

BOOK REVIEW

Wang Zheng, *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1964* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2017)

Yang Lin, *University of California, San Diego*

The assumption that Chinese women, despite the Chinese Communist Party's gender-equality rhetoric and campaigns, had remained hapless victims of authoritarian and patriarchal oppression in the socialist period has been constantly challenged as women's studies in the field of modern Chinese history gains momentum. As we witness rural women, female factory workers, and educated urban women regaining their individual agency in historical narratives, however, one group of "nameless heroes" (50) who dedicated their life-long work to promote women's social position at the institutional level, is conspicuously absent in these narratives. *Finding women in the state*, Wang Zheng's aptly titled monograph on the state feminists' struggle to bring about a feminist revolution, has finally filled in part of the lacuna. Wang argues that state feminists—feminists in the CCP who took on various official posts after 1949—working within the constraints of a patriarchal system and the volatile political environments, adopted different strategies and initiated various agendas to strive for gender equality and women's liberation.

This is a book written with passion. It is a tribute to the much-forgotten state feminists who championed women's liberation, a eulogy honoring the ideal of socialist feminism, and an indictment of the post-socialist knowledge production that erases and negates the state feminists' accomplishments. Such passion is complemented with valuable contributions to the field of modern Chinese history, the chief among which is the book's attention to the "persistent gender line in the struggles within high politics" (2). The dearth of women in the upper echelon of the ruling elites, as well as the state feminists' adoption of a "politics of concealment" (50) has obscured the gender politics within the CCP, but with archival materials, oral history interviews, and the careful study of the state feminists' cultural productions, Wang not only found "women in the state," but also recovered their central role not only in the production of a socialist culture, but also in the processes of socialist state formation.

The book is divided into two parts. The four chapters in Part I on the institutional operation of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), its strategies in navigating the challenges from within the CCP, not only to its feminist agendas, but to its very existence, and ACWF's efforts to transform the existing gender hierarchy, gender norms, and gendered power relations through its publication, *Women of China*.

Chapter 1 presents a case study of the Shanghai Women's Federation (SWF) in the early 1950s to illustrate the influence of the women's federation in urban China and the predicament

of the federation as a gender-based mass organization. Despite the SWF's popularity among women and its effective organization of housewives for neighborhood work, SWF's grassroots organization, women's congresses, were resented by many male officials, who viewed the congresses as competitors with neighborhood residents committees dominated by men. The hostility towards women-work within the administration threatened the survival of the congresses, and only with the interference of the ACWF leaders, whose party ranking surpassed the municipal officials and whose husbands occupied important positions in the central government, did the congresses survive temporarily. The tug-of-war over the women's congresses illustrates the marginalization and subordination of women's organizations by masculinist power, as well as the CCP's lukewarm commitment to women's interests. But the accomplishments of the SWF in the contentious environment also demonstrated the women officials' "successful maneuvering behind the scenes, rather than from some favor granted by a benevolent patriarch" (47). An important strategy for such successful maneuvering is the "politics of concealment," where state feminists appropriate key words in the state agenda to "claim legitimacy and authority for promoting women's rights and interests," and conceal their agency by representing their achievements as the accomplishment of the Party (22). An excellent example of this strategy is the reinterpretation of "feudalism" by the state feminists. By making "feudalism" a "gender-inflected key word encompassing everything we today call sexism, masculinism, patriarchy, male chauvinism, and/or misogyny, the state feminists successfully folded their cause under the Party's "anti-feudalism" agenda (14).

Chapter 2 delves into the story behind the ACWF's conservative turn in its approach to women's liberation in 1957. While previously the ACWF had promoted women's participation as a means of achieving women's liberation, at the Third Women's Congress, the ACWF announced a "double diligences" (56) policy, which made household management the primary duty for women in the following four years. The ACWF's previous radical position on gender equality threatened the state agenda of socialist construction and the patriarchal order, prompting some top officials to suggest the abolishment of the ACWF. This move to promote "double-diligence", engineered by Deng Xiaoping behind the scene, was a necessary compromise with the masculinist power in the Party to justify the continuing existence of the ACWF. But Deng did not help the ACWF on his own initiative. Wang points out the crucial role played by Deng Yingchao in getting the ACWF the help of Deng Xiaoping, a long-time comrade. Situated at the

near bottom of the Party's power structure, the utilization of informal relations was often the most effective way to promote women's interest. The entanglement of the personal and the political was a feature "crucially relevant to feminist pursuits" (248).

Personal relationships featured prominently in a critical moment in the history of the ACWF, but this time to the detriment of the feminist cause. Chapter 4 recounts the attack on the ACWF publication, *Women of China*, by Chen Boda, a senior Party theoretician and secretary to Mao Zedong. In a 1964 article published in Red Flag, the CCP Central Committee's theoretical journal, Chen accused the editors of *Women of China* of lacking class perspective and championing bourgeois humanism. Chen targeted two magazine forums dedicated to gender issues, especially domestic life and conjugal relations, as proof of the editor's deviating from class analysis. Although oral interviews with an editor indicted in Chen's article suggests that Chen's attack was motivated by personal animosity, Wang closely compares Chen's article and the editorials of *Women of China* to explicate the ideological differences between the state feminists and the Party patriarchy: while the state feminists considered the relationship between the socialist revolution and women's liberation as symbiotic, the patriarchy saw it as hierarchical (126).

The 1964 crisis effectively ended the editors' efforts to transform gender relations by addressing the common concerns of its women readers. But between the birth of *Women of China* in 1949 and 1964, the editors of the magazine actively shaped revolutionary cultural images of gender, at times diverging from the Party Central's agenda, even challenging sexism in the Party (78). Chapter 3 describes how the magazine developed into a forum for the "general public to articulate their opinions on issues relating to women" and a culture front for "transforming patriarchal culture and shaping new socialist subjectivities" (79). Although the majority of the magazine's readers were women with some education and government officials, the editors were committed to promote the image of the subaltern. Rural and ethnic minority women were consistently the most prominent cover themes, even as the content of the magazine had to adapt to the ever-changing political atmosphere. Wang locates the state feminists' agency in the discrepancies between the contents and the cover images and sees it as proof for their covert efforts to further the feminist cause.

Part II of the book shifts gears to examine the film industry and the state feminists' central role in creating the image of "revolutionary heroines in both war and peace" (15). Chapter 5 and chapter 6 are two mini-biographies of Chen Bo'er and Xia Yan respectively. Chen Bo'er, a strong advocate for the emancipation of the lower-class women, pioneered the practice of *xiashenghuo*, or fieldwork, where filmmakers spent a period of time among the people they were about to depict, and the collaboration between the filmmakers and the masses (163). Chen's practices predated Mao's Yan'an Talks, and Wang takes the opportunity to refute the argument that Mao's Talks were a "monologue singularly produced in the great leader's mind for the purpose of controlling Party members and harnessing artists' creativity" (159). In addition to these methodological innovations, Chen's biggest contribution lies in her depiction of

women workers/peasants/soldiers on the screen, which makes their sacrifice to the revolution visible.

Xia Yan, the only male feminist featured in the book, took up Chen Bo'er's baton and went on to create a number of memorable female heroines on the screen, who represented the state feminists' idea of what the "real new women" were and of the old patriarchal orders they should be fighting against. By illustrating the initiatives and input from the state feminists like Chen and Xia in creating the "pervasive images of brave, selfless revolutionary heroines (198)," Wang argues against the assumption that the authoritarian patriarchal state, represented by men, were the sole authors of these images and the socialist culture that is associated with these images.

The feminists' vision of the socialist culture was repressed and replaced with Xia's downfall and Jiang Qing's rise, which is the subject of Chapter 7. As Jiang's model operas dominated the cultural realm, her version of revolutionary heroines-- women who took leadership roles in previously male-dominated areas--became the "best-known artistic representations of women" (215). The majority of these women had no "familial relationships, let alone romantic love interest" (215). The only thing that marked them as women were gender-inflected symbols like long hair or red clothes. As a result, gender contentions were rendered invisible by class struggle. Wang interprets the central role of women in Jiang Qing's operas not so much as the result of her feminist consciousness, but her "aspiration to operate in the center of a man's world like a man" (217).

The last chapter of the book takes on the condemnation of representations of strong heroines championed by the state feminists in the post-Mao years. Taking the "Iron Girls" as an example of the CCP's masculinization of women, men, and some elite women, attack the socialist gender policies and negate the state feminists' achievement in women's liberation. Given the "Iron Girls" were rural laboring women, such critique has a class dimension to it too—it not only aims to restore and reinforce the gender hierarchy, but also the urban/rural divide. In Wang's view, this rhetoric is proof to the post-socialist Chinese elites' indifference to rural women, and possibly their anti-socialism agenda and the "pursuit of a capitalist modernity" (237). Meanwhile, the hegemony of this narrative, in and outside China, erases the voice of the subaltern—for example, the leader of the "Iron Girls" who looks back at her youth nostalgically—and illustrates the "locally situated power relations in knowledge production" (234). Mistaking the elite voices as the "native voices", the western academia is complicit in the circulation of this knowledge as well (235).

Finding Women in the State is ambitious in its scope. In addition to the subject of state feminism, it also addresses other prominent issues in modern Chinese history, for instance, the assumption of an omnipotent and homogeneous CCP ruling class (Wu, 2014; Brown and Pickowicz, 2010), the Party-artist relationship (Goldman, 1967; Link, 2000), the continuity between the CCP as a state power holder and the CCP as a grassroots organizer (Gao, 2014), and the primacy of the cultural dimension in the power struggles (Clark, 2008; Mittler, 2012). Meanwhile, the book also raises more possibilities of inquiry. To list a few: Male officials, both those who agitated

to disband the women's congresses in Shanghai, and the top leaders who questioned the usefulness of the ACWF, appear to be faceless men who took the patriarchal position by default. With the exception of Xia Yan, were the proponents and detractors of state feminism neatly divided along the gender line? How did the state feminists reconcile with the administrative arrangement in which women students and workers were organized separately into Youth Associations and Trade Unions and outside their purview? Is it possible, or necessary, to discern the personal and the political in political maneuvering? If Chen Boda's attack on *Women of China* "failed miserably to make a splash in the political center (137)" and was motivated mainly by personal animosity, how much was his theoretical justification for the attack reflective of the attitude of the Party patriarchy? Are there any sources available to shed some lights on Mao's stand on the Women Question? Does writing a new inscription for *Women Of China* effectively remove Mao from the list of suspected attackers, given his capricious political temperament (134)? How did the role of personal connection, especially the influence and power of the first generation of the ACWF leaders change during the period covered in the book? How did the rise of Jiang Qing both adversely and positively influence the state feminist cause? Did Jiang Qing, arguably one of the most powerful woman of the century, ever articulate her opinion on feminism? Is there any other possible interpretation for the "booming sex industry" except for as a "invisible indicator of masculine potency" (241) (Zhang, 2015) ? Finally, what are some of the differences the socialist culture, co-authored by the state feminists, made in women's everyday life? For example, how much did the socialist cultural representation really change the perception of the rural laborers being inferior to the urbanites (Brown, 2012)? This is not meant to be a criticism of the book. Given the difficulty in accessing archival materials and the scale of the project, the author has done an impressive job rescuing the state feminists' history from the nation. Rather, this shows how this

book serves as an inspiration for further academic investigation on state feminism in China.

Finally, there are two minor issues I would have liked the author to address in the book. First, there are places where the author uses published interviews and memoirs as critical support for her arguments, for example, Luo Qiong's deep gratitude to the "guidance of the Central Committee and comrade Deng Xiaoping" in coming up with the "double diligences" slogan as the ACWF's guiding policy (56), the rural women's articulation of "new subjectivities shaped by the CCP's 'women-work'" described by Chen Bo'er, or "Iron Girl" Guo Fenglian's "conscious rejection of the hegemonic gender discourses in the post-socialist era" (239). Without necessarily compromising the credibility of the sources, a brief discussion on the context of these publication—when and how they were produced and for what purposes—might better inform the readers' understanding of the materials. Second, while I appreciate Wang's critique of the contemporary elites' discourse on the socialist gender politics, the interpretation of it as the scheme of the post-Mao intellectuals who finally broke from their class categorization as "class enemies" (238), and proof of their "full collaboration with the new CCP leadership's agenda" needs to be better substantiated. Moreover, instead of reading it as evidence for the urban-educated women being complaisant partners of the male elites in reproducing patriarchy authoritarianism and class realignment, the "realistic" flashbacks" of urban educated women on their experiences of "masculinization" as represented by the writer Zhang Xinxin in her novel, perhaps merits a more empathetic reading. Women like Zhang only make up a small percentage of the women population, and their disproportionately large role in knowledge production did contribute to the dominant discourse of the masculinization of women, but this does not invalidate their subjective experiences.

Works Cited

Brown, Jeremy, *City Versus Countryside in Mao's China: Negotiating the Divide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
 Brown, Jeremy and Paul G. Pickowicz eds., *Dilemmas of Victory: The Early Years of the People's Republic of China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007)
 Clark, Paul. *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
 Mittler, Barbara. *A Continuous Revolution: Making Sense of Cultural Revolution Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012).

Gao, James Zheng, *The Communist Takeover of Hangzhou: The Transformation of City and Cadre, 1949-1954* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004).
 Goldman, Merle, *Literary Dissent in Communist China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).
 Link, Perry, *The Uses of Literature: Life in the Socialist Chinese Literary System* (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 2000).
 Wu, Yiching. *The Cultural Revolution at the Margins: Chinese Socialism in Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).
 Zhang, Everett. *The Impotence Epidemic: Men's Medicine and Sexual Desire in Contemporary China* (Durham: Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

Response to Lin Yang's Review

Wang Zheng, *University of Michigan*

Lin Yang's review presents the most careful reading and thoughtful analysis of the book up to date. I am grateful that the *PRC History Review* and Yidi Wu arranged for her to review, as she has keenly grasped my main points and astutely noticed gaps in the historical narratives I constructed. I thank Lin Yang for enabling me to elaborate some points I did not manage to articulate clearly in the book. Since Lin Yang's review presents a succinct summary of my book with nuanced reading of each chapter that highlights the main thesis, I will just go straight to addressing the questions she raises.

Were the proponents and detractors of state feminism neatly divided along the gender line? No. My inclusion of Xia Yan was to illustrate that the presence of a subjectivity shaped by the May Fourth feminism was manifested among both educated women and men. Certainly not all the educated men and artists of the New Culture May Fourth generation could be listed as feminists even though many of them embraced the slogan "equality between men and women." As I argued in *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories* (1999), in the massive literary representations of Chinese women's victimization and oppression, "women" were often used as a trope for literary male elite to represent their subconscious desires and anxieties or conscious critiques of the political and social systems. Still, some men who had both empathy and strong intellectual capacity were genuinely able to feel the pains inflicted on women by injustice in gender arrangements, and further, were capable to see the connection between a hierarchical gender system and the ills of Chinese socio-economic and political systems. For such male intellectuals, they found globally circulating feminist ideas and critiques not only convincing but also having the power to transform the Chinese patriarchal culture, or, in their terminology, "feudalist culture." Xia Yan was but one of such New Culturalists who embraced feminism, though probably the most prolific one. In my study of women and gender in modern China, I see the educated men informed by New Culture May Fourth feminism as belonging to a unique cohort whose subjectivity formation was contingent to a specific historical time and location.

I gave Xia Yan more than one chapter's space in the book not only because he illustrates the existence of the cohort of male feminists in that particular historical context but also because his life trajectory epitomizes the historical process that displayed that generation of Chinese left intellectuals' (male and female) aspirations, practices, struggles, triumphs, dilemmas, and ultimate defeat in accomplishing their visions of cultural transformation. However, their defeat ought not be taken as the reason to delegitimize their visions and their historically contingent practices. If in the second decade of the twenty-first century another Chinese emperor were ever to emerge, would we find that a *déjà vu* of the situation Chen Duxiu encountered in 1915 that stimulated him to launch a New Culture Movement? The viability and potency of Chinese imperial power interwoven with patriarchal power warrants a revisit of the New Culture intellectual critiques of "Chinese feudalism" as well as a historical investigation of when, why,

and how that grand project of cultural critique and cultural transformation was aborted. Obviously, the limited space in the book only allowed me to initiate such an investigation rather than exhaust all the dimensions relating to these questions.

Rather than drawing a gender line between those who embraced or rejected a feminist position in the history of the CCP, I have found that categories of generation and location play a more prominent role. To put it simply, the reach of the May Fourth feminist discourse makes a crucial difference. The CCP's rank and file in the wars were constituted mainly by rural peasants, many of whom were illiterate. However, those who took leading positions at various administrative levels and Party branches after 1949 were often selected from the pool of these "old revolutionaries" who had demonstrated loyalty and tenacity on the battle ground. Given this particular constitution of the CCP leading cadres, it was totally understandable that the chances for the Women's Federation cadres to find a sympathetic ear from their superiors in the government were very slim. Likewise, it was also understandable why socialist cultural production had demonstrated strong feminist orientations. The young left artists and literary people informed by the May Fourth feminism were concentrated in the cultural realm after 1949, often taking leadership positions as well. Besides Xia Yan, other men of his cohort also produced lots of cultural products in various forms that continued an anti-feudalist agenda openly critiquing patriarchal culture and celebrating women's accomplishments.¹ Even the younger cultural producers who were taught directly by the May Fourth generation of artists also showed understanding of the agenda of feminist cultural transformation in their literary representation. An obvious example in this regard is Li Zhun's *Li Shuangshuang*. Li Zhun's essay on how he was excited and inspired by rural women activists he encountered in his fieldwork vividly articulated a New Culture belief, which was a coalesce of feminism and nationalism, that is, for China to become modern, not only "feudalism" should be transformed but more importantly, Chinese women's rejecting a "feudalist" subjectivity held the key to this transformation. Up to Li Zhun's time, male cultural producers generally hailed the emergence of strong women who unambiguously demonstrated their autonomy and agency. And this celebratory artistic representation was framed in the dominant concept and agenda of "anti-feudalism." As I argued in the book, the downfall of Xia Yan in 1964 signified the end of the anti-feudalist agenda in the cultural realm.

However, the dominant gender discourse and mechanisms produced by socialist state feminists persisted in various realms. The Iron Girls who emerged in 1963 were the embodiment of the effects of the official gender discourse in the socialist period that celebrated strong women's disruption of both gender and class hierarchies. The rapid rise of the Iron Girls as the symbol of the Chinese women's liberation in the Cultural Revolution, paradoxically, continued anti-feudal practices in a time when cultural production was forced to shift to a "proletarian cultural agenda" of "class struggles" exclusively, as I demonstrated in

the book. The complexity of the historical processes is such that there are always competing and contradicting forces, practices, and discourses at work. The intricate entanglement of messy trajectories and multi-faceted developments on the ground often makes scholarly narratives look pale and simplistic. I wished to present the complexity in the actual history as closely as possible in my historical narrative, yet I also understood that it was unrealistic to address such complexity in the space of one or two chapters. That is why I am truly glad to see many good questions for further inquiries raised by Lin Yang.

For Jiang Qing's role in the Cultural Revolution, my book only focused on her maneuvers in the film industry and her work in promoting "revolutionary model operas." Her actions and impacts were certainly not limited to these realms. I think it would be highly interesting to further investigate the ways in which she operated in male dominated high politics, how her gender identity affected her political performance, what the symbolic power of her political power generated and in what concrete ways her power impacted gender relations and gender practices in the CR and the following years. Of course, not all the questions we are fascinated by can be investigated given the increasingly tighten-up access to archives in the PRC. A lot of puzzles have to be left to future historians.

However, one important question raised by Lin Yang deserves immediate investigation. That is, what are some of the differences that the socialist culture, co-authored by the state feminists, made in women's everyday life? An important method to address this question is an oral history of the generation of ordinary women, urban and rural, educated or not, who grew up in the socialist period. Such research is feasible to conduct. In fact, my chapter on the Iron Girls heavily relies on the oral histories of Dazhai Iron Girls and interviews of other Iron Girls by other scholars, besides deploying my own experience of being an Iron Girl on a farm in my youth.² Another important method is discourse analysis. If we agree with the post-structuralist insight that "language constructs," tracing and analyzing the changes of dominant gender discourses would be highly useful for understanding changes of the construction of gendered subjectivities. But again, we still have to pay tremendous attention to location (both social and geographical) and generation in order to assess the reach of dominant gender discourses in different historical periods in such a vast and diverse country like China. Perhaps we can further concretize our research questions, such as: when urban/rural divide is maintained by state policies, would different official discourses make a difference in urban/rural people's relations and perceptions of each other as well as understandings of themselves? Judging from my personal experience, the answer is affirmative. A dominant socialist ideology that extolled peasants as the masters of New China and Iron Girls as heroines, certainly had different effects on people from that of dominant social Darwinist and masculinist ideologies that categorize rural people as the "low-end population," and strong women as "masculinized" women. Still, much empirical research is needed to understand how and to what extent ordinary Chinese people's gendered subjectivities have been changed and what the expressions of such changes are.

A related critical point in Lin Yang's review is in regard to the oral history material I used in the book. I accept her criticism that the context of the production of those oral materials should be foregrounded and analyzed. I could have moved the footnote 2 in Chapter 8 to the body of the text to elaborate on Dazhai Iron Girls' oral histories produced by scholars in China in various forms. I see such production in itself as a scholarly performance of resistance against the erasure of Dazhai people's collective endeavors by the master narrative that celebrates Deng Xiaoping's "new" era of privatization. To what extent were Dazhai Iron Girls and villagers conscious of this resistance stance in their refusal to present their memories of a collective past in the mode of "speaking bitterness?" That is not something I can answer with confidence as I did not have a chance to conduct face-to-face interviews myself, although in some narrators' tones and choice of words, especially in Guo Fenglian's interviews on TV, I see clearly signs of such consciousness. How can we be sure that such oral histories constructed in a different historical era authentically represent the narrators' lived experiences in the past rather than a retrospective construction mainly responding to the time when the interviews were taken? For me a useful method to assess the validity of narrators' memories is to check the key words. In China's rapid changes in the past century, a huge quantity of new phrases was coined against specific historical contexts, in fashion one day and dropped out of circulation the next. When a narrator adopts a phrase that was only used in the past and no longer in circulation now, I can be pretty sure that that part of the narrative genuinely reflected her experience of a particular moment in the past.

I used this same method to analyze literary texts to identify retrospective constructions of so-called "experiences of being masculinized." This point is to address Lin Yang's question on whether my reading of Zhang Xinxin's novel lacks empathy of the author's "subjective experience." I do not think any articulation of "subjective experiences" can be ahistorical or without a context. Or, rather, the formation of subjectivity is always saturated in historically specific languages, ideologies, and values that provide meanings to a subject's corporeal existence. Certainly, the hardship of manual labor could be extra taxing for urban young women who were not used to such work (actually, my back was injured by such heavy manual labor on the farm). But the meaning of such hardship and the way in which any historical being articulates it is historically contingent. In other words, during the Cultural Revolution when a young urban woman was carrying heavy loads like what any other peasant women were doing, the language that went through her mind to give meanings to the physical pain she was enduring could not be "I am masculinized." The phrase "masculinization of women" was not in circulation in the PRC until after the Cultural Revolution ended. Likewise, no Chinese women before the late nineteenth century would use the phrase "oppression of women" to describe her pain of foot-binding.

In fact, Zhang Xinxin's novel presents an excellent anthropological account of the process of the retrospective construction of the protagonist's "experience of being masculinized." In the protagonist's attempt to understand why she failed to attract the man she loved, she began to examine

her “unfeminine” behaviors in the “male gaze.” Her soul searching did not stop there. She also tried to reflect on the historical process in which her “masculinization” was completed in the Cultural Revolution. Here is when her “flashbacks” of heavy manual labor she performed in the rural society emerged, among a range of episodes in which the protagonist was forced to shoulder all kinds of burdens, physical or mental. In the author’s description, before the protagonist wished to form a heterosexual romantic relationship with the man who commented on her “unfeminine” behavior, she had never thought of applying this category of “masculinization” to all the things she went through. This point is historically accurate, and significantly captures the moment of shift in the mainstream gender discourses and its effects on ordinary women’s everyday life. Thanks to the novelist’s sensitive observations, we now have a valuable primary source to trace the critical moments of discursive changes in post-Cultural Revolution China. The novel’s illustration of retrospective construction of so-called “historical experiences” warrants the attention of any scholar who intends to investigate ordinary people’s lives in the socialist period. The public knowledge of the socialist period has been so far largely produced by literary representations in the same historical setting as this novel. How to use such texts as primary sources is a question of paramount importance for scholars.

One more question raised by Lin Yang I would like to address is, is it possible, or necessary, to discern the personal and the political in political maneuvering? I have long observed an obvious gap between political commentators and scholars in their descriptions of Chinese politics. Scholarly works,

especially by political scientists, tend to apply theoretical frameworks to large patterns they observed without paying attention to political players’ personal relations and the social networks they have built. But if you go to any platform to listen to any Chinese commentators on Chinese politics, you will find that a prominent hobby among them is to show their knowledge of intricate personal networks of political players, who is whose former boss or subordinate, or student or friend, or who is whose brother-in-law or other kinship. The unsaid but shared understanding among these self-made commentators (meaning without disciplinary training) is that, of course, we are talking about politics in a society constituted of and operated by *guanxi*, a key feature of the Chinese society that has been studied by generations of Chinese sociologists starting with Fei Xiaotong. Besides the political commentators, the memoirs and autobiographies of political players are often filled with details of personal networks, highlighting the importance of such personal relations in their careers. With all the contrasting evidence, I have long suspected that some disciplinary trainings may have serious reductive effects on understanding Chinese specificities. My narratives of the close relationship between the personal and political, in other words, were not stimulated by any political theories but were based on my study of primary source materials. This is not to say that one has to study the relationship between the personal and political. This is to say, if your primary source material presents you with phenomena that do not have appearance in ready-made theories, that is exactly your chance to examine, analyze, and elaborate these little studied phenomena.

¹ Films with an anti-feudalist agenda produced by artists of Xia Yan’s cohort include: *Wangzi qianhong zongshichun* Shanghai Film Studio, 1959, and *Nü lifashi*, Shanghai Film Studio, 1962,

² For a collective memoirs of women growing up in the socialist period, see *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing up in the Mao Era*, edited by Xueping Zhong, Wang Zheng, and Bai Di, Rutgers University Press, 2001.