

Class and Gender

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CHINA, in the 90's of the 20th century, began to undergo a drastic process of class differentiation while its social institutions were restructuring and the intervention of the globalisation process in Chinese society was deepening. Women have undoubtedly been chosen to be the social group to be sacrificed in this process. In the cultural context, this has not only meant an extension of the social and cultural processes that began in the 80's in terms of "rewriting" women: rewriting definitions and norms and redefining women's social status and identity in the process of social restructuring. It has also become one of the ways to solve, or at least to displace, social crises and social contradictions.

In a number of occasions, I have emphasised that even though Chinese Socialism or the so-called Mao's Era has become remote and alien in the cultural perspective of contemporary China, all that are happening in China now are connected with or entangled in the historical legacies and debts of Mao's Era, albeit in complex or even weird forms. Throughout the process of *gai ge kai fang* (economic reforms and the opening up of the market) that China has been undergoing, the conspicuous reconstruction of class and gender manifests in more complex and eerie ways the entanglement of the present with the real and singular historical legacies and debts of that era.

A weird scene can be witnessed on the social and cultural stage of China: the interlocking processes of rewriting and reconstructing the reality of class and gender have become themes which conceal and circumscribe each other when they are projected as social problems or appear in cultural representations. When gender is addressed, it seems to

imply a standpoint that places itself above other social problems, in particular the reality of class. But such a standpoint fails to acknowledge the reality of women, especially the sufferings of lower class women in the process of social restructuring. When a particular vision of women's resistance that "originates from the west" finds an effective counterpart in China, a particular way of life of women and their resistance becomes that of all women: representations of women and feminism inevitably become those which conceal the social reality of the survival of women. For example, in the 90's when a particular kind of women's writings and the literary criticisms that target this kind of women's writing became a distinguishable feature in the cultural landscape, the applause or the defence of a form of resistance in a kind of women's writing that is "me-my self-my monster-my body" could inevitably conceal the much more complex or much more painful reality of the fate of women and women's bodies in China in the 90's.

When we defend "women writing with their bodies"—the expression of women's bodily experience, desire and sexuality, are we able to come face to face with the dead bodies of women workers who were burnt to death or those who had become permanently disabled and were sent home with a meagre compensation as a result of being locked behind an iron gate in a fire that broke out in the Zhili Toy Factory in Shenzhen in 1993? When we rose up in defiance against the rage and the assault of the patriarchal society subsequent to particular kinds of representation of women denuding their bodies, how do we treat other episodes in the narrative about the social and cultural scenery surrounding women? For example, the many advertisements of breasts enhancing creams which say "*Zuo nu ren 'ting' hao*"¹ or "Don't let men grasp you in one hand". Or the mass of news reports on police action against the sex industry disclosing indirectly the bodily experience of women who work completely nude or half nude, or serve their customers in Japanese kneel-down style?

Behind the logic of feminist critique in terms of active/passive and gaze/being gazed, how do we deal with the logic of capitalism that is adorned and reinforced by money? In the case of the latter, is it being effectively understood and critiqued when the theme of class is being taken up? In fact, close by the expression of "my body, my self" is another scene unveiled by women's writings: use one's own body, especially when it is still "a virgin's body", as one's only capital to dig up the first bucket of gold in the Special Economic Zone. This is obviously a logic of women's subjectivity, which the patriarchal culture has refused to face. But does the discovery of such a subjectivity imply an end or a conclusion to the problems discussed above?

In fact this is a cultural reality that is formed on two different but inter-related levels. First, even though it is complex and diverse, it is still an effective construction of a new dominant ideology and that of the mass culture. It is a top-down construction that is used consciously or unconsciously to divert people's attention from the increasingly acute reality of class conflicts. When the process of social reconstruction and the attempt to displace the subsequent social crisis to women as a social group become visible and result in these realities being perceived as social problems that cannot be evaded, the women's question or the discourse on women is used by the dominant ideology and the mass culture to divert people's attention away from the question of class. The discourse is shifted to particular kinds of discussion on gender role and gender division of labour. This is so obvious in the discussion of "the assailing waves of unemployment" which is depicted as so-called problems of *xia gang nu gong* (women workers who leave their posts) the discussion of which becomes miracle stories of "stars of the reemployed" and "the woman boss who establishes her own enterprise". More interestingly, the question of women workers being robbed of their right to work has quietly become chatters about "the full time housewives" or "the professional mothers". In the stories of the happy "full time housewives", women are all "white collar beauties" or housewives that live in suburban villas.

For example, in an advertisement of a washing powder that is used by most families, the voice of the narrator is unexpectedly a girl. "Mother has been unhappy recently," the voice says. On the screen is a young woman who appears to be distressed and heavy-hearted. She looks wearily at the post-ups on the wall that advertise for recruitments. When she comes home, she sees clothes put on one side, washed and folded neatly. A tired girl lies asleep on the sofa. Tears in her eyes, the mother hugs her child. The brand name of the washing powder appears on the screen. This is the first time a *xia gang nu gong* and the problems faced by *xia gang nu gong* appear in advertisements of commercial products. This undoubtedly shows that the problem is widespread and is deepening.

In spite of this, representations in the advertisement—the family setting, the images of the mother and the daughter—all smack of "middle class" that is a must in the advertising culture. Consequently, the advertisement distances itself from the themes of survival, poverty and class that the problem of unemployment brings. What is represented is some kind of temporary difficulties faced by the individual and the family.

In fact, in the so-called turn of the century, other than this advertisement, many TV soap operas have used similar forms of expressions and representations when depicting the experience of

retrenchment of their female characters. The main female characters are usually young, beautiful, educated and have professional skills. These images have effectively hidden from public's view the real experience of the middle-aged and aged women workers who are suffering from oppression and discrimination resulting from their gender, age and educational background. On the other hand, when the official leitmotiv attempts to make use of the classical socialist discourse—the working class is the master of society—to mobilise the masses and reintegrate the society while rendering invisible the earlier discussed processes, the working class is granted the collective image of men.

Secondly, on another level, as the objects of concern and discourse in the 90's of critical intellectuals concerned with social equality, the themes of class and gender are facing the problem of rendering each other invisible while drawing on each other's perspectives. Let us put aside for a while the fact that the theme of gender is often neglected among male intellectuals (even when they are critical intellectuals) who ignore its complex manifestation and cruel reality and are more concerned with the universal theme of class. Let us also put aside the fact that feminist theories and critical resources smack of the culture of western middle class white and the consequent limitation in the coverage of their concerns with respect to the real life and social problems of women. Even when we only look at the themes and the discourse of class and of gender, the way they draw on each other and render each other invisible shows that both theories and discourses face the problem of a profound inability and contradiction in articulating the reality.

For me, class differentiation and the reconstitution of gender order are both the most prominent and cruel reality of the Chinese society in the 90's. They are entangled in such deep and complex ways that they can hardly be separated from each other. But when we transform such a mainstream reality to a kind of critical language, when we turn our eyes to and use our speeches on the lower class people and women sectors which are becoming more and more marginalized, we find ourselves faced with the problem of the poverty of theory and discourse. The existing discourses on class and gender are embodied in a language that enjoys its dominant position due to its historical origin and is characterised by its function to enable the integration of a nation. Because of this, when they are put to practical use, what results might be an unforeseen effect of rendering each other invisible instead of manifesting each other. When we draw on Marxist theoretical resources and turn our eyes to the exploitation of the lower classes and the sufferings of the lower class people who are becoming increasingly invisible; when we, in the name of

class, engage ourselves in the practice to depict anew the process of social integration, we might be turning away from the factor of gender as we look at social processes that make selections on who would be making sacrifices. We might also be neglecting the fact that the reconstitution of the gender order has an ideological function in legitimising the reality of class.

On the other hand, when we, in the name of gender, attempt to unveil the dramatic regression, in the process of so-called progress, in terms of survival and the reality of culture as women have experienced it as a social group, we might have allowed the highly contrasting realities of different classes to remain hidden. We might be able to underline and weave into one picture the “second wives’ flats”, the bustling sex industry and their “contribution” to the local treasury, the struggles of the *xia gang nu gong*, the “full-time housewives” and the “white collar beauties”, the misery of the *wai lai mei* (girls coming from outside), the “absolute privacy” of the women entrepreneurs and the trafficking of rural women. But such integration often feels sort of light and unreal because of the absence of a class perspective. When we protest against the drastic fall in the proportion of women in the workforce of big and medium-sized state-owned enterprises due to the retrenchment of women workers, how do we account for the absorption and emission of women workers and child workers from the rural areas in the large numbers of enterprises jointly-owned or solely-owned by foreigners? More often than not, we are faced with such texts like “Private Life”, “Fragments of Passion” or “The War of an Individual” which quote from and appear to verify feminist theories, and which have definitely stepped on the sore toes of male chauvinism. When we express our support and approval of these texts, are we knowingly or unknowingly endorsing the idea that the women’s urban culture in the 80’s and 90’s and the middle class-to-be and intellectual women is the ultimate, if not the only, subject of women as a whole. When we applaud the fact that at the turn of the 70’s and 80’s, as a social group, women have finally made a breakthrough in the domination of the class theory and “rose above the horizon” again, are we aware that in these same moments, the survival, the experience and the reality of the lower class women are gradually being submerged?

Let’s look at other examples. When Wei Hui, who represents “the generation born in the seventies”, had her *Shanghai Baby* rave about her material desires, her middle class imagination and idolatry of the West in the name of the Alternative or Feminism; when at the turn of the century, women’s “body-writing”, in writing about women’s bodies and laying bare their desires, turn to behavioural art in supermarkets; when women writers

sell men's underwear on which are the writers' pictures; when the rituals of autographing books and crying out "Come, have a look at the breasts of Shanghai Baby" are expressed as imaginations about and idolatry of Henry Miller, as wishes for sadistic treatment in the hands of party guards, or as depiction of the life of leisurely women in bath tubs or at bar tables as the "Raging Blossom of an Injured Flower"—how shall feminists face up to such scenes and what have they to say?

In fact, in the year 2000 when Wei Hui (and also Mian Mian) became the most popular writers in the rather sombre book market, when she was the centre of a media hype, the representative of youth culture, the hot spot of internet culture which was in vogue, and the hottest topic on women and feminism, nearly all the feminists and critics of "women's literature" have maintained a cautious silence. If this is because Wei Hui has indeed given rise to a fad which can be said to be somewhat weird, can we ignore the debates on the web—the extremely complex yet real confrontations between the sexes in response to the comment of "beautiful women always bring disasters"—and the dark billows of male chauvinistic discourse? Can we ignore the fact that *Shanghai Baby* was finally banned—the publisher was ordered to stop distributing the book, destroy the die plate, and was later ordered to "stop operation for further inspection"? There is no doubt that all these might have involved intricate politics, but they have also shown the result of the rage of the male chauvinistic culture. Even though there was a banning order and it was rumoured that the circulation of the book was "strictly prohibited", they have only boosted the sale of other writings of Wei Hui. The web version of *Shanghai Baby* has been sound and safe and its click-in rate has accelerated. In fact the complex about banned books has resulted in pirated versions of *Shanghai Baby* flooding the market and numerous imitations with titles like "Small Town Baby" circulated widely.

Another interesting thing in this cultural phenomenon is when Mian Mian, a popular woman writer as much reputed as Wei Hui, became the object of a media hype, when she is dressed Rock n' Roll and she is in fact a Rock n' Roll person, when she came "in glint and glitter" onto the "same stage" with Wei Hui, talks of fad, of women and of "body writing", another aspect of Mian Mian's writing — an aspect which might have a meaning which is more real — is completely submerged. Having been a "problem girl", a Rock n' Roll youth, a former drug addict who had tried to kick off her addiction twice, Mian Mian's life experience at the bottom of the society (or say her "fall to the earth") shows us an invisible aspect of Chinese society in the 90's. In the words of the Germans, hers is "witness to the filthy life of the lowest class in China". She has not only given shape to

“the generation that ran away from home after hearing the Rock n’ Roll music of Cui Jian” and to the culture of the anonymous urban youths, she has also allowed us to have a glimpse of the lowest class which is often absent from vogue writings and women’s writings. However, in the noisy hype and the extremely confused debates about Mian Mian’s writings, the frequently quoted words of “a face of an eighteen years’ old but a vagina of an eighty years’ old” have completely submerged what could have been an important aspect of her work, and that is a synchronization of her experience in terms of gender and in terms of class. In the subsequent barrage of words between Mian Mian and Wei Hui which has so aroused the media and the web which are both dominated by men, Mian Mian accused Wei Hui: “You are not a real Shanghainese!” (you are only a woman adventurer coming from a small city!) and Wei Hui retorted: “You don’t have any respectable qualification.”

The excitement shown by the media towards the hostility and the hatred between women completely covers up an important aspect of Chinese society that is revealed in this case: class conflict in China is often disguised as or displaced to territorial confrontations. If we are to look at Wei Hui’s writings from this perspective, her representative work is obviously not *Shanghai Baby* but *Mad Like Wei Hui*. In this book, what we read is not so much “madness” as a female version of “the youth from other provinces”. The latter is a kind of syndrome that subverted Chinese culture in the 90’s and the story of Wei Hui is but a slightly different story of personal struggle and “gold-digging”. The prejudices expressed by the two writers on the media unveils a historical and real life context in a particular way: the strict household registration system of Mao’s era established the insurmountable boundaries between the rural areas and the cities and the hierarchy between major cities, cities in the periphery and the medium and small-sized cities. The system of admission of the universities has become a modern form of civil service examination and the only way and only possibility to cross such social barriers. As a consequence of institutional changes or the result of the capitalist process, not only have some positions within the socialist institutions promptly become a kind of intangible asset in certain industries, legal right to residence in the cities has also become a kind of asset leading to promotion to higher class status. If Wei Hui’s pride about her academic qualification and her “Fudan University sentiment” reveals the implication of culture as a symbolic asset in the new social system and shows that culture is the means to changing one’s “background” and the ladder to a new “higher” class, then Mian Mian’s rebuttal is also filled with territorial and class prejudice. However, in the enthusiastic performance of sex and gender,

factors that assume forms in such social syndromes have become a presence that is expressed in its absence.

Since the 1990's, until now, a paradoxical phenomenon in the representative structure of the culture of China has expressed itself in the dilemma of not being able to have both class and gender correctness in terms of "political correctness". Representations that have a clear class consciousness, a clear stand and a streak of social resistance often carry with them rather deep-seated, blatant and perhaps unconscious gender prejudice, if not discrimination. Women's resistance and their intense gender awareness and consciousness, in the meantime, seem to be restricted to the lives of middle class women intellectuals in the cities. On the other hand, in the construction of mass culture, the discourses on class and gender conspire and draw on each other. Compared with critical discourses, mass culture is able to do so more smoothly and the result is more exuberant.

An illustrative example is a small theatre drama entitled *Che Guevara* staged in April 2000. In Beijing, this drama has been a cultural shock and an intellectual impact which was neither too small nor too big. In a certain way, this drama could be said to be the first unofficial "revolutionary drama" ever staged since the Reform in China 20 years ago. Not only was this drama not authorised by the government, its staging was very far from the wishes of the government. Not only did this drama reiterate "revolution" in the name of Che Guevara, it has also used very strong terms (crude, simple and violent terms) to talk about the confrontations between the rich and the poor in the China of today and the injustice in distribution, and questioned why such social inequalities and injustices could be so blatant and so flamboyant.

Let us put aside the question of theatre as art or the question of rethinking history. This small theatre drama was a rare work in terms of political correctness on the level of class-consciousness and as a protest against the reality. But while speaking out in the name of Che Guevara, this drama also manifested a prejudicial and discriminatory gender subconscious. This subconscious was in fact the basic elements of the narrative structure of the drama: on the stage, the famous image of Che Guevara looked down on the platform from the ceiling, in the script which was structured in the form of a great polemic, three actors played the positive forces—the revolutionaries; the negative forces—the rulers and the classes with vested interests—were played by four actresses. Consequently, repression and resistance, counter-revolutionary and revolutionary, social prejudice and social justice, were embodied on stage as the conflicts and confrontations between the male figures and the female figures even though

the image, behaviour and cultural pattern of the so-called negative forces had obviously traits that characterised the dominant male culture.

The subtext on gender did not stop here. Feminism was obviously a trivial fad that had become the object of ridicule, if not criticism, in the drama. Feminism was presented in the following way in the words of the negative forces, "I believe I am going mad for being poor! I am not afraid of being poor. I can play with stocks, with stock index, with real estate and with Internet! I can play with feminism, womanism, or any isms related to women! I can play with postmodernism, premodernism, pre and postmodernism, post and premodernism! If that's still not enough, I can play Rock n' Roll. I can play experimental, avant-garde, bastard literature or strip myself in front of my foreign friends and play nude run. There are all kinds of games in the world, so why play with revolution?"

It should be pointed out that in the landscape of the Chinese elites or that of the mass culture, such kind of gestures and stand in terms of class representation was actually rare in the 90's while the rewriting of gender and discrimination were all over the place. Hysterical and unreasonable women and women who understand and suffer for the Cause have become the two extremes in the portrayal of women in the 90's. In women's writings and other writings, there are a lot of works with women's consciousness and the consciousness to rebel, but one can say in the affirmative that all these works are about the life of urban, middle class or middle-class-to-be, intellectual women (or women who have at least the characteristics of intellectual women). Writers of these kinds of work and the main characters in these works have never cast a glance of sympathy or recognition at women of the lower classes. The emphasis on and concealment of women as a social group is very obvious in literatures and women's writings produced in Guangzhou and in the special economic zones in its vicinity. Woman writer Zhang Mei, in her rather unique works, has unveiled the process of "intermarriage" and the transfer of social status between the red aristocrats and the gold aristocrats and the "painless groans" of a rather privileged group of women through her depiction of the life of a new class of "madams" (full time house madams?).

On the other hand, Zhang Xin, the most successful woman writer in the mid 90's and who excels in popular novels, was one of the first to portray realistically and meticulously, in her romantic novels, the imperceptible but painful fall of the urban middle class in the great wave of commercialisation in the early 90's and their soreness and bitterness. Digressing from the normal storyline in romantic novels, Zhang Xin has consistently allowed her women characters to sacrifice their romance for

friendship between women. If we say that women writers in the special economic zones, in their depiction of the "painless groans" of the upper middle class women, have painted women in a way as though they were working on restoring a picture, then the "reforms of the economic institutions"—the change of the system of ownership and the reorganisation of state-owned large and medium-sized enterprises—means that the ongoing differentiation between social classes remains one of the most important realities in social life.

But the fragmented and heterogeneous ideological representations have rendered the differentiation between social classes an anonymous reality in Chinese society. To "continue writing" about and legitimise class differentiation and the existence of class under the banner of a socialist ideology that advocates the elimination of class, the abrogation of exploitation and oppression, and the abrogation of all inequalities and injustices has been one of the most important tasks of the mainstream ideology in the 90's. It has adopted the rhetoric of economic pragmatism and consumerism, and has also drawn partially on the false promise of the vision of development theory (after "allowing some to get rich first", the general society will become rich and a society in which the middle class is the subject will appear). Despite these efforts, internally it must face (though it really could not have faced) the reality of the drastic process of class differentiation and its profound and acute conflict with the ideology of classical socialism that is up till now the basis that legitimises the present government, and which must be rewritten and smothered as a social and cultural element. If it is allowed to be too direct and "real", it might become the weapon of rebellion and spiritual resources for the lower class people who have been sacrificed in this process of class differentiation.

Even though China has, in the 80's, successfully transformed the historical and cultural choice of "saying farewell to the revolution" of the elite intellectuals to a social consensus (or "cultural hegemony", to put it simply), the exploitation, abandonment and impoverishment that have been the real experience of the lower class people (former workers of state enterprises, large numbers of peasants who have been displaced as a result of urbanisation) might still drive them to draw on the familiar discourse of socialism to fight for their own interest. For these reasons, the representation of class realities and the existence of class are important content in the construction of the legitimacy of the mainstream ideology in the 90's, but it is also faced with the problem of "paying tribute to" and integrating a socialist ideology of the past which has set limitations to the discourse the overcoming of which is nearly impossible.

On the other hand, for some intellectuals who speak from the standpoint of social resistance and from a critical stand, exposing and writing about the harsh and cruel reality of the process of class differentiation and the difficulties and sufferings of the lower class people means touching directly the taboos of a political reality which still exercises a strong control on people's thought. Faced with a socialist regime, it is also difficult for the intellectuals to simply return to classical Marxism while they refuse to accept both the former and the present "official rhetoric". Trapped in a difficult situation wherein they cannot provide any effective solution to the social problems they witness, they inevitably end up facing the reality of class differentiation in a state of loss of words. Consequently, representations of this reality of class differentiation have become a hidden form of writing that are omnipresent in Chinese culture in the 90's and have often drawn on other cultural metaphors. Topics of gender/women have been one of the most important metaphors which have been used to underline and conceal at the same time the reality of the existence of class.

In China in the 90's, one form of rhetoric widely adopted by the mainstream media and mass culture was to give widespread social problems a woman's face. For example, *xia gang nu gong* has become the nickname for the mass of unemployed workers who are receiving hardly any support in the social security system. *Wai lai mei* is the resounding name for workers from the rural areas whose numbers are much more massive than that of the retrenched workers. The use of these names has allowed some prevalent social problems to be looked upon as special situations faced by one particular gender. Using the history of capitalism as a reference for a vision of "progress", these problems are then depicted and interpreted as part of a "process" and a kind of "labour pain" on which one might, illuminated by "great humanist ideals", shower one's compassion and compliments while looking away from the cruel reality that is not so far off.

This can be seen in a number of ads for philanthropic purposes. In one such advertisement, the word *ren* (human beings) is placed vertically up and on top of the word *gang* (posts) that is falling on its side. The theme that is emphasised in this advertisement is: "Be a self-empowering and self-reliant retrenched person!" Another advertisement shows a middle-aged *xia gang nu gong* wandering in the marketplace for jobseekers, unable to accept the conditions offered for "reemployment". When she sees some children coming out of a school, she remembers her own child and returns "promptly and resolutely" to the marketplace and takes a job under the category of "social service".

Another more typical example is the movie, *Beautiful Mother*. Even though it flopped at box office in China, because of the hype surrounding the movie, it was a famous movie. It was famous partly because internationally known actress Gong Li played a *xia gang nu gong*. In fact Gong Li plays a woman who, driven by her great love for her child, had "volunteered to resign from her post". Sun Zhou, the male film director, said he "wanted to do some thinking on feminism", yet in this movie what he expressed was: "In the beautiful and bright smile of women, there's a cleft which men have never crossed and would never be able to cross." It is in this way that maternal love and the sacrificing spirit in maternal love are used to conceal both the sacrifice the society demands from women and from lower class people and the reality of the kind of sacrifices which the latter are forced to make. If we look at the media reports on this movie, we might have a glimpse of the realities that are entangled with each other but which also conceal each other. First, it is due to her image as the "loving mother" and not the image of a lower class woman that Gong Li received the prestigious title of the "Goodwill Ambassador" of the United Nations even though this title is much less glamorous than her title as the "Beauty Ambassador" of L'Oreal. Second, when, for the purpose of movie promotion, Gong Li and the son in the movie met in Beijing, the "Guangzhou mother" of the boy became only an obscure prop. Third were the reports on the seminar held between Gong Li and the Little Red Caps mothers. The sad stories of these women workers who appeared to be very touched in media reports were of course specially chosen and tailored. Despite this, from the stories of these "beautiful mothers" who were not that beautiful and who were probably leading a difficult life similar to that of the character in the movie, one might still be able to glimpse that their hardship arose more from a need and a struggle to survive than from great maternal love. Here we are faced with an interesting concealment. Though a large number of male Little Red Cap workers can be seen on the streets everyday, their survival in society and the reality of their lives were hidden behind the mask of women and maternal love. As a result, the situation of the retrenched workers and the reality of the existence of class and age discrimination that lie behind the stories of the Little Red Caps are buried deeper down in the invisible limbo. Fourth, when *Beautiful Mother* was released in China, all the media and websites were reporting more enthusiastically on Hollywood's election of "beautiful mothers". It is in these moments that the real meaning of "Beautiful Mother" seems to be revealed: they are "the stories of the motherhood and the maternal love of some glamorous, elegant and privileged beauty that belong to" the kind of "eternal and charming"

stories that have nothing to do with the cruel realities that we are witnessing in Chinese society and that which are placed high above the real life stories of survival of the lower class women.

However, as I mentioned earlier, a general discussion of the immediate reality of society and class in China might not reveal thoroughly the difficulties and the problems lower class women are facing (not to speak of the much larger numbers of rural women). Instead, up till today all kinds of general discussion about Chinese society have either ignored the profound and complex social problems faced by women, or considered these problems as "special" problems faced by a "minority group" and, therefore, as less immediate and lower in priority. Let us first put aside the contrasting stands and attitudes vis-à-vis Chinese society and the social realities in the 90's. The not too numerous intellectuals who hold a critical stand on society appear to think that raising the gender question as a premise means neglecting, if not denying, the reality of class. Feminism seems to imply lightness and extravagance. Contrasted with feminism is the complexity of reality and discourse and a heaviness that is unbearable. Such discussions on themes related with class imply not only a neglect of social problems related with gender/women that are also becoming increasingly acute. They might also mean drawing on dominant representations, whether old or new, which have been formed on the basis of the mainstream discourse or the male chauvinistic discourse of the former days and result in accelerating the oppression and exploitation of women.

Of course, themes of class and gender might not cover all the social problems of contemporary China. Representations of the question of ethnicity and race that have emerged in much more uncanny ways and the unveiling of age discrimination that has become much more explicit with class differentiation and the process of rewriting gender are all illustrations of the complex social reality of China in the 90's. These are problems that this paper can neither shelve away nor ignore. However, the importance of the themes of class and gender does not only lie in the fact that they involve the exploited and sacrificed majority. The paradox in the representations of class and gender in the culture of China in the 90's is in fact a manifestation of the social and cultural syndrome of China in the 80's and 90's, particularly from the 90's up to now. The complex processes of the interlocking historical evolvement of the advantaged/disadvantaged and the mainstream/periphery, and their relative relations with the many axes of power, are in fact linked in a complex way with the history of Mao's era and with what I have called the "historical debts and

legacies" of contemporary China. It is indeed an important mode and means to draw on or avenge these debts and legacies.

The interlocking narratives of class and gender in the specific historical context of China have consequently inaugurated a cultural performance on many levels: social dramas played by women who have become a social sign and a puppet on which all sorts of essentialist gender imaginations of society are projected. Light is also shed on some factors in the cultural performance of so-called women or feminist representations as the scene changes or the terms of reference change with the complex scenario and setting of globalisation. For me, it implies a multi-dimensional critical thinking on two levels: on one level, unveiling and critique of the cultural construction of new mainstream ideologies in their use of women, as typified by the mass media; on another level, reflection and critique of the dilemma facing Chinese feminism in its critical practice, which I have been engaged in.

Translated by Cheung Choi Wan

NOTE

1. Literally means "it's 'really' nice to be a woman", but a pun is played on the word "really" which also means "straighten" or "push up" in Chinese. The pun results in changing the meaning of the line to "Push up (your breasts) if you are a woman."
— translator