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# The East-West dialogue: methodical diversity and frailties of feminist accounts

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This paper investigates the commonalities and differences of contemporary feminist theories by proffering a comprehensive comparative analysis of the Western feminist agenda and Chinese woman's concerns in relation to the philosophical discourse on global justice. Interpretation of feminist accounts delineates the persistent gender inequalities presented by Western feminist thinkers, such as Maria Lugones, Elizabeth Spelman, and Sally Haslanger, while highlighting the historical and constitutional approach to understanding the roots of gender distinctions and norms in Chinese culture through the philosophies of Ruism, Daoism, and Buddhism, as well as the Civil Code of marriage. Reflection assesses the extent of translatability concerning feminist matters given the dissimilar social contexts and political circumstances between China and the United States. This paper draws attention to the need for embracing the historical and cultural heterogeneity of grievances of women from all over the world to acknowledge the cross- and multi-cultural conditions regarding the life prospects of both men and women. Such initiatives encourage mutual engagement in promulgating the multiplicity of feminist voices to prompt more productive conversations about the identities and meanings of masculinity and femininity instead of expecting or imposing a universal consolidation of woman's experiences.

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## Introduction

Among contemporary philosophers, disputes concerning feminist theories have continuously escalated throughout the past decade. Most feminist critiques of androcentric patriarchy posit a system of nearly comprehensive, generally one-sided domination of males over females, to the profoundly unjust disadvantage of the females. In hopes of identifying and clarifying persistent gender inequalities, feminist thinkers, such as Maria Lugones, Elizabeth Spelman, and Sally Haslanger, offer similar yet differing perspectives regarding the systemic oppression of women. Their writings address the need for both pragmatic and theoretic approaches to understanding feminism as an assortment of every woman's experiences, with an emphasis on the amplification and diversification of female voices. Specifically, Lugones and Spelman advocate for a theorization of feminism that is implicitly and explicitly committed to validating every woman's worth and her capabilities to bring about change. Although Haslanger agrees with Lugones and Spelman's aim to establish an explicative feminist framework that empowers women within a patriarchal society, she acknowledges its shortcomings given the divergence of social contexts. The ambiguity of concepts pertaining to a woman's self-identification with gender, sex, and race may change the framework.

I concur with Lugones, Spelman, and Haslanger that probing a common theory of feminism in terms of its applicability to different cultures and societies conjoins women and calls attention to the residual impact of patriarchy. However, I also believe that we have no reason to expect or impose a universal consolidation of each woman's experiences through theorizing. This belief does not undermine the integrity of womanhood, nor does it overlook the socioeconomic inequalities that women often have to reckon with as a result of social relations that regard them as inferior to men. Instead of making any generalizations or assuming their homogeneity, embracing the historical and cultural heterogeneity of grievances of women globally prompts more productive conversations among women on how to confide in one another and share their distinct conceptions of how feminism relates to their personal lives.

In this paper, I will first elaborate on the problem raised by Lugones and Spelman regarding the lack of voice or representation from women of color within the discussion of feminism that has been dominated by the opinions of White women. Then, I will analyze the implications and limitations of their claims by discussing why women in China do not necessarily share their grievances. Finally, I will explain the significance of such a matter with Haslanger's views of feminism and my own ideas of feminism in China in relation to the philosophies of Ruism, Daoism, and Buddhism.

## Evaluation of white feminist theories: Lugones and Spelman

**Lugones's and Spelman's feminist accounts.** Co-authoring their paper "Have We Got a Theory for You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for 'The Woman's Voice,'" Lugones and Spelman present their individual and collective thoughts about how the differences among women silence women of color and prevent them from speaking in one voice. Lugones and Spelman acknowledge that there are certain matters that they both assume but cannot confirm to be true, and refrain from speaking in the third person, for it presents an outsider's perception of the issue rather than recognizing the insider's experiences.

Spelman, self-identifying as a White-Anglo Saxon woman, defines feminism as a response to the fact that women have been excluded from an almost exclusively male account of the world. She believes that what feminists want and demand for women is not only the right to move and to act in accordance with our own

will, but also the desire and insistence that we give our own accounts of these movements and actions. It matters to us what is said about us, who says it, and to whom it is said. In other words, being silenced in one's own account of one's life is a kind of amputation that signifies oppression. Such internalized oppression indicates that a woman experiences her life in terms of impoverished and degrading descriptions. Thus, the articulation of our experience constitutes a part of the hallmarks of a self-determining individual or community.<sup>1</sup> The concept of a woman's voice is itself theoretical in the sense that it presumes a theory, which states that our identities as humans are compound identities that fuse or confuse intersectional identities as women or men, Black or brown or White, etc. Economic, social, and political privileges resulting from skin color, class membership, and ethnic identity have mostly benefited White women and amplified their voices while discouraging and excluding those belonging to women of color. Some feminist theories arise from the experiences of these White women, and if other voices do not align with them, those voices are not counted and are instead rejected and categorized according to ethnicity, such as Black, Hispanic, Jewish, etc.

Lugones sheds light on her "Hispana" viewpoint as an Argentinian woman who has lived in the U.S. for 16 years and condemns the exclusion and silencing of women of color within the realm of feminism. She creates a "we vs. you" narrative, in which "we" refers to the "Hispanas" as a displaced population apart from the White-Anglo Saxon community, and "you" represents White-Anglo Saxon women. Just because not all women are equally vulnerable with respect to race, class, etc., White women's voices are more likely to be heard by those who have also abated the accounts of women of color. For example, White, middle-class, heterosexual, and Christian (or anyway not self-identified non-Christian) women's voices are most likely to be heard in the United States.<sup>2</sup> This reflects nascent empirical theory and presupposes that the silencing of women is systemic and complicates the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality and how it affects the representation and diversity of women's voices. However, none of the feminist theories developed so far seem to help "Hispanas" in the articulation of their experiences as they do not resonate with these theories and suffer from this alienation. "Hispanas" need to think carefully about the relation between the interpretation of their own experience, and theories made by them and other non-Hispanic women about themselves and other women.

## Feminist agenda in translation

### Limitations of Lugones's and Spelman's arguments for theorizing feminism.

As a young Chinese woman born and raised in Shanghai and has spent the past nine years studying in the United States, I would like to first commend Lugones and Spelman for expressing their discontent toward the dominance of the theories of White feminism. Lugones and Spelman have illustrated that if a global agenda of feminism truly exists, then it ought to denote the insufficient representation or even exclusivity of women of color, in addition to confronting men about their manipulation, abuse, and oppression of women. Western feminist thinkers should pay more attention to other communities and expressions of women of color by encouraging the circulation of works written by feminists from other countries. On the other hand, Lugones argues that assimilation to the English language fails to acknowledge and capture the experiences of women of color: "We and you do not talk the same language. When we talk to you, we use your language: the language of your experience and of your theories [...] to communicate our world of experience. But since

your language and your theories are inadequate in expressing our experiences, we only succeed in communicating our experience of exclusion.<sup>3</sup> Using English reifies cultural imperialism of the West that eliminates the universality and veracity of feminist theories due to its confinement to the interpretation of feminism by White women. Therefore, it seems utterly implausible how the dissemination of feminist ideas can prevail in the absence of proper mechanisms of translation.

**Translation of feminism and negotiation.** In response to Lugones and Spelman, I believe that a more thorough interpretation of feminism necessitates the appropriate procedures of translation. The legitimacy and efficacy of translation are contingent upon its capacity of capturing content and significance of events from the perspectives of the affected populations and expressing them in a foreign language with no political motivation of enforcing or manipulating any narratives related to the original community. Notably, the most elemental collection of four didactic texts for the erudition of Chinese women written by Chinese women is the *Confucian Nü Sishu* (《女四书》), entailing Han Dynasty woman historian Ban Zhao's *Nüjie* (*Lessons for Women* 《女戒》), Song Ruoxi and Song Ruozhao's *Nü Lunyu* (*Analects for Women* 《女论语》) from the Tang Dynasty, Ming Dynasty Empress Renxiao's *Neixun* (*Teachings for the Inner Court* 《内训》), and Chaste Widow Wang's *Nüfan Jielu* (*Short Records of Models for Women* 《女范捷录》) from the Ming Dynasty. When reading and learning about feminism in China, one should eschew the incautious assumption that Chinese women belong to a homogenous group in which all of us have been treated equally, cautioning against thinking we are all oppressed. From here on, "we" refers to Chinese women. I recognize the tenuousness of the collective "we" and "our" as each of us may hold our own opinions about what feminism means to us; however, I have a profound yearning for such firmness to translate my knowledge of Chinese feminism and explicate some background context that Lugones and Spelman disregarded to further investigate the obstacles to theorizing feminism.

The historical patriarchal values and restrictions of Chinese society incorporated within the philosophies that the country is founded upon substantiate our worth based on our affiliation and interactions with men, which limits the opportunities for open dialogues about feminism. For example, the fundamental Chinese philosophers, such as Kongzi and Laozi, founders of the traditional school of thought of Ruism and Daoism in Chinese society, are all male. They introduced and incorporated the notions of femininity and masculinity in their philosophy of familial piety, as well as the contrast of "Yin" and "Yang". Simultaneously, resisting the tempting affinity to a patent correlation between these ancient philosophies and the subjugation of Chinese women instigate open-ended interpretations.<sup>4</sup> This is because most works of ancient Chinese philosophy, including *The Analects* (《论语》), *The Book of Mencius* (《孟子》), *Daodejing* (《道德经》), and *The Book of Changes* (《易经》), never specify the anatomical details and behaviors that make a woman into a woman and a man into a man. This conceptual ambiguity enabled the ruling emperors to exploit the vagueness of these terms and justify the unequal treatment of women by men. Since our conception of philosophy as the cultural embodiment and moral education of Chinese civilization is comparable to that of religion in other nations, gender ideals are inseparable from conventional social doctrines. A family's living organism is the first soil in which a person's nascent individuality takes root. The Chinese evolutionary climate comprises bequeathed customs, spiritual praxis, and psychological stimulations which I emphasize as invaluable qualitative

evidence and cumulative methodologies to galvanize rigorous scrutiny, interactions, and perusal in formal academics.

Outlining how men and women ought to behave in functioning society, the traditional sociopolitical and philosophical gauges for macho (nan zi han 男子汉) expect men to attain and maximize their power while rewarding them with the subservience of women through subliminal or hereditary rules. In particular, the Confucian revival (1850–1910) of the mid-Qing period brought about the discourse on marriage and intensified state campaigns to promote a common family ideal in which we were to be chaste and obedient.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, our reputations within our clans and communities were of utmost importance in the moral assessment of our behaviors. To this day, revealing clothing is prohibited and disrespectful, and women—not their male offenders—are responsible for being victims of sexual assault or harassment in the eyes of those around us and of adjudicating officials. We are told to prioritize home affairs over our work ambitions because, traditionally, men are supposed to be the primary income earners. We receive judgment from others for unweddedness or divorce and for giving birth to daughters who are inferior to sons; only sons will carry on the family name and ancestral bloodline. Such circumstances sustain the devaluation and subjugation of women by means of the codification and instruction of gender roles and stereotypes, which makes it harder for women to rebel against conventional social norms stemming from the founding principles of Chinese society.

Furthermore, not every country is like the U.S. where the law protects and spurs freedom of speech. The prevalence of political censorship, which seeks to promote the unity of thought and national solidarity, contributes to unproductive discussions about feminism filled with confusion and misunderstandings. Censoring politically sensitive keywords and blocking online content that might produce turmoil restricts the liberty to express our thoughts and responses to hurtful patriarchal allegations. The toxicity of such social media regulation further discourages some of us from being open or honest about our feminist beliefs as we gradually become more uncertain about what feminism really is. Mindful of this heavy censorship, surveillance, and filtration, some of us might eventually choose to be politically apathetic and desist from participating in activities that challenge the status quo or authorities. My brief re-iteration of the historical phenomena of the oppression of Chinese women and the country's political atmosphere in English insinuates that translation of seemingly distant or incoherent ideas from an alternative community engenders an ancillary way of articulating the history of gender, which is imperative for inspecting feminist theories. Language epitomizes the cultural orientation of a community, highlighting the differences among women around the world that must be not merely tolerated, but seen as the necessary polarities between which their creativity can spark like a dialectic.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, the context-dependency of feminist theories differentiates grievances of which Western theorists ought to be more aware.

### **Intersectionality of race, gender, and sex: Hanslanger**

#### **On Haslanger and the intersectionality of race, gender, and sex.**

One of the potential objections to my point is that the high sensitivity to contextual variation might sustain the narrow outlook on feminism, with loosely defined conditions in which one's gender is negotiated. Haslanger's concerns with women's sexual inequality stress the need for the development of intersectional feminist theories. She buttresses feminist and antiracist efforts to empower critical social agents that defy the patriarchy and make social progress toward a more equal and just society. She writes, "[T]he core phenomenon to be addressed is the pattern of social relations that constitute the social classes of men as dominant and

women as subordinate.”<sup>7</sup> She contends that males and females differ physically and systematically in terms of their social statuses and accessibility to social positions as societies privilege individuals with male bodies. Despite the particularity of oppression in various cultures, women should not lose sight of the dominant patriarchal ideology that aims to control and exploit their sexual and reproductive capacities. Women ought to prioritize their agency and question the conventional ideology-rhetoric complex of race, sex, and gender in the fields of art, religion, philosophy, science, and law.<sup>8</sup> This, in return, eliminates the societal presumption of and compliance with manipulative theories that legitimize the subordination of women on the basis of such corporeal and anatomical qualifications.

I agree with Haslanger’s argument that one’s analysis of the intersecting terminologies of race, sex, and gender rests upon the framing of one’s personal and political identities in problematic and repressive social systems that both men and women ought to object to. This enables women to take account of their privileges in subordinate positions and reappraise who they think they are and how to strategically raise awareness of their considerations when communicating with men. People’s inquiries about the categorization of femininity and masculinity can help them identify and critique broad patterns of racial and sexual oppression to debunk the misconceptions surrounding the ideology-rhetoric complex of race and gender. Given the normative force and political potential of identifying someone in racial or gendered terms, people ought to deconstruct what they know about race, gender, and sex because the ideologies they are familiar with serve the purpose of maintaining racial and sexist rankings. Haslanger asserts that people “should refuse to be gendered man or woman [and] refuse to be raced.”<sup>9</sup> I applaud her criticism of the ideological-rhetorical pretense of rationalizing the subjugation, exploitation, and nonrepair of women with regard to their raced and gendered identities and denials of self-understanding. Nonetheless, whether this terminological shift is politically useful will depend on the circumstances in which it is employed and the agents employing it. Building upon Haslanger’s claims, I suggest that not all women ally themselves with such grievances because of their countries’ and communities’ existing cultural and legislative situations.

### **Chinese gender norms through Ruism, Daoism, and Buddhism**

**Diverging feminist grievances between Chinese and Western societies.** The reason why feminist thinkers should never surmise or forcefully populate a comprehensive theory of feminism that universalizes woman’s experiences is that the multiplicity of social conditions of each community brings variety to the epistemic import for testing and confirming people’s feminist and non-feminist beliefs, rules, and principles. Lugones, Spelman, and Haslanger call for the communal transformation of the self-identification of women to relinquish their preconceived expectations in an oppressive society and to correlate their voices with one another, regardless of skin color, for social change and progress toward equality. For these Western feminist theorists, the patriarchy is not static because people are able to unite their grievances about the unjust treatment and underrepresentation of women by openly expressing them in the forms of protests and social movements. Unfortunately, this is not the case in China because the patriarchy has been a relatively invariant system of norms that has infiltrated our morals and cultural practices through the three main Chinese philosophies and religions: Ruism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Even though Ruism, Daoism, and Buddhism offer the framework for enhancing the ethical and appropriate conduct among civilians, variances in the exegesis of

these three schools of thought and their metaphysical divagations obfuscate the ideological and pragmatic perspectives of what feminism and masculinity mean to each individual. Such instances of ambiguity maintain gender stereotypes in communities, which necessitates the reevaluation of these values for understanding our grievances to promote social development.

**The cultural affirmations for patriarchy through Confucian values.** In *The Analects*, Kongzi, one of the most profound ancient Chinese philosophers who pioneered Confucian thinking, indicates that our acquisition of personal traits, such as self-discipline, benevolence, and responsibility, as well as our understanding of societal rules, is dependent upon the way we treat our families and ancestors. The male ruler, on the other hand, possesses the influential character (de 德) of an exemplary man (jun zi 君子) who works hard for the benefit of others, exhibits humanity and empathetic effort (ren 仁), and brings about the role of paternity to the people.<sup>10</sup> Kongzi deems men and women as “precious ritual vessels” that retain pure intentions, genuine passion, and sincerity to take part in customs and ceremonial observances to show excessive deference to their ancestors.<sup>11</sup> Such participation in communal rituals with conformity to the regulation and implementation of ceremonies regardless of the variance between their social status establishes the “harmonious ease” within society.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, Confucianist Ruism accents the establishment of social harmony (he 和) with traditional norms of ritualized and proper conduct (li 礼). In particular, as women, we fulfill the obligation of filiation as the daughters of goodness by transmitting and upholding the ritual proprieties of marriage and childbirth and fortifying our hereditary bonds in reverence of the elders who have nurtured us. We ought to adhere to our father’s and grandfather’s will and intentions regardless of whether they are dead or alive. Our relationships with our families directly influence our personalities and inculcate us with expected conformity with traditional thinking and codes of behavior, which is essential for bringing about collective order within our communities, even if it requires hardship.

The evolution of Confucian philosophy in contemporary Chinese society poses structural impediments to our radical defiance of sexist and patriarchal values, differentiating Chinese feminism from the aforementioned Western theories. We cope with these problematic norms by observing and learning from our mothers, grandmothers, and other female figures with passivity, resilience, and adaptiveness. The Civil Code of the People’s Republic of China forbids domestic violence and maltreatment or desertion of family members, commanding that husband and wife are equal in marriage and family for upholding the duty of mutual support.<sup>13</sup> However, the realities are such that most cases of intimate partner violence (IPV) in China are undermined and underreported. IPV depicts the behavioral patterns within an intimate relationship that causes physical, sexual, or psychological harm with limited research and data recordings in quantity, quality, and diversity.<sup>14</sup> This is unsurprising for us given the social norms and workings of the patriarchy, as they have justified brutality and intense physicality as ordinary male traits that we are expected to cope with through pliable mindsets and emotional rapport from our loved ones.

Divorce is an option for some of us who are capable of leaving toxic relationships for greater autonomy, but its accompanying stigmas are not always optimistic. The older generations tend to react either apathetically or intensely to our decisions for divorce depending on their emotional capacities and involvement in their children’s lives, along with their personal experiences with past traumas and toxic relationships. The elders may continue to perceive such legal dissolution of marital partnerships as an

infringement upon the familial virtues of unity and civility, which can lead to more miscommunication and despondency in our lives. Painfully cognizant of the continuation of the patriarchal system that grants recognition of men's leadership in households and the political sphere, we learn to finesse the mishaps resiliently and ingeniously under the status quo as we have no expectations for men to reverse or improve our situations. Most of us rarely excuse the public revelation of our domestic affairs or flagrantly oppose the male figures around us and their ineluctably systemic beliefs, but we preserve our individuality by maximizing our benefits and opportunities under the given circumstances while working independently of men to live a comforting life for ourselves and our families as a whole.

### Daoism and Its introspection of masculinity and femininity.

The dogmas, rituals, and practices of Daoism as a religion (Dao jiao 道教) are associated with the core philosophy of the Daoist school (Dao jia 道家) that conceptualizes the social and behavioral imperative of men and women to follow the Way and live meaningfully. Laozi's notion of the Way that encompasses the origin, force, and progression of all phenomena and living beings utilizes a variety of natural elements, such as water, air, and earth, as embodiments of the qualities of masculinity and femininity. I recognize that the Daoist religion presents the principles and techniques of how to avoid death, which is expressly working *against* nature, whereas Daoism as a philosophy focuses on mental and physical disciplines in harmony with nature.<sup>15</sup> However, such contradictions do not undermine their overall influence on the contemporary gender norms regarding how men and women ought to behave and divide their responsibilities in society. Specifically, the Chinese often relay the Daoist symbolization of water with the nature of femininity. Laozi's philosophical teachings in *Daodejing* suggest that goodness in life resembles water with its aquatic features in terms of its tenderness and downward direction of its flow, yielding valuable lessons regarding the cosmology and cultivation of the Way.<sup>16</sup> For instance, water is regarded as supple, soft, flowy, and transparent, which conventional social norms incorporate into the characterization of womanhood. Suppose we engage in a heated argument with our own husband in public with both sides refusing to compromise. In that case, our expressions of anger denote a sign of masculinity against our feminine characters, and we are expected to take the lead to make concessions as a way of respecting our husbands as the head of the family.

Meanwhile, like how people ought to look to water for guidance to practice the Way, men rely on women when reckoning with home affairs to maintain a harmonious relationship. Our femininity, through recognizing the validity of our partners' opinions and making peaceful amends with compassion and suppleness (rou 柔), in the manner of water, enhances the longevity of our affinity with our own husband. Notwithstanding, the infliction of physical violence by male figures in the house might be rightly justified as a reasonable masculine response to dispute resolution. The cultural expectations of the power dynamic within a traditional Daoist Chinese family structure accentuate and exalt harmony yet defectively address post-conflict stalemate and even a divorce that some of us must deal with resulting from such emotional manipulation and physical abuses by our spouse. Similarly, the Daoist religion imposes a series of inquiries into the masculine and feminine generalities through the interactivity between the Yin and Yang.

The Daoist conception of the Way delineates the chaos (hun dun 混沌) or changes between the Yin and Yang in an embodiment of the interactions between masculinity and femininity. Originally, Yin refers to the comparative shade and coolness caused by shelter from

direct sunlight, and Yang signifies the sunlit areas. The Yin-Yang symbolism implies how men and women are equal as they cannot exist nor survive without the other.<sup>17</sup> When applied to the Chinese societal context, the Yin-Yang dualism designates the assortment of symbolic depictions that shape and guide the human pneuma or breath (qi 气).<sup>18</sup> Qi and blood are crucial for the subsistence of the organ systems of the human body for stipulating physical vitality. To refrain from the exhaustion of qi and blood to live longer, contemporary Chinese practitioners abide by the religious teachings of Daoism by incorporating these elements into breath work (qigong 气功) and bodily movements. As a result, these techniques have become a prevalent form of Daojiao rituals, manifesting through daily exercising and healing. Since the majority of its masters have been men, qigong has espoused a naturalized category of masculinity involving pertinent gender ideologies.<sup>19</sup> In particular, the Chinese qigong masters possess the ultimate physiological qualities of Yang with a heightened sense of "hypermasculinity" that endows these male masters with the superhuman powers of longevity, invulnerability, and potency.<sup>20</sup> Such framings of manliness perpetuated by the Daoist fitness routines politicize sex and gender, categorizing masculinity in terms of survival, vigor, and strength, which we, as Chinese women, can also personify. Extending the realm of discussion from qigong to exercising in general, just because it is uncommon for us to attain a high level of expertise in physical exertion does not mean that we should normalize and deify the male-oriented success in mastery in negligence of our own concerns and efforts for wellness. Namely, Wang Yaping, a 41-year-old Chinese female astronaut, has recently become the first Chinese woman to enter China's space station inside the Tianhe core module, bridging the gender gap in the fields of space exploration.<sup>21</sup> Her prowess, strength, and determination to meet high physical and emotional standards for extended extraterrestrial missions set the paradigm of female empowerment with her deft operation of qi and blood to be healthy, defying the orthodox circumstances of Yang. The discourses about the propriety of characterization of virility and womanhood are further invigorated within the philosophy of Chinese Buddhism on its theological contextualization and explication of the corporal and spiritual inferiorities of females.

**Buddhist scriptures and descriptions of the sordidness of women.** The nonsecular scripts of Chinese Buddhism contribute to the ambivalence of masculine and feminine merits by probing the natural corporeal and psychical conditions of women in association with emotionality, weakness, and enslavement to reproductive necessity. These sacred texts examine why Buddhahood seems inevitably unachievable for women. *The Wonderful Dharma Lotus Flower Sutra—The Universal Door Of Guanshiyin Bodhisattva (The Lotus Sūtra 《妙法莲华经》)* is one of the most institutional and venerated Sanskrit literature that has laid the foundation for the Buddhist doctrines in China for offering insights into the Dharma teachings as well as spiritual guidance toward nirvana. According to *The Lotus Sūtra*,

"The body of a woman is filthy and not a vessel for the Dharma [...] What is more, a woman's body has five obstacles: one, she cannot become a Brahma Heaven King; two, she cannot become Sakra; three, she cannot become a Mara (demon); four, she cannot become a Wheel-turning sage king; five, she cannot become a Buddha."<sup>22</sup>

(“女身垢秽，非是法器……又女人身、犹有五障，一者、不得作梵天王，二者、帝释，三者、魔王，四者、转轮圣王，五者、佛身。”<sup>23</sup>)

As stated, we cannot become a Brahma Heaven King that lords over the heavenly realm Brahmaloaka, where inhabitants are free

from sensual desires. This corresponds to the folk taboos of Yin blood (yin xue 阴血) that describe our contribution to reproduction as a numinous contamination that uses inherent lecherousness through femininity. Experiencing the physical processes of menses and having reproductive fluids that nourish the fetus damage our corporeal and metaphysical purity, which contrives the cultural norms of “female pollution.”<sup>24</sup> Although the abandonment of austerity by male monks through re-secularization (huansu 还俗) and re-marriage is socially acceptable, we cannot become Sakra because we are salacious; we cannot become a Mara because demons possess masculine characteristics of heftiness and impregnability whereas we are tenuous and sickly; we cannot become a Wheel-turning sage king because we have intense jealousy toward one another; we cannot become a Buddha or obtain bodhi (awakening) and vimutti (release from clinging and craving) because we are born with restless minds and are doomed to live in vexation.<sup>25</sup> Hence the qualities of womanhood are confined to the ineluctably negative traits of lasciviousness, covetousness, intemperance, and indignation, which encumber us from Buddhahood.

The Buddhist theologies never explicitly advocate for the stringency of feminine and manly values despite their controversial descriptions of womanhood and absolute lionization of masculinity. Instead, Chinese Buddhism proposes that femininity and manhood can be mutually inclusive within a human, and women can even convert themselves to retain more manly attributes, which is often overlooked in contemporary society. One of the mythical narratives in *The Lotus Sūtra* about the Buddhahood of the dragon king’s daughter emphasizes such merging and transcending binary categories. In the story, the dragon princess worked incessantly to expand her knowledge of the karmas of all living beings, willingly and diligently suffering through countless eons to relinquish the antipathetic feminine dispositions to cultivate all paramitas (perfections) for enlightenment with omniscience, compassion, and benevolence.<sup>26</sup> Her dedication, harmonious mind, and refined will empower her to arrive at bodhi and perfect the Bodhisattva conduct by eventually transforming into a man. Though this religious anecdote is solely contingent upon hallowed grounds bereft of secular validity, its lessons and the implicit fluidity of womanly and virile accounts are worthy of our individuate-reflective causes and reconsiderations of what it means for us to be women in China. Tracing the historical, ecclesiastical, and cultural trajectories of feminism clarifies our understanding of how the Ruist, Daoist, and Buddhist philosophies bring about feminine and masculine properties through Chinese societal traditions, services, activities, and religious observances in Chinese society in order to consolidate our common grievances for progression.

## Gender affairs in China

**Domestic implications of the interrelation between gender and Chinese culture.** Uncovering the philosophical ideas and theologies on the obscurities and ontological nature of manhood and womanhood is vital for comprehending why people may behave the way they do in a patriarchal society and how these gender stereotypes have become intergenerational and ingrained in Chinese culture. Such matters are manifested in the prospects of life for both men and women, especially about their contentious attitudes toward marriage and its liturgical appropriateness of betrothal gifts (caili 彩礼) and ethicality of dowries (jiashuang 嫁妆). Betrothal gifts are a man’s largesse to his fiancée for their formal engagement to be married, such as banknotes, jewelry, property, wine, automobile(s), furniture, and home appliances. Dowries, on the other hand, usually consist of the assets or money offered by a bride to her bridegroom after their marriage,

including her cosmetics, electronic devices, credit cards, and house(s) if her family is wealthy. Even though arranged marriages, mercenary marriages, the exaction of money or other property by way of marriage, and other acts interfering with the freedom of marriage are proscribed by the Civil Code of China, gift-giving has been the most indispensable historical convention of matrimony and a performative indication of mutual love and affection.<sup>27</sup> Such procedures are reciprocal as the more a man cares about his spouse and the more he gifts, the more she requites his hospitality in her dowries.

Contrary to the extremist Western feminist liberation from the conjugal bond, we insist that marriage is not a zero-sum game that exclusively benefits men at the expense of the prosperity or freedom of women, nor are divorce proceedings the universal solution to disentangling from toxic and damaging relationships that all of us can manage and handle due to societal Communist stigmas. I concede that in rural areas of China with high rates of poverty and low urban population densities, arranged marriages in which parents of the bride are lumbered with disadvantageous socioeconomic conditions tend to “sell” their daughter off for wealth and other material rewards through nuptial bequests from her husband can still be ordinarily justified for sustaining their lineages. However, such phenomena do not account for the prevailing ancestral philosophical Ruist, Daoist, and Buddhist Chinese verdict of marriage that the salubrious family life is not just about the bloodlines. Rather, it is a mutual deal that entails a balance between masculinity and femininity in partnership. The costs of a man’s betrothal gift correlate with the patriarchal attributes of protection and provision of monetary security for his spouse and their family members; women exemplify the traditionally feminine qualities of grace and kindness in return. For these reasons, we may not be openly receptive or attentive to the Western ideals of female supremacy and complete self-sufficiency. However, this can seem parochial and problematic for Western feminists who are not invested in inspecting the retrospective aspects of patriarchy and paternity. Their ahistorical outlook in ignorance of the complicated ideological and cultural legacies of Chinese philosophies induces the untranslatability of our concerns and grievances with more misunderstandings and tensions on a global scale.

**Where to go from here?** Our philosophical, social, and political pragmatism of feminism might be drastically dissimilar from the West, but what we have encountered is interdependent with the experiences of women across the world, with a joint demand for and advocacy of women’s rights and equal treatment in societies. However, such interdependence does not rely on our anticipation of consolidating a ubiquitous or holistic conclusion of feminism. There is a multitude of feminisms, feminist theories, and methodologies.<sup>28</sup> In fact, before reaching such a state of agreement, we have been occupied with dealing with domestic divisions of our grievances. Some of us have been spreading awareness using social media about sexist stereotypes for both women and men, while others argue that Chinese citizens ought to make structural modifications to the integration of conventional philosophies within society. For us, culture and gender are convolutedly interrelated as gender inequality can be culturally mandated, which culminates in our deficiency in eliminating patriarchal practices that control women. Consequently, we are less likely to perceive gendered renegotiation and reforms in zero-sum terms (that is, when not foregrounding the purported moral or practical superiority of women’s sensibilities and stated priorities). These phenomena of mutuality and complementarity in avoidance of the melodramatic gendered oppositionality do not give us the right to discount the principal histories and ideologies of

femininity and masculinity whose remnants are prevalent in our personal, familial, and reproductive side of life as well as the public realms of leadership and political representation.

Hence, I urge my fellow Chinese women to lean into what aches and embrace the uneasiness about confronting the cultural practices that oppress us. Assessing our gendered society historically by outlining the contextual features and details, in light of the dynamics of changing social relations between women and men, is equally valuable as solidifying perspicuous resolutions to injustice against women. Such open-mindedness and receptiveness to differences between communities will help women resonate with one another and prolong the inclusive and orderly global discourse about feminism among themselves and with men.

My paper is not meant to profess my loathing of ancient Chinese philosophies, nor is it my reactionary rantings of Western feminist theories. The rudimental issue here is salient—the sources of Chinese feminism in translation remain scanty, and the milieu and content of grievances of Chinese women may be untranslatable in all respects, given the theological convolutions of history. With my Chinese patriarchal family upbringing and privilege of having experienced Western feminist empowerment and education at an all-girls high school in the United States, I agree with Lugones, Spelman, and Haslanger that women of color and their intersecting identities of gender, sex, and race are often left out within discussions about feminism. Yet I find it frustrating and challenging to infer or theorize a uniform resolution that is applicable to all communities. Witnessing the predominance of the Western feminist model over the divergent voices of women in China, I have sought to amplify one of them by writing this paper for the coverage of misinterpretation and amelioration of hostilities. Western obtrusive and schismatic gendered paradigms upon feminist philosophers and critical theorists have impeded viable resolutions and misconceived the focal roots and canonical pedigrees in Chinese history. A person can attain the comprehension of the invariant woman's experiences as intimately interconnected and explicable if they are open-minded, respectful of the differences in the woman's cultural, political, and social backgrounds, patient, and willing to learn and engage in meaningful conversations. A more productive mode of such consciousness is overdue.

Intercontinental engagement begins with our own re-examination of the Ruist, Daoist, and Buddhist accounts of masculinity and femininity to distinguish the commonality and differences between our affairs with the interests of other feminists. Confining feminism to the discontentment with White men's entitlement and imposing the universalization of grievances without giving ample consideration to the appropriateness of gender distinctions in various communities will only lead to more intellectual stagnation. It is time for all members of society to face the tragic repetition of racist, patriarchal thought and lean into the discomfort of asking what holds us back from change—we have far greater power than we might realize.

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## Notes

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## Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

## Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

## Informed consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any of the authors.

## Additional information

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