Reading Wendy Larson's *Women and Writing in Modern China* (1998) to Reflect on Gender-based Approaches in China Studies

(Wendy Larson, *Women and Writing in Modern China*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998, 267 pp. ISBN 0-8047-3151-9)

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Since the 1990s, a surging interest in questions of gender and sexuality in China Studies has prompted the production of a vast and varied body of scholarly works, in English and Chinese, which has turned to gender as an analytical category to explore mechanisms of subjectivity formation, individual agency, and relations of power in pre-modern and modern China beyond biological determinism and a male-female binary. Inspired by Joan W. Scott's theorization of gender as a category that demands historicization, the 1992 conference "Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State" at Harvard University marked a historic moment in the establishment of gender in the field of China Studies as a method of critical inquiry into rapports of subordination and ideological constructions of masculinity and femininity (Hershatter and Wang 1406). The "gender turn" that has witnessed the publication of many groundbreaking researches in the areas of social sciences, literature, culture, and the performing arts reflects a broader shift from the holistic, essentializing approach of Area Studies—which emphasizes "cultural uniqueness" and "sense of difference"—to approaches that have sought to dismantle the hegemony of orientalist epistemologies by encouraging interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives (Harootunian and Miyoshi). Take for instance Rey Chow's *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (1991). In this foundational study, Chow resorts to psychoanalytic, postcolonial, and feminist theories to productively expose the politics of discrimination and exclusion that survive in disciplinary divisions, and to reveal the capacity of (Western) theory to

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unveil that which has been concealed and oppressed. In her analysis, "woman" ceases to be an ontological entity endowed with distinct traits and emerges as a ubiquitous signifier that enables us to attend to "a dialectic of resistance-in-givenness that is constitutive of modernity in a non-Western, but Westernized, context" (Chow 170).

It is in this historical and epistemological juncture that Wendy Larson's book *Women and Writing in Modern China* (1998) ought to be situated. Echoing the legacy of Chow's method, Larson draws on different theoretical approaches, including but not limited to feminist and cultural studies, to engage with a variety of literary and non-literary texts and map reconfigurations of womanhood and the feminine in modern China. Unlike Chow, however, Larson is especially invested in teasing out the intimate connection between "woman" and "writing" as sites where the encounter of a plurality of discourses and practices—modern and non-modern, Chinese and non-Chinese—set into motion complex processes of translation and negotiation that gave rise to multiple and oftentimes ambiguous subject positions. Building on the insights of Dorothy Ko, and Meng Yue 孟悅 and Dai Jinhua 戴錦華 (see Ko; Meng and Dai), among others, Larson demonstrates how notions of woman, the female body, and writing were variously tied not only to local moral codes but also to emerging nationalist concerns. By tying changing configurations of woman and writing to the history of the nation and the formation of new aspirations and communities, Larson's book has provided a model of critical inquiry that to this day continues to inform gender-based approaches to Chinese literature and culture.

Her argument is that the introduction of "Western" notions of "*women's liberation* and the *autonomous aesthetic*" (Larson 1) in China since the late nineteenth-century enabled the emergence of new ideas concerning the role of women in society as well as their accessibility to the sphere of intellectual, cultural production. While the dissemination of Western theories was crucial to the development of these new ideas, Larson points out that Western understandings of gender roles and their respective share in the domain of literature and culture were not passively appropriated by the Chinese; those ideas were faced with specific, local notions of woman and writing. As exemplified by the traditionally opposite concepts of *de* 德 (virtue) and *cai* 才 (talent), women in China had historically been relegated to the private spheres of the house and the family where their womanhood was measured according to their capacity to perform moral virtues (*de*). They could write, but writing for women was acceptable inasmuch as it did not traverse the boundaries of the house to outflow in the public realm. The perceived subversive potential of the written text as a vehicle for women to transgress gender boundaries was reinforced by a view of women as deficient in activities that required intellectual transcendence and thought labor (*cai*); the latter being the province of male literati. In this respect, Larson departs from Tani Barlow's conceptualization of gender difference as relational and grounded on differences of positionality (see Barlow). Even though the position in a determinate context (social, familial, and so on) was crucial to defining the individual's sphere of action, Larson notes, "this relational structure does not mean that women's position was as variable or flexible as that of men" (37). Women were bound to their physicality so it was in the material realm of moral virtues as comprising a whole range of bodily practices (chastity,

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foot-binding, suicide, and other forms of physical mutilation and sacrifice) that women could express themselves and attend to their prescribed social roles.

Larson devotes an extensive discussion to the dialectic between woman and writing in pre-modern China, for this helps bring out the gendered nature of these concepts and the fact that this gendered connotation was not shaken off as China opened up to modernity. Woman and writing entered modernity as gendered concepts. But Chinese gender meanings did not coincide with Western gender meanings. It is not surprising then that foreign categories of "new woman" and "aesthetic freedom" merged and even clashed with local configurations of woman and writing. This cultural encounter (or clash), Larson contends, generated a "unique" rather than a hybrid space where alternative possibilities for women could be probed. As she unpacks the variety of voices and positions that dominated late nineteenth-early-twentieth-century debates, Larson drives our attention to the ambiguities and contradictions that changing discourses on women and writing produced as China became increasingly more committed to the project of modernity and nation-building.

An area where contradictions can be discerned is that of physical and intellectual education for women. Although intellectuals differed in the way they theorized and justified the importance of empowering women in society, it became clear that discourses on women could not be separated from discourses on national salvation. Herein lies the irony of the entire propaganda. In the first two chapters of the book (Larson 7-83), Larson shows that while more and more voices called for women's intellectual and physical training, these ideas were aimed at constructing an obedient, strong female figure that could take proper care of the house and aptly educate the children of the nation. Far from being liberatory, the rhetoric upholding women's learning ultimately took women back into the house and turned them into a function of the nation.

In the third chapter (Larson 84-130), articulations of woman and writing intersect with discussions on love. In concert with May Fourth iconoclasm, free love became a symbol of independence for women and denunciation of centuries of oppression inflicted on women through the Confucian institutions of the family and marriage. Women writers participated in love debates and love turned into a prominent topic in their literary creation. Nevertheless, as Larson's analysis of specific works by Chen Hengzhe 陳衡哲 (1890-1976), Lu Yin 庐隐 (1898-1934), Ling Shuhua 凌叔华 (1900-1990), and Bing Xin 冰心 (1900-1999) suggests, textual representations of female love rested on the fundamental antagonism between women's pursuit of bodily satisfaction and literary ambitions. Even though women writers made a great effort to allow an interaction between women's bodily/emotional experience and their intellectual aspirations, their fictional narratives (short stories and novels) invariably portray the female body as an obstacle to women's literary accomplishment. In many of these stories, the effacement (or sacrifice) of the female body is a necessary condition to the woman's attainment of intellectual success. In spite of their struggle to carve a space for literary pursuits, women writers failed to reconcile their physicality with their

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intellectual impulses. They continued to perceive the literary field as a male-gendered domain.

In a similar way, the increasing participation of women in writing practices and the establishment of a group of prolific female writers spurred on heated discussions on the legitimacy of women's involvement in literary production; a dimension that Larson examines in the fourth chapter of her book (131-165). She first dwells upon male intellectuals' responses to the phenomenon of women's literature (*funü wenxue* 婦女文學 or *nüxing wenxue* 女性文學). Although positive claims to women's affiliation with literature can be found in Xie Wuliang's 謝無量 (1885-1964) history of women's literature in China, as well as in some of Zhou Zuoren's 周作人 (1885-1967) and Liu Linsheng's 劉麟生 (1894-1980) articles, a negative attitude toward women's literature prevailed. Criticism revolved around the self-centeredness and excessive self-absorption of women's literature as impediments to women's understanding of society and the reality of the outside world. Notably, the relation between women and literature is given a negative portrayal even in the work of women writers. Then, how do we explain these women's unwavering effort to represent a female subjectivity in their literary production? For Larson, "rather than being merely the representation of a trivial world of self-absorption, the privileging of female subjectivity becomes a way for women writers to probe the psychological and material boundaries of moral virtue and to propose new configurations" (164).

Around the late 1920s and into the 1930s, attempts by male critics to make literature feminine and characterize women as "innately literary" (177) turned out to be a problematic move, Larson explains in the last chapter. As she notes, "the tradition they elevated is the same tradition of lyricism and emotionality that had undergone unrelenting criticism since the May Fourth movement […]; second, the conditions for the production and excellence of this literature, the confinement and separation of women, were precisely the conditions that reformers had been trying to change" (177). Similarly, the consolidation of the leftists' emphasis on literature's engagement with national issues, at a time when the threat of foreign imperialism had become more pressing for China, generated harsh criticism against the alleged inwardness of women's literature. They called for a new ungendered aesthetics that demanded of the writers to use literature as a tool to serve the national struggle for independence and sovereignty.

In other words, by the beginning of the 1930s, neither *de* nor *cai* were available subject positions for women writers. Both the feminization of literature and the summoning of a socially engaged cultural production did not offer a solution to the much debated issue of women and writing. The issue is in fact an ongoing one. In spite of the leftist discourse on ungendered, engaged literature, "literature and culture have continued to retain some of their traditional masculine prestige" (Larson 206). "Thus," Larson concludes, "women writers must constantly negotiate a fine line between writing as a man and thereby claiming their own share of the tradition, and writing as a woman and thereby perhaps producing a modern subjectivity but at the risk of demeaning their labor" (206).

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Larson's book has made a great contribution to the study of women's writing practices and notions of womanhood in twentieth-century China. Through the analysis of a wide range of texts and discourses, it unpacks ambiguities and contradictions inherent in reconfigurations of women and writing in modern(izing) China, beyond male-female and pre-modern/modern dichotomies. Throughout, the book challenges visions of a monolithic past to highlight the continuous and messy interactions between what was felt as pre-modern (or traditional) and what was held as a standard of modernity. Worth mentioning is also Larson's attention to the body not simply as a discursive construct but also as a material entity. By addressing the changing material conditions that allowed women to enter schools and factories, and experience forms of sociality other than normative heterosexual relationships (159-163), the book prefigures more recent efforts to couple the study of the discursive and the imaginary with the study of the material and the bodily in gender-based approaches to China.

To be sure, the book is not without shortcomings. But Larson's humility and honesty in recognizing some of the limits of the ideological underpinnings of her study deserve appreciation. Toward the end of the book, she indulges in an moment of self-reflection and acknowledges being entrapped in Western frameworks of analysis as she investigates a context that is not Western. Her take on modernity, in particular, is vague and stereotyped; modernity in this book is represented by the triumph of Western science, rationalization, liberal thought, women's liberation, and so on. Larson is inspired by Gregory Jusdanis's work on "belated modernity" in Greece and subscribes to his idea that (Western) modernity is such a pervasive, irresistible force that its accomplishment is only a matter of time. In Larson's inquiry, then, the identification of things modern with the West seems to be taken for granted and risks imparting a sense of 'inevitability' upon the historical phenomena and changes she examines.

Overall, Larson's study remains anchored to a "Western impact-Chinese response" interpretive paradigm, yet it tries to complicate the hierarchical relationship between different systems of knowledge by emphasizing the 'uniqueness' of the discursive and material domain generated by the encounter between the West and the local. New gender configurations grew out of such an encounter, even though they ultimately reasserted the same values and ideas that advocates of the modernity project in China had set out to overcome. A number of questions then naturally arise: If literature continues to mark a space for male prestige and hegemony, how is the female subject/woman writer re-configured in modern China? How does she differ from her pre-modern counterpart? If women remain trapped in the either/or choice of acting as a man or as a woman, as Larson suggests, what qualifies the female subject as modern?

Larson would respond by appealing to the heightened subjectivity awareness that features prominently in modern works by women writers. Her point, however, raises more questions than it answers, leaving the issue of how woman was reconfigured in modern China open to further inquiry. Since then, many scholars have taken up the task of continuing the exploration of changing configurations of gender from various angles. Emotion, for instance, has lent a productive perspective to illuminate constructions of gender in China (Lee). More recently, new revisionist efforts, stemming from a desire to identify a local strand of Chinese feminism that can claim its

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share in global feminist movements, has unearthed a post-structuralist undercurrent in early twentieth-century China that repurposed Western gender and colonial discourses to "re-enchant the feminine," de-stabilizing the "binary opposition of strong masculinity and weak femininity" (Zhu 5). The horizon of gender-based approaches to Chinese literary and cultural production is ever expanding. Such developments are built on the achievements of those who came before. Larson's book has provided insights and a method that have had a lasting impact on how we think of, and analyze, gender in China Studies, and remains, to this day, essential to understanding the complex relation between woman and writing in modern China.

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