chinese while trying to remain distinctively Chinese. What "Chinese" means culturally and politically is contentious and complicated, but it makes sense to set it against a background of transculturalism when we examine feminism. It is because gender issues and women's oppression can be treated as a universal theme that is expressed in various forms in different cultures and countries. A transcultural version of Chinese feminism means that it constantly negotiates between indigenous Chinese feminism and internationalized feminism while simultaneously trying to be faithful to its Chinese values and traditions and taking part in international society. In a sense, it reflects the same dilemma or struggle that China has gone through in the past several decades in its seeking modernity—it is a process of retaining strong Chinese nationalism while it sorts out (beneficial and detrimental) international interactions, conflicts, and contentions. The distinctive contribution of my paper is to present a specifically Chinese feminist philosophy as well as to provide a transcultural approach and framework that is fruitful for thinking about feminisms in other cultures.

This paper examines the Chinese feminist scholarship generated from the mid-1990s to the present. To the question "Is there such a thing as 'Chinese feminist philosophy'?" I refer to the intellectual development of Chinese feminism and critically assess feminist attempts to synthesize, theorize, and philosophize themes of Chinese feminist scholarship. I argue that the intellectual development of Chinese feminist scholarship in the past three decades, which includes scholars outside of China writing about Chinese feminism, has been significantly influenced by U.S.-centric global feminism, international feminism, and transnational feminism. In addition, I argue that Chinese feminist scholarship has also evolved from the history of Chinese feminism and reflections on the complicated relationship between global influences and local Chinese feminism. I understand Chinese feminist philosophy as a critical study of Chinese feminist intellectual activity and scholarly research on Chinese women's existence. While focusing specifically on feminist intellectual activity, I offer a broader social and historical perspective for thinking philosophically about feminist politics,

feminist social movements, and often the implicit feminist resistance to gender domination, which I take to be important and revealing contexts of intellectual activity. Part of my argument is developed with references to the past transnational and transcultural processes that contribute to Chinese thinking about gender, patriarchy, family, and equality.

There are four sections in the main text: In Section 2, I present an overview of Chinese feminist scholarship, in the discipline of women's studies and the discipline of philosophy respectively, after providing a brief history of Chinese feminism. In Section 3, I intend to propose an idea of "Chinese feminist philosophy" by making a connection between Chinese feminism and comparative Chinese feminist philosophy. In Section 4, I talk about what the transcultural approach is, and I also make connections between transnational feminism and transcultural feminism to demonstrate why the latter is a preferable approach. Proposing the transcultural approach sets up both a descriptive methodology and a normative commitment for connecting the seven aspects of Chinese feminism laid out in Section 2 and summarized in Section 3. The seven aspects overall aim to show that my transcultural approach is an effective and preferable way to interpret and conceive of Chinese feminism. In Section 5, I propose an idea of "Chinese feminist philosophy" in transcultural contexts and explain how a transcultural approach can be used to delineate Chinese feminist philosophy. A transcultural understanding of Chinese feminist philosophy bears on the interconnections of the seven aspects and the unity of the paper because transcultural thinking suggests a kind of synthesis that could embrace trends that develop separately or even through antagonism to each other.

2. CHINESE FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP

In taking up the question of Chinese feminism today, I trace Chinese feminist struggles and efforts as well as their contributions and constraints. Chinese feminism is a convergence of different and sometimes conflicting ideas and ideologies. It has a unique history since its birth in the late 19th century (e.g., the influence of arguably oppressive Chinese traditions such as Confucianism, as well as women's liberation in the socialist revolution guided by Marxist egalitarianism). At the same time, contemporary Chinese feminism was to a large extent influenced by the arrival of Western feminist theories and practices in the 1990s (e.g., democratic ideas of women's rights and the concept of gender).

2.1 A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHINESE FEMINISM

Feminism in China has a history that is over a century long, so a brief history of Chinese feminism before the 1990s is needed to understand the question of "Chinese feminism" today. The early history of Chinese feminism shows that Chinese feminism is transcultural at its birth. At the turn of the twentieth century, some male intellectuals tried to use ideas of democracy and science to solve China's problems. A female intellectual He-Yin Zhen criticized the progressive male intellectuals' idea of women's liberation as only serving the interests of men. Reading He-Yin's work, historians

reconsider "the rise of Chinese feminism" in the "inescapable logic" and universal opposition of West and East: "Neither position [male intellectuals and He-Yin] can neatly be mapped onto any preconceived ideas of what Chinese feminism was or should have been in opposition to the fiction of a totalized Western feminism" (Liu, Karl, and Ko 2013, 8).

Zheng Wang addresses women in the Chinese Enlightenment and how the May Fourth era (starting on May 4, 1919) was engendered by illustrating the relationships "between the emergence of New Culturalists as a social force and the new subject positions for women created" and "between modernity and women's liberation in China" in the May Fourth period (Wang 1999, 6). Through doing so, Wang "attempts to demonstrate not only the discursive construction of 'new women' in the May Fourth era, but also a gendered process of the formation of May Fourth men's discursive power" (Wang 1999, 6-7). In questioning the binary West/China logic and exploring the theme of "modern women" who allegedly possess new subjectivities, Tani E. Barlow situates her research on Chinese feminism in the context of "colonial modernity," which she refers to a term used to "rethink the conditions and features of enlightened thought in Chinese intellectual circles after the monarchy" (Barlow 2004, 87). She believes that colonial modernity is the global condition for exploring the idea of "modern women" in pre-revolutionary China because "feminism, colonialism, and globalization are linked" (Barlow 2004, 11). Similarly, Lingzhen Wang brings attention to "the dynamic, transnational nature of gender and feminist research in Chinese studies" and interrogates "the totalizing perspectives on Chinese gender studies that typically treat China only in binary opposition to the West" (Wang 2013a, 1).

Equality between men and women was an integral goal of the Chinese Revolution, which was reflected in transformative policies and programs such as passing the 1950 *Marriage Law* that granted women the freedom to divorce and remarry, women's literacy, equal pay for equal work, and women's political participation. The impact of the Chinese Revolution on the division of labor both at home and at work also invited reflections about special women's roles with the infusion of traditional Confucian values as well as what counts as progress with feminist work. There was not much theoretical work related to women's issues in post-revolutionary China (1949-1978), so what is presented in feminist scholarship is mainly about the role feminism played in the Chinese Revolution and the subsequent evolution of policies and practices in post-1978 China. It is commonly accepted by scholars who study Chinese feminism that Chinese feminists' concerns are fundamentally with the relationship between women and the state. The relationship between Chinese feminism and the state can be addressed within a larger context of global capitalism. Due to the complexity of Chinese socialism, I focus on China's state feminism and the influence of China's socialist legacies (the liberation of women) on Chinese feminism. Zheng Wang uses the term "state feminism" to refer to a "paradoxical image of a state patriarch championing women's liberation" conceptually, when "equality between men and women" was endorsed ideologically but the state power was primarily possessed politically by men (Wang 2017, 7). Wang's research shows how women's activism in the 1950s within the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), which is a state-run

mass organization that does not have executive power, had to take place under "a politics of concealment": "Pursuing effective results in promoting women's interests within a male-dominated state-system, therefore, required not only *disguising* feminists' real agenda but also *concealing* the actual agents who were actively and discreetly maneuvering behind the scenes" (Wang 2017, 50; emphasis in original).

The Marxist theory of women's problems established in the Revolution years and in socialist China was challenged by some scholars in the 1980s. They examine how historical and sociopolitical contexts shape the rise and development of women's studies as well as the resulting characteristics and knowledge production in women's studies, in particular in a dynamic interplay of Chinese Marxism and feminism. They initiated a "Chinese women's studies movement" to establish a discipline of women's studies during economic reforms in the early 1980s. Xiaojiang Li, a pioneer and active member of this movement, questioned the Marxist theory of women's liberation. She particularly challenged the theoretical assumption that gender issues can be addressed by ending class struggles: "Women's liberation not only arose as a result of women's consciousness but relied also on awaking the consciousness of all humanity" (Li 2013 [1983], 28). The history and legacy of feminism from pre-revolutionary and revolutionary China (namely from the turn of the twentieth century to 1949) and from the "new women's studies movement" in the 1980s produced consequential changes that led to significant progressive challenges for many Chinese women in the late twentieth century.

2.2 CHINESE FEMINIST THEORIES AND PRAXES: 1990 ONWARD

My summary of Chinese feminist scholarship before the 1990s puts Chinese feminism in a transnational analytical context and provides a background for thinking about the rise of current Chinese feminist theories and practices. The theoretical development of Chinese feminist scholarship since the early 1990s can be showcased in the scholars' debates about the concept of gender. The focus on the "gender" trouble is found in the dissemination of the concept of gender in China as well as its impact on the theoretical development of Chinese feminist scholarship and women's studies as a discipline in Chinese academia. The concept of gender was not employed by scholars working earlier on women's issues in China but was introduced by a group of scholars from the United States (U.S.) in the early 1990s during preparations for the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women 1995 ('FWCW 1995' for short). The Chinese Society of Women's Studies, which was constituted by scholars who were interested in women's studies in the United States, was the key organization for the introduction of gender theory into China.

The entry of the concept of gender into China was comparatively smooth. "Gender" soon became a dominant theoretical tool and a category of analysis used by feminist scholars. The introduction of "gender" to Chinese academia enlarged feminist work beyond a biological male/female binary to a broader inquiry into relationships of social power between the genders. It signified a discursive shift from "women-men" equality to "gender" equality. "Gender training," which refers to using the gender concept to

educate government and institutional leaders and officials about gender issues, became "an innovative form of activism in their engagement with the existing political system and social institutions" (Wang and Zhang 2010, 51). However, a small group of feminist scholars questioned the use of the concept of gender in Chinese feminist scholarship. This they called China's "gender" trouble. They claim that while the introduction of "gender" advances Chinese feminist scholarship, it also interrupted the autonomous development of Chinese women's studies. The "troubling" side of the dissemination of gender in China lies partly in the fact that "the obtrusive dissemination of [the idea of] gender by outside forces was suspected of reflecting colonial or neocolonial relations in theory building" (Spakowski 2018, 567).

Nevertheless, the influence of Western feminism, in particular the concept of gender, on Chinese feminism was significant. "Gender mainstreaming", which means channeling gender consciousness into the mainstream of policymaking, was advocated by Chinese women's studies scholars, the state-run All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) officials, as well as those who worked for Chinese feminist NGOs. The nationwide campaign to implement the documents signed at the FWCW 1995 "helped create legitimacy for the Chinese women's movement", but "in terms of 'connecting with the international track,' the ACWF had to work out how to combine the term 'gender' with traditional Marxist women's theory and how to adapt to the concept of NGO in place of their old organisational structure" (Min 2017, 73). Chinese feminist NGO praxes after the FWCW 1995 started with *jie-gui* (接軌literally "connecting tracks" in Chinese), when China tried to reestablish a relationship with the international society in the early 1990s. That is also when the national focus shifted from 1980s modernization to 1990s globalization. Efforts were made to connect "local" Chinese feminism with "international" feminism and the latter is represented by U.S. feminism and arguably packaged by a United Nations agenda. The global influences in praxes were mainly expressed in "gender and development" projects and the emergence of a largely internationally funded sector of feminist NGOs. Chinese feminist NGO praxes can be evaluated partly by the effectiveness of "gender and development" projects in China. These projects were executed by feminist NGOs and Chinese state feminism to promote "gender mainstreaming" that made "gender" the mainstream category of analysis.

Some scholars have emphasized the positive achievements of Chinese feminism under international influence, claiming that the FWCW 1995 is "a historic turning point for the women's movement in China" and a starting point for Chinese feminist NGO practices (Wang 1996, 192). Others, however, express concerns about the effectiveness of feminist NGO practices in China. For example, Tamara Jacka criticizes the discourse of "participatory development" in China, which was a program to address the disadvantage of rural people. She argues that the "participatory development" discourse fails to develop effective strategies for overcoming gender injustice that rural women suffer. The failure of the "participatory development" discourse results from "a shift in focus away from tackling institutionalized gender inequalities toward participation and empowerment for women and the poor within local communities" (Jacka 2013,1003). Some scholars are also concerned that funding for Chinese feminist

NGOs from the West not only provides money but also in a certain way leads the direction of projects in promoting liberal values like rights and freedom. For instance, Lu Zhang uses the case of anti-domestic NGOs to exemplify "the almost excessive eagerness of the developed nations to teach Chinese women NGOs and activists about their domestic violence management skills, channeled through funding initiatives, implies domestic violence policy as a symbolic difference that distinguishes the 'advanced' model of development from the 'backward' model" (Zhang 2009, 80). Some feminists charge NGOs supported by foreign funds as "a new form of colonialism because they create dependence on nonelected overseas funders and their locally appointed officials, undermining the development of social programs administered by elected officials accountable to local people" (Jaggar 2001, 309). Seemingly universal liberal ideas (such as the slogan "women's rights as human rights" or women's empowerment and development) are executed through NGO projects (such as anti-domestic violence, participatory development, and microcredit programs) that only empower individual women or groups of women without leading to systemic changes that challenge structural gender inequality. It should be noted that Chinese feminist scholars also got involved in feminist NGO projects because of the financial incentives in the entrepreneurial and commercialization atmosphere in mid-1990s China, which they call "doing projects" (做項目*zuo-xiang-mu*). The "gender and development" approach and agendas of NGOs were under scrutiny after the initial excitement and enthusiasm over "gender and development" in the 1990s wore off.

In post-2000 China, feminism moved away from the NGO path that characterizes the development of feminism during the 1980s and 1990s, and Chinese feminism started to demonstrate a different kind of diversity. The diversity of Chinese feminism is shown in terms of position in the governmental system, minority existence (ethnicity and identity difference), and geographic difference. Chinese feminists are positioned differently in relation to the state: inside the state system (體制內*ti-zhi-nei*; on government payroll such as working in academia and the women's federation) or outside the system (體制外*ti-zhi-wai*; informal practices/performance demonstrations). This can be seen in the empirical study of gender inequality in social studies that offers a gender analysis of Chinese social inequality, one of which situates "gender inequality in the larger context of social disparity in Chinese society and conceptualize it as a ramification of social inequality" (Wang 2016, 9). Noticeably in post-2000 China, some preliminary academic research is done on feminist activism outside of academia, in the "outer system" (outside the official political system), and in the LGBTQIA+ community. This kind of feminist activism is demonstrated through actions that contest both the objectification of women's bodies in the market economy and the traditional feminine roles that the state or the society promotes, which resonates with the "Me Too" movement globally.

Scholarship on feminism of ethnic minorities (non-Han Chinese, such as the Bai and the Dai, which consists of less than 9% of the Chinese population) goes beyond Han patriarchy and provides multiethnic studies of women and gender. For instance, Shanshan Du tries to "bridge the gap between understanding the majority Han and

ethnic minorities in regard to women and gender in contemporary Chinese societies" (Du 2011, 1-2). She claims that "compared to those of the Han, the gender norms of many ethnic minorities tend to associate women with higher value and status" (Du 2011, 13). Some scholars explore queer identity and activism in the ideological negotiations between socialism and neoliberalism. Focusing on gay identity and activism in China, Hongwei Bao acknowledges that books on feminism "had a profound impact on how people understand sex and sexuality in China" (Bao 2018, 80). There are also geographic differences in Chinese-speaking regions such as Hong Kong and Taiwan. Some scholars examine the complexity of different academic feminisms in various Chinese-speaking areas (such as feminist scholarship across the Taiwan Strait) amidst political contentions and controversies over "cultural Chinese" and "political Chinese". For example, Ya-Chen Chen addresses the political and cultural tensions and connections between these feminisms and claims that "what is Chinese feminism" is a question that "can be endlessly explored but never conclusively, definitively answered" (Chen 2011, 2).

2.3 COMPARATIVE CHINESE FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

While the relationship between local Chinese feminism and global feminism is in flux, another body/resource of feminist work about Chinese feminism adds more complexity to the current configuration of Chinese feminism. Starting from the 2000s, scholars in comparative philosophy (residing mainly outside the Chinese academia, noticeably in the U.S., Austria, and Singapore) cast their gaze upon the relationship between Chinese philosophy (traditions) and feminism. Contemporary feminist discussions of Chinese traditional values can be found mainly in feminist philosophical interpretations of Chinese classical texts in Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, among others.

The New Culture Movement in the early part of the twentieth century departed from Confucianism, and a series of social, cultural, and political movements afterward further dismantled Confucian traditions. However, in the early 2000s, responding to more widely discussed gender issues, the question of Chinese women in Confucian traditions became the question of how Confucian traditions might position themselves in the current feminist discourse. The main topics pursued by feminist scholars on Confucianism can be traced in feminist scholarship and literature about Confucian philosophy. Feminist scholarship on Confucianism addresses the "gender complex" that Chenyang Li observes, who finds out that there is little philosophical Confucian scholarship on the subject of women. Li calls this "psychological impasse the Confucian 'gender complex'," and urges Confucian scholars to address feminist concerns, and for Confucianism to "overcome this 'gender complex'" to come to terms with feminism (Li 2000, 187). Although scholars in general agree that Confucianism is oppressive to women, some of them seek to prove that Confucianism is compatible with feminism. For example, Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee (2006) claims that Confucianism is also a feminist theory or a feminist alternative, and she developed hybrid "Confucian feminism" to seek reconciliation between feminism and Confucianism.

Scholars who do comparative studies of Chinese philosophy agree that Confucianism has been oppressive to women in its later stages when Confucianism overtly claims that women are inferior. Sandra A. Wawrytko states, “The rise of Confucianism as an ideology, State Confucianism, in the Han, reoriented the original concept of channeling natural emotions in the direction of control (having absorbed the authoritarian stance of the defeated Qin). Women were perceived as the embodiment of that which needed to be controlled.” (Wawrytko 2000, 188) Paul R. Goldin shares a similar sentiment and argues that one of the reasons “why Confucianism is frequently accused of sexism has to do with *later* manifestations of sexism and misogyny perpetrated in the name of the tradition. It is in imperial times that we see the proliferation of those sanctimonious manuals which outline ‘appropriate’ behavior for women” (Goldin 2000,149; emphasis in original). Robin R. Wang explores the ramification of Dong Zhongshu’s solidification and politicization of Confucian teaching, especially the *yin-yang* idea, to trace the conception of women’s inferiority in Confucianism: “Dong’s politicization of Confucian ethical teaching comes at a high price: original Confucianism loses its deep orientation to *ren* (仁) and originates an ideological mechanism of social control. This transformation was justified and conceptualized through Dong’s interpretation of *yin* and *yang* theory.” (Wang 2005, 218)

Scholars also try to highlight women’s status positively in Chinese history. For instance, Lisa Raphals (2000) argues that historical narratives from the *Warring States* and *Han* periods represent women possessing the same capacities as men. In addition, she presents the arguments in the ancient texts by women, arguing that the “corpus of ethical and political arguments specially attributed to women in *Warring States* and *Han* texts are philosophically comparable to the arguments of the Masters texts, but are not associated with teaching lineages” (Raphals 2001, 157). The *lie-nü* (烈女 exemplary women with feminine virtues) tradition of imperial China (from the early *Han* dynasty to the late *Qing* dynasty) is recorded in biographies of virtuous women, which is part of the imperial histories. Aside from the *lie-nü* tradition, there is a literary tradition regarding women in the didactic texts. For example, the *Four Books for Women* (*Nü-Si-Shu* 《女四書》) written by women for women’s education includes female authors from four different historical periods. Ann A. Pang-White argues that the *Four Books for Women* should be interpreted as a feminist response to Confucius’s teachings. However, she does not intend to prove that “Confucianism as-is” is a feminist philosophy. Instead, “we need to be careful in our critique of Confucian ideology, so as to separate politicized Confucianism from the essential teachings of classic Confucianism as a philosophy” (Pang-White 2018, 22). Pang-White (2023) also presents readings in Chinese women’s philosophical and feminist thought from the Yuan dynasty to the Republics, which she claims creates a new narrative of Chinese philosophical thought that pays attention to women-authored works.

In addition to feminist scholarship on Confucianism, there is emerging feminist scholarship on Daoism and Buddhism in recent years, but it remains in its formative stages. Daoist and Buddhist approaches to women are prominently philosophical and

religious, and they are overshadowed by the dominant Confucianism. Daoism and Buddhism examine women-centered issues in different ways. A few scholars emphasize femininity in Daoism as well as how femininity should be understood in the Daoist notion of complementarity. For instance, Lin Ma argues that there is an explicit feminine or femininity theme in the *Daodejing*. She claims the term *ci* (雌) indicates the Dao of the feminine, and the feminine occupies a central place and possesses a philosophical significance in the *Daodejing* on its term. "This centrality is not to be defined in relation to the masculine, either in terms of a presumably harmonious and complementary relation, or in terms of mutual contradiction and distinctiveness from one another, or in terms of a combination of both facets." (Ma 2016, 241) Buddhism offers a more radical approach that is beyond gender. In the Buddhist ideal, women and men transcend gender identity into the non-discriminating mind of Buddha where sexed bodies and "gender" are viewed as illusions of the discriminating mind (see Wawrytko 2009 and 2016, and Pang-White 2016). Despite the complexity of these two traditions, feminist scholarship on Daoism and Buddhism illustrates the diversity of feminist scholarship regarding Chinese traditions that goes beyond the dominant Confucianism.

3. CHINESE FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY: BRIDGING CHINESE FEMINISM AND COMPARATIVE CHINESE FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

Feminist scholarship on Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism exhibits a transcultural trend, in which gender issues intersect with these traditions textually and philosophically (rather than developing a contemporary feminist movement or theory). However, this body of scholarship on Chinese philosophy and gender has yet to interact with Chinese feminism and gender studies in China in a way that leads to an explicitly Chinese feminist philosophy. A limitation of existing comparative Chinese feminist philosophy is that scholars in general focus on reinterpretation of classical texts and try to tease out the gender theme without making connections between the gender theme in these reinterpretations with the social reality of ongoing gender oppression. I think this may be mended through philosophical reflections on Chinese feminist theories and praxes, as well as by building a bridge between the discipline of women's studies and the discipline of philosophy. To sort out tensions between feminism and Chinese traditions as represented by Confucianism (which remains ubiquitous in China), we may distinguish political Confucianism from philosophical Confucianism. As a social practice informed by traditional and ideological norms, Confucianism has been oppressive to women. But its teachings and norms may shed light on how feminism, conceived mainly as a western and "imported" idea, interacts with Chinese traditions. Investigating this interaction bears on the experiences and prospects of contemporary Chinese women. To sort out tensions between feminism and Chinese traditions as represented by Confucianism (which remains ubiquitous in China), we may distinguish political Confucianism from philosophical Confucianism. As a social practice informed by traditional and ideological norms, Confucianism has been oppressive to women. But its teachings and norms may shed light on how feminism, conceived mainly as a

Western and "imported" idea, interacts with Chinese traditions. Investigating this interaction bears on the experiences and prospects of contemporary Chinese women.

As an attempt to build this bridge, I make the case for a Chinese feminist philosophy, over the course of seven aspects as I illustrated above and summarize below. These seven aspects are pertaining to distinct aspects of women's struggles and conditions in China and the way that scholars have thought about them. These seven aspects of Chinese feminism are found in the three bodies/sources of feminist work (feminist theories, feminist praxis, and Chinese traditions). I summarize one characteristic of Chinese feminism—Chinese feminism is simultaneously shaped by national feminism and transnational feminism. The seven distinguishable aspects of Chinese feminism reflect this characteristic:

- Aspect #1 concerns the influences of global feminism, such as Western feminist ideas, capitalist globalization, and the triumph of neoliberal policies, academic groups such as women's studies, and the interplay between local and global feminisms.
- Aspect #2 focuses on Western influences on feminist theorization such as the introduction and circulation of the concept of gender.
- Aspect #3 is about the dynamic relationship between Chinese socialist legacies and Chinese feminism.
- Aspect #4 concerns feminist activism such as feminist NGO practices.
- Aspect #5 concerns feminist scholarship on Confucianism—a dominant intellectual and cultural tradition—and gender.
- Aspect #6 is about other intellectual and cultural traditions such as Daoism and Buddhism (both as philosophy and practice), and the role of these Chinese traditions in thinking about women.
- Aspect #7 addresses the diversity of Chinese feminism such as feminist academic discussion of non- "official"/non-intellectual Chinese feminism, and feminisms in the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as in different ethnicities and Chinese-speaking areas.

The scholarship about Chinese feminism can be understood in various ways, but three different sources/bodies of work might be identified as "Chinese feminism", or at any rate, can contribute to Chinese feminist philosophy. Chinese feminist philosophy can be 1) an examination of feminist theories in China, 2) an analysis of feminist praxes in China, or 3) a feminist philosophy that is based, or draws, on Chinese sources and traditions (but which is often practiced by feminist scholars/philosophers writing mainly outside of China). I categorize the existing literature on Chinese feminism in these three bodies of work (feminist theories, feminist praxis, and Chinese traditions) while weaving them together in a broad philosophical survey.

In these aspects, I pursue a novel transdisciplinary project because I draw on and attempt to synthesize all three bodies of feminist scholarship. In performing the synthesis of the three bodies of feminist scholarship, one might take one of three approaches: national, transnational, and transcultural. I am drawing on and weaving together the three different bodies of work (feminist theories, feminist praxis, and Chinese traditions), *and* have these three interpretative categories/approaches (transcultural, transnational, and national). These three interpretative categories are not

intended to exactly map onto the three sources/bodies of Chinese feminist scholarship, but they are rather rival interpretations of Chinese feminism overall. Their rivalry concerns the question of whether Chinese feminism is an indigenous idea that is based on the unique historical and social conditions of Chinese women, or whether Chinese feminism is deeply influenced by Western feminist theories and practices. The difference lies in a disagreement about the proper source of theoretical interpretation of women-centered issues in China: indigenous Chinese theories (such as a Chinese version of socialism and its traditional values), or international/transnational (but covertly U.S.-centric) feminist theories. As "peripheralized" feminism, Chinese feminism allegedly does not produce analogous theoretical tools to gender theories generated in the U.S. academy. "Western" feminist theories are arguably more "developed," but they may not apply to the Chinese condition or even entail conflicts with China's national pride. In the effort to make "local" Chinese feminism more globalized, there is also an effort to keep Chinese feminism a specifically Chinese idea amidst globalization (therefore keeping it distinctively Chinese both culturally and politically).

One of the challenges that Chinese feminist scholars face is how to address tensions between traditional values and the Chinese Revolution legacy in the neoliberal setting. China has adapted to the global market system, which has deepened commodity relations within China. The reconstruction of women's agency and subjectivities, in particular elite women or exemplary women in ancient China, gains more visibility in contemporary reinterpretations of Chinese texts and history. This might have an unintended and unexpected impact on the discourse about women. In postrevolutionary years, the tendency to underplay the impact of the Revolution has been coupled with active deconstructing the discourse of women's revolution. Women's liberation in the Revolution and socialist years, therefore, are considered passive liberation for women. That is, women were liberated as members of the proletariat; this did not focus on transforming oppressive gender relations as pursued in the Western feminist movements. The tension between the limited emphasis on women's liberation in the socialist tradition and the rejuvenation of the discourse of Chinese Confucian tradition needs to be sorted out to think about Chinese feminism at the contemporary intersection of its past and present. State-led economic reform and modernization in the 1980s gave rise to state and market reconfigurations of gender and the role of women, which were closely tied to a new gender division of labor, the market-based reconstruction of the private sphere, and the associated commodification of women. Chinese societal changes under the influence of neoliberal global capitalism have not only contributed to the rise of consumerist culture but have also contributed to a shift in feminist discourse from a focus on collective social movement to an emphasis on individual women's struggles and empowerment, as these figure in women's roles in family and work. Skepticism about the adequacy of the Marxist account of women's oppression and disappointment about persisting oppression in the post-revolutionary period opened a large theoretical space for Western feminist theories. Sensing this theoretical void, Chinese scholars and activists also looked for new and different theories to understand and interpret gender issues. The introduction of the concept of gender may

seem to undermine the creation of an autonomous pathway for Chinese feminism, but the interaction of global feminism and Chinese feminism in the 1990s was unavoidable.

A major concern of Chinese feminist scholars is how to assess Western influence (mainly from the U.S.) of feminist theories (often promoted by NGOs like the Ford Foundation) on Chinese feminism. Shaopeng Song emphasizes harm done to women by the transformations toward a neoliberal economic system:

> I believe that the currently prevalent "social gender" theory cannot properly respond to the challenges brought by neoliberalism. There is an intriguing coincidence in the timing of the introduction of both social gender theory and the rise of neoliberalism in China. Is this only a historical accident, or is there a kind of alliance between these two things? (Song 2023, 149)

Song then suggests transcending liberalism and pursuing a "community-based socialist feminism," which Nicola Spakowski associates with "critical socialist feminist theories":

> I have interpreted the rejection of gender as an act of "epistemic disobedience" to Western feminism and as a core factor in the formation of a critical socialist feminism…. Under the impact of gender, a collective socialist memory had faded and is in the process of being reanimated through the work of critical socialist feminists. (Spakowski 2018, 581)

Some suggest that the overpowering Western influence could become dominant: "Western feminist discourse introduced into China beginning in the mid-and-late 1980s has played a double-edged role, with its liberating potential and hegemonic power" (Wang 2013b, 19). Chinese feminist scholars often refer to the influence of "international society" or "Western feminism," but the agents of these influences remain vague and faceless. This can be seen in a concern raised:

> The ACWF and women's studies scholars and activists employed the idea of *jiegui* to challenge existing internal hegemonies, and to assert that global and Western feminist ideas represented advanced, progressive thought. In the meantime, this may have blocked inquiry into who and what represented the global and what constituted the international community. It also seems to have delayed an exploration of the limits of global feminism and prevented critical analysis of just which Western feminisms travelled and why. (Min 2017, 89)

It is, therefore, necessary to explore what exactly "Western influence" means. This requires us to shift our gaze to the other side, that is, the side that allegedly "exports" feminist theories from the West to China. Chinese feminism in the 1990s was mainly under the influence of the strand of international feminism, so it will help to investigate the genealogy, complexity, and inner logic of the internationalization of feminism, as well as to study what takes place when feminist knowledge is produced and disseminated.

4. TRANSCULTURAL FEMINISM: BRIDGING CHINA AND THE WEST IN FEMINIST KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND DISSEMINATION

There is a broader framework involved by reviewing the development of and debates around the internationalization of feminism by scholars in the U.S. and its impact on Chinese feminism. The history and the nuances in the conceptual development of terms such as "transnational feminism," "international feminism," and "global feminism" should be acknowledged and noted because these terms mean different things in feminist theories (for more details, see Dai 2020). Both global feminism and international feminism started as political progressive philosophies. Global feminism stemmed from the idea of "global sisterhood," which pointed to women's universal oppression, but global feminism was criticized for overlooking differences among women's oppression. As a more progressive form of feminism, international feminism paid attention to the difference in women's oppression especially in the global South. However, international feminism was challenged as neocolonial because what it internationalizes is Western feminism and values. The rise of transnational feminism resists neoliberal global capitalism as well as challenges international feminism (which has been promoted by globalization and global capitalism) and global feminism. Transnational feminism is progressive compared to global feminism and international feminism, but it is also limited by its paradoxical national limitations such as the nationalization of U.S. transnational feminism.

A central question for Chinese feminism is: "Is Chinese feminism the local application of global concepts, or is it a matter of national feminism being integrated into international feminism?" For considering this question, with the risk of oversimplification, I draw a contrast between transnational feminism and national feminism. Transnational feminism has sought to move beyond the nation state, transcend the exclusionary dimensions of nationalism, and challenge global capitalism and neo-colonialism. National feminism is a project that is to be achieved as part of a national project that operates in and through the nation-state. Transnational feminism arose in response to the inadequacy of (Eurocentric) global feminism and international feminism. Transnational feminism began critically by questioning the uncritical acceptance of the nation as a meaningful unit of analysis for feminists and advocates for transnational feminist solidarity. Reflecting on the political-economic impact of globalization, M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty "foreground a set of collective political practices that women in different parts of the world had undertaken as a way of understanding genealogies of feminist political struggles and organizing" (Alexander and Mohanty 2010, 23).

Transnationalism was meant to destabilize rather than maintain the boundaries of a nation, but transnational feminism gradually became U.S.-centric—institutionalized and nationalized in a specific U.S. academic context. In the nationalist construction of the "global," the U.S. academy provided the framing narrative for transnational feminist discourses even though transnational feminism intended to move beyond the territorial boundaries of the United States. Consequently, the United States as a nation-state, ironically, became an unmarked, universal "transnational" nation. Leela

Fernandes points out that “the paradigm of transnational feminism” (Fernandes 2013, 2) is shaped by the specific national context of the United States, which in turn shapes “the ways in which we produce, consume, and disseminate knowledge about the world within the United States” (4). As “a normative paradigm,” transnationalism “has increasingly become a disciplinary device within interdisciplinary research and theory” (9). The U.S. national narrative is “a discursive marker of the nationalized narratives of transnationalism that permeate and increasingly discipline interdisciplinary fields of knowledge” such as women’s studies, and such national framings “produce ‘the world’ within the United States” (9). Fernandes points to an irony in transnational feminism: “[T]he transnational frame that undergirds and polices such interdisciplinary judgments is itself a product of the national specificities of the American academy. This is one of the central ironies of the transnational imperative of feminist scholarship.” (24)

The paradigm of U.S.-centric transnational feminism shapes how feminist knowledge about women in the world is framed and produced. In my understanding, this is what happened to the internationalized feminism that was prominent at the end of the twentieth century and where it went wrong. The “trans”-national feminism may not be conflated with what Alexander and Mohanty originally proposed and intended, but the nationalized version of transnational feminism is not up to the challenge of articulating a feminist project for China because it looks at Chinese feminism in a supposedly transnational framework but that is actually U.S.-centric. That is, this so-called “transnational” feminism is not transnational, but covertly U.S.-centric. Although a U.S.-centric transnational perspective has the potential to be used to contribute to genuine collaboration with women “elsewhere,” it could institutionalize and discipline the production and dissemination of feminist knowledge.

I therefore advocate a transcultural approach to correct the shortcomings of nationalization of transnational feminism. I propose an idea of “transcultural feminism” to question the paradigm of transnational feminism and the politics of transnational feminist knowledge production, as well as to survey conceptual distinctions underlying Chinese feminist scholarship. The transcultural approach differs from the transnational approach not simply by its being more genuinely transnational, but also because the idea of “cultural” is not mapped onto the nation-state. “Culture” used to circulate within a society in a given locality or territory, but it is now more often circulating freely across national borders. “Culture” is the filter or lens through which life, arts, and humanities can be more flexibly understood. As a common source of meaning, a sense of culture inevitably has impacts at the level of “nation,” but “nation” can be understood differently from the usually assumed nationalist idea. For instance, the use of “international” or “global” can be considered as a normalizing gesture in neoliberal times. That is because the internationalization of feminism is yet another “add-and-stir” framework (adding “internationalization” to U.S.-centric feminism), which maintains the nationalist focus of women’s studies without challenging it. This is transnational feminism’s criticism of global feminism and international feminism, but transnational feminism somehow falls into a similar undesirable state.

Looking at these different feminisms in a transcultural framework is not only related to the diversity of Chinese feminism but also related to feminisms in a loosely

defined “Asian culture”. Chinese feminism is constantly shaped by its interplay with economic, political, and cultural fluctuations and its diversity and heterogeneity is a demonstration of transculturalism. A transcultural approach not only sets a reflective distance between oppressed women and the culture in which they are located but also makes it possible for them to be sensitive to the situatedness and difference of women’s experiences. Transcultural experience creates an imagined world that goes beyond political constellations such as the nation-state. In a world increasingly boundary-less, culture connects people through a complicated and loosely constituted network of structures, values, practices, and perspectives, often beyond the nation-state. Therefore, transculture is not bound to nationalist concepts and practices, and it constantly addresses the tension between nationalism and transnationalism. As a result, it may potentially contribute to transcultural feminist solidarity. For example, by using the term “Chinese feminism,” I refer to not only feminism generated within the territory of China, but also feminism in other Chinese cultural spaces like Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Australia, and the U.S.

“Transcultural feminism,” “transnational feminism,” and “national feminism” are the three interpretative categories/approaches of the paper. I challenge both transnational feminist imperatives and nation-centered feminisms and offer the transcultural feminist approach as a third alternative to transnational and national feminism. The transcultural approach shares commitments with transnational feminism, but there are important differences. Unlike transnational feminism, the transcultural approach affirms that the Chinese national and cultural context is important for understanding women’s struggles in China (i.e., feminist goals and problems are not the same in China as they are in Nigeria, or the U.S.); but unlike national feminism, I do not want to reify those differences (or assimilate the women’s struggles to the project/values of China as a nation-state).

The transcultural approach, which I see emerging out of Chinese feminist scholarship and which I intend as an interpretation of Chinese feminism, avoids the problems of the national and transnational approaches. Transcultural feminism, as I conceive it, focuses more on the interactions of cultures, which may or may not map onto nation-states, both locally and globally. Focusing on cultural interactions may resolve assumed tensions in feminism, e.g., having to choose either woman of color feminism or transnational feminism in the U.S. academia. The positive influence of transnational feminism, which is supposed to be more progressive than international feminism and which criticizes global neoliberal capitalism, is yet to be seen in Chinese feminist scholarship. In this sense, using a transcultural approach could open a door for us to investigate the complexity of Chinese women’s oppression and exploitation simultaneously in globalization and the rejuvenation of traditional values and feminine virtues.

5. CHINESE FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY IN TRANSCULTURAL CONTEXTS

Thinking with the fluid idea of culture may raise questions about differences among societies but also about differences within individual societies (e.g., cultural differences

among classes as well as among minorities/majorities). For example, the notion of "culture" bears respects in which discussions of Confucianism introduce significant cultural contrasts with the cultural world of contemporary China and with the contemporary West. Comparative feminist philosophers, who mainly reside outside of China, study the compatibility of Confucianism and feminism because of the relevant interactions between Chinese culture and transnational cultures. What a transcultural approach is doing with Confucian philosophy, for example, is that it explores what is and is not useful within Confucianism for women's liberation. This is something that national or transnational feminisms could not do because there is a disconnect between feminist scholarship in women's studies (e.g., feminist theories and praxis) and that in philosophy (e.g., Confucian feminist philosophy). A transcultural approach helps to address gender issues in fuzzy and ambiguous transcultural spaces where cultures interact with one another. A transcultural approach not only sets up a reflective distance for scholars to think critically about the values and limitations of a culture but also looks at Chinese feminist scholarship macroscopically and connects the disconnected disciplinary feminist inquiries. This transcultural approach also identifies space for women across cultures and ideologies in which to break the cultural boundaries that have separated Chinese feminism from integration into a truly transcultural feminism (as opposed to the U.S.-centric global/international /transnational feminism).

My aim in this paper is that I am compelled to propose an explicit idea of "Chinese feminist philosophy" after surveying and reflecting on Chinese feminist scholarship. One of the implications for "Chinese feminist philosophy" is that Chinese feminism is transcultural from the beginning as shown in both my discussion of Chinese feminist theories and praxes and that of comparative Chinese feminist philosophy. I intend to make a connection between these two bodies of scholarship in a philosophical reflection against the background of the internalization of (Western) feminism in globalization. Chinese feminist scholars' reexamination of China's socialist feminism and Chinese traditions as a "legacy" and "resource" adds a new strand to an already pluralized field of Chinese feminism, but Chinese feminism acts as an example of larger issues such as the implications of standardizing international feminism (making feminisms in other cultures part of the standardized international feminism).

A transcultural approach can be used to analyze and synthesize the seven aspects of Chinese feminism and three bodies/sources of Chinese feminist scholarship to delineate Chinese feminist philosophy in the complex relationship between local feminism and global feminism. Exploring how the transcultural approach contrasts with transnational feminism and national feminism by identifying and examining transnational feminism and national feminism in my general treatment of the history of feminism in China, I suggest that the various historical developments in Chinese feminism can be understood as involving the transcultural perspective in the socialist phase, the various kinds of Western influence, and the interplay of past and present in recent reflection on Chinese traditions. The paper is both synthetic—bringing together multiple aspects of Chinese feminism in a transcultural framework—and critical. The critical perspective allows me to sort out and compare the strengths and weaknesses of various kinds of feminist work of Chinese feminism. This critically comparative and

transcultural overview implies what a synthesis of various themes in Chinese feminism should achieve. For instance, one way to understand the Western (mainly the U.S.) influence on the tensions in Chinese feminism between the market and traditional values, and between individuals and collectives is to see the "global influence" as domination rather than imperialism. The impact of globalization on the global division of labor can be partly seen in shifting a large amount of low-paid and labor-intensive manufacturing jobs to China, which simultaneously empowers and exploits Chinese women, especially young rural women. Recognizing that the capitalist market is transnational because of the obvious interconnectedness of capitals in multinational corporations, one realizes that transcultural feminist solidarity is necessary to resist transnational exploitation of women.

Chinese feminism is distinctive by being Chinese and transcultural at the same time, and it continues to progress in a distinctively Chinese way. The emphasis on a distinctively Chinese set of feminist practices coincides with a descriptive but also prescriptive emphasis on transcultural feminist solidarity because feminists share the goal of achieving gender equality. The assumed tension between commonality (a shared feminist goal) and difference (gender inequality is different from culture to culture) makes it necessary to think about transcultural feminist solidarity among differences. I look at transcultural feminist solidarity as part of the transcultural commitment, which has implications for non-Chinese feminists as well as for Chinese feminists. Transcultural feminism questions ethnocentrism and promotes solidarity across national borders. Transculturalism offers a critical perspective for thinking about relations and tensions between local feminism and global feminism, and for exploring how various feminisms do (or do not) contribute to transcultural feminist activity.

6. CONCLUSION

My discussion of Chinese feminism has been both descriptive/historical (what Chinese feminism has been and how it has evolved) and normative (what Chinese feminism can be and should be in a transcultural setting). Transculturalism is fruitful as a critical and normative perspective on the direction of Chinese feminism because it identifies a key point of contention among Chinese feminist scholars, namely, whether Chinese feminism is local to China or must be shaped by cross-national feminism. The normative perspective draws from descriptive claims about how Chinese feminist intellectual work has evolved to the present moment. The contrast between transnational feminism and national feminism prevails when Chinese feminists are overly influenced by U.S. practices. The contrast between "transnational feminism" and "national feminism" can also be critical of these two approaches when exploring the advantages of a transcultural approach, which emphasizes interactions of cultures. A transcultural approach fits neither side of the contrast, so the transcultural approach would then be both offering a different (third) way of thinking about a descriptive/historical account of the evolution of some feminist practices and offering a different normative sense of where feminism in China should be going. This normative sense then informs a critical perspective, which would implicitly question

the stability and coherence of a nation-centered approach, without having to put in question discussing specifically Chinese feminism.

The approach of this paper is inherently critical insofar as it takes women's oppression as something that must and can be effectively challenged. I presented and assessed ways in which intellectuals have responded to changing contexts and longstanding questions about gender. I hope my paper contributes something new to the scholarly conversations in these works by honing an explicit Chinese feminist philosophy that has yet to be systematically addressed. My paper not only locates the discussion of Chinese philosophy and Chinese women in transcultural contexts but also bridges the gap between Chinese philosophy and Chinese women's studies. In a nutshell, I built on the arguments made in the existing feminist scholastic sources, extending their analysis to temporally contemporary China and spatially both on the global stage and in a local Chinese context. My paper sims to synthesize the themes in these sources, along with those in other publications, and have a philosophical dialogue with this body of scholarship on Chinese feminism and transnational feminism.

I conclude the paper by arguing that Chinese feminism has a unique trajectory in the flux of neoliberalism, socialism, and Chinese traditions, and its development is in alignment with the modernization of China. The current configuration of Chinese feminism is a result of transcultural exchanges, which makes the transcultural approach not only a descriptive and analytical approach but also a normative and critical concern and commitment. Transculturalism indicates something new being generated in the interaction of feminist intellectual activities in different cultures. I believe the transcultural perspective that I propose will not only help us understand better the intellectual pathways of Chinese feminism but also could be useful to decenter the U.S.-centric internationalization of feminism. It could point to the limits of a narrow sense of nation-centered feminism, and lead to a constructive and inclusive strategy to understand feminisms in other countries and cultures.

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