Chinese Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination, 1905-1948

Yan Haiping
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Chinese Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination, 1905–1948 provides a compelling study of leading women writers in modern China, charting their literary works and life journeys to examine the politics and poetics of Chinese transcultural feminism that exceed the boundaries of bourgeois feminist selfhood.

Unlike recent literary studies that focus on the discursive formation of the modern Chinese nation state and its gendering effects, Yan explores the radical degrees to which Chinese women writers re-invented their lives alongside their writings in distinctly conditioned and fundamentally revolutionary ways.

The book draws on these women’s voluminous works and dramatic lives to illuminate the range of Chinese women’s literary and artistic achievements and offers vital sources for exploring the history and legacy of twentieth-century Chinese feminist consciousness and its centrality in the Chinese Revolution. It will be of great interest to scholars of gender studies, literary and cultural studies and performance studies.

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Yan Haiping
To Mother
and
all those whose presence has made
this book possible.
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I was working through my old notebooks where passages taken from aleatory readings transcribed there looked like the wreckage of a vanished ship, or a world. Glancing over some pages, I encountered a passage that has become intelligible over the years:

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe that keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

(Walter Benjamin, *Illumination*, pp. 257–258)

Then I saw a large question mark, next to this passage, that I myself had drawn. I paused.

YHP, 2006
Introduction

On Empowerment

“I am weak and therefore I am strong.”

Bing Xin, 1919

This book revisits a Chinese revolutionary feminist legacy through an encounter with a group of seminal twentieth century Chinese women writers at the point of intersection of their print works and life passages. Informed by, but unlike works in recent literary studies that focus on the discursive formation of modern Chinese nation state and its gendering effects, I am centrally interested in the radical degrees to which Chinese women writers re-invented their lives along with their writings, each in her distinctly conditioned and fundamentally revolutionary way. I trace their literary scenes and lived trajectories as intertwining loci of their innovative struggles to navigate the force fields of a violent history while aspiring to women’s empowerment. As my discussion develops, I inquire how such struggles by women in print and in life may invite us to re-think aspects of twentieth century China and the Chinese revolution.

In the Debris of History

Scholars and historians have long discussed how the specter of Chinese revolution had its rise from a time of chaos in the decades following the British Opium War of 1840 and subsequent imperialist incursions. It is indicative that, by 1900, Western powers including czarist Russia and Japan, had established claims on thirteen out of eighteen Chinese provinces. For the Chinese, the imperatives of “becoming modern” emerged out of a state of emergency. The 1911 revolution made visible the magnitude of the challenges but produced no viable solutions. As the land was being physically torn asunder, early twentieth century writers portrayed a traumatized China on the world stage and inscribed it with the bodily image of the defeated, humiliated, and the possibly doomed. Walter Benjamin’s figuration of modern history as “a field of wreckages” and modern humanity as “a pile of debris” can be taken in this context as literally accurate as it is socio-psychically evocative.

It is then not incidental that the bodies of the dying and the dead inhabit the pages of modern Chinese women’s writings with a disturbing frequency. They
designate a material condition of Chinese society as much as a horizon of those women’s critical imagination. Qiu Jin’s evocation of women warriors who died in battle, Lu Yin’s delineation of mass refugees drowned in river flood, Xiao Hong’s rendition of peasants who starved to death and whose bodies scattered across rural China are only a few most obvious examples. Bing Xin, long standardized by literary historians into a “feminine” author specializing in transcendental “motherly love,” brings into her writing a world of premature deaths of children, particularly female children, in the midst of quiet daily trials and tribulations as much as open crossfires of spreading wars. Such fictional figures or journalist scenes are accompanied by remembrances of actual persons that those women knew as personal friends, literary fellow-travelers, political comrades, and life companions. Ding Ling’s “Songs of Death” (Sizhige), an autobiographical prose work, can be read as figuring a tumultuous world that she and her contemporary women inhabited. After describing in detail her earliest memory that registers the disintegration of the Chinese gentry-household, that of her father’s funeral, she concludes: “It was the beginning of my nebulous consciousness about life, where I knew death. How fearful death was! My entire childhood was spent from then on in following my mother and her struggle, each day on the edge of death.”

As discussed in the last two chapters of this book, Ding Ling spent not only her childhood but also the subsequent decades “on the edge of death,” as did other women gathered in this book, each through her respective passage, literally and figuratively. Many women writers and artists died young in the period studied here. Qiu Jin died in Shaoxing at age thirty-two in the last years of the rule of the Qing court; her poem “On the Eve of My Death” (Zhi xü xiaoshu jieming ci) is an anticipatory mourning of her own demise. Shi Pingmei died in Beiping of encephalitis at age twenty-six and abruptly ended the influential journal that she was editing, The Wilde Rose (Qiangwei zhoukan). Lu Yin died in labor at the age of thirty-four in the city of Shanghai then under Japanese military attack. Amid Blood and Fire (Xüe yü huo), her final, major novel about the resistance against the Japanese invasion, was left half done. And Xiao Hong, after giving birth to a dead baby amid war refugees, managed to go on living for only eighteen more months. While writing Tales of Hulan River (Hulan he zhuan), a major novella, recalling her birthplace, she died of medical mal-surgery at age thirty-one in British Hong Kong under Japanese military occupation. If social disruption affected those and other women in different ways and to different degrees over the first three decades of the twentieth century, the 1937–1945 Sino-Japanese War ripped each of them from their precarious arrangements of life and rendered them all refugees on Chinese soil. “Time is being wrecked,” Zhang Ailing wrote in occupied Shanghai, “wreckages of larger magnitude are coming.” A cursory look at those women’s lives cut-short or displaced repeatedly over the decades, leaving so many stories half-written and book projects unfinished, should caution us to pause and compel us to ponder the defining conditions of their lives and works, or their lifeworks. Only when we situate those lifeworks in their pertinent context – a time and place where death and particularly female death became daily routine – can we even begin to approach their
lifeworks embodying human struggle for survival in the midst of the debris of history, one of “blood and tears” as Qiu Jin puts it.

**The Gender of “the Weak”**

An exploration into such terrain is not only cognitively but emotionally challenging, for the explorer must confront barely concealed extreme brutality. This time has another expression frequently found in modern Chinese writings: an age of “ruorou qiangshi,” which can be roughly translated as “the weak (ruo) become prey (rou); the strong (qiang) devour the weak (shi).” For contemporary feminist scholars in a wide range of literary studies and critical theory, the categories of “the weak” and “the strong” are evocative. Writing from the context of European history, Joan Scott, Margaret Ferguson and Sidonie Smith, for instance, have in their respective ways articulated how, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a newly sexualized female soul gradually displaced the theologically unsexed soul of the Medieval Period and Renaissance. Anne Fausto-Sterling, Sandra Harding, and Denise Riley among others have delineated how such “theological revision” crowded out the “autonomous soul” while developing a feminized conception of Nature in her place, with which the “lack” of the human cognition or thinking faculty is made out to be “the natural” attribute of “the sexualized female soul.” As embodiment of this “lack,” the female sex is then marked as the bioevidence of “the bottom of a subject,” the “naturally weaker,” against which the male subject is established as the “stronger.”

Indeed, “the strong man” in European languages, particularly English, has become since the seventeenth century a frequent designation for one whose physical strength is emblematic of mental and moral faculties, which entitles him to possession of social, political, financial, military, and other institutional powers. Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous (or infamous) mapping of the inherent rhythms of “the stronger” and “weaker” registers the implied power relations between the male and female sexes so designated, as a “beyond good and evil” inevitability: “Is it virtuous when a cell transforms itself into a function of a stronger cell? It has to do so [Sie muss es]. Is it evil when the stronger cell assimilates the weaker? . . . Joy and desire appear together in the stronger that wants to transform something into its function; joy and the wish to be desired appear together in the weaker that wants to become a function.”

This characterization of the weaker-stronger binary as the natural condition of the modern subject formation reveals a social structure that is also a biopolitical economy of desire and sexuality. The “stronger” is the force of active masculinity whose “essence” lies in his assimilating others into functions that serve to promote his desired expansion as the subject. The “weaker” is the body of passive femininity whose “nature” lies in her “wish” to be desired and assimilated into functions of the “stronger.”

Such biopolitical ideas were brought into China when the modern European canon was translated into Chinese in a period of compressed time in the early twentieth century.
weak”) and the ways in which it appears and recurs with figurative variations in modern Chinese women’s literature while becoming a component of modern Chinese vocabulary. As late as in the year 2000, the inaugural issue of a women’s publication in Beijing entitled *Chinese Women’s Culture (Zhongguo nüxing wenhua)* carries a range of articles that tackle the question of “ruozhe” as female-bodied, an indicative phenomenon which I revisit in my Conclusion. Twentieth century scholars in China, the U.S., and around the globe have long been engaged in critically unpacking the “natural binary” between the “weaker” and “stronger” sexes along with its implementation in codes of law, social policies, cultural norms, and organizing principles of institutions in relation to the historical operation of the modern nation state. For some the categories of gender and sexuality are central to a politics that takes the “biology” of the “weaker sex” as “destiny,” while others explore the various dimensions of such “bio-destiny” in ways that at once deploy and exceed the categories of gender and sexuality. Chandra Mohanty, Jacqui Alexander, Lisa Lowe and many more work through the gendered and sexed effects of socially arranged power relations to connect them with other seemingly discrete scenes of human pain across old and new geopolitical and biopolitical boundaries. Their “third-fourth world feminist projects,” so conceived, argue for engagements and confrontations with the conditions of “multiply oppressed women” not only due to their gender and sex but their race, ethnicity, class, and nationality.

Some theorists have questioned the efficacy of the adjective “feminist” for such projects since they seem to de-center the category of gender and sexuality by enlisting so many problems at once without a coherent analytical perspective and pertinent “feminist” focus. Others, including a number of leading twentieth century Chinese women writers, have questioned the designation “feminist” itself for the reason that it does not apply to what they consider central to their works and lives, such as anti-colonial struggles or multi-forms of resistance to the perpetuation of global inequality. While a mountain of works has been produced in response to such questioning, what has been questioned remains in need of further theoretical reckoning. Such reckonings are beyond the scope of this book, while it is hoped that this book may be of use for them. Suffice it to say here that those “third-fourth world feminist projects” evoke a profound concern that is also an analytical center of gravity, pulling otherwise empirically disparate works and scattered issues into a significant constellation. The concern extends to all forms of human oppression in modern history. When those projects situate “the question of the weaker sex” at the intersection of the national, ethnic, racial, class, and colonial questions, they implicitly gesture toward what I call “the question of the weak” (ruozhe) that is central to the Chinese women’s imaginative writings and their actual lives examined in this book: the lifeworks where the predica-ments of the “weaker sex” are so figured that they are not only inextricably linked with but also paradigmatically evocative of the “destiny” assigned to the variously marginalized, exploited, displaced or dispossessed as “prey of the strong” in modern history, regardless of their actual sex. As specified throughout this book, such figurations in their irreducible variations and resilient fecundity.
are not simply metaphorizations of the gender-specific problem into what has been called an “unhappy marriage” between feminism and Marxism or the leftist politics of the twentieth century in general. Rather, they point to and in effect amount to a revolutionary feminist impetus that moved and motivated the struggles of the “multiply oppressed” in a multiply inscribed semicolonial Chinese context to shift and alter their conditions as imaginative embodiments of potential alternatives for human existence, in print as in life.

Bioethnic Politics and Feminist Empowerment

Those Chinese women aspired to no less than a transformation of their destiny, in a volatile historical conjuncture where the imperial regime was disintegrating while its codes were still operative in society, and the “modern forces” were ascending while their implications were by no means clear or clearly women-friendly. This book probes how, without knowing any methods to open up social spaces for themselves, women at the turn of the century stepped out of the known boundaries of their “natural place” in the geographies of social arrangements. They established, publicly, women’s societies, women’s academies, and women’s newspapers and journals, while traveling in and beyond China, some extensively, in Japan, the U.S., Russia, and Europe. As a woman writer observed in 1909: “Since the Wuxu Reform Movement . . . [brave women] have left their parents, crossed the oceans, and traveled through Europe and America, often in groups!” Chen Xiefen, the founder of the second earliest Chinese women’s journal, published an article in Shanghai Women’s Paper (Shanghai nüxüebao) in 1903 where she took such boundary-crossing activity as the passage in the making for “modern Chinese women.” Arguing against “waiting” for social change, Chen writes: “The wonderfully rich Chinese phrase ‘jinli’ [making efforts to the best of one’s ability] is in contrast with the concept of ‘dengdai’ [waiting] . . . and ‘yongxin’ [putting one’s heart into such efforts] is the core of ‘jinli’.”

With such efforts, those women of mostly gentry backgrounds left their cloistered inner chambers and turned into traveling writers, publishers, activists, agitators, organizers of public events and social movements for women. Qiu Jin, the towering figure of modern Chinese women’s literary and social revolution was among those early women whose boundary-crossing activity formed a female-bodied social matrix for an emergent Chinese feminist imagination. The next two chapters explore those barely discernible patterns of such emergent imagination as forming dynamics and features of writing Chinese women in relation to the Chinese revolution. The other chapters trace such dynamic features in a body of literary scenes and life scenarios by working through their immense variety to converge in a designation of how those women in the first half of the twentieth century made the differential force fields of their given conditions visible in the midst of their crossings of the given social boundaries. More importantly, they not only mapped those force fields that defined their “places” in culture and society but also unmasked the workings of the logic of such definition itself. While Qiu Jin famously pointed out such “places” as that of
“lifelong prisoners” and “slaves on earth,” and aired her anger at the “weakness” of women who seemed to accept such arrangements of their life and humanity without “any sense of being insulted,” others probed the often hidden workings of those social forces that coerced women’s “weakness” in a specific way. Zhang Zhujun, another woman activist since the 1910s, for instance, concludes as follows after she detailed “dangers” that “women face under their present condition” in one of her well-known essays on issues about women’s learning and security:

Some have asked whether it is due to their born fate that women are fixed in such a dangerous situation; or is it due to humanly composed forces that they so suffer? My reasoning shows that the latter is more accurate; half of our problems result from those who maintain their power in domination and the other half result from women themselves giving up on making efforts to make changes happen. . . . Not knowing how to learn and how to organize, women remain uninformed about the world and appear to be indifferent to others who share the same dangers, sufferings, and struggles. Our way of moving beyond such ignorance and disconnection [which have been regarded as women’s particular weakness] is to learn and learn to organize ourselves.

An open call to arms for women’s mobilization at one level, Zhang Zhujun here also touched on a feature of those “humanly composed forces” that involves something more than material oppression. A double operation through which “humanly composed forces” “fixed” women in a social place marked out for the dominated, and inscribed them as the “born” inferior cognitively, morally, and socio-politically— in other words, as “the naturally weak.”

Several years later, Lu Yin, a leading woman writer of the May Fourth era, also touched on this double operation when she observes the social workings of Darwinian logic of “natural selection” and the production of “the inferior-superior” or “weak-strong” binary:

Since Darwin’s theory on the origins of the species has appeared in this world, “victory to the superior and defeat to the inferior” (yousheng liebai) has come to be claimed as a natural theorem; and “the weak are the prey of the strong” (ruorou qiangshi) has come to be regarded as the necessary tendency of history. Competition among human beings has escalated as such theorems and necessities are promoted. The intensity of such promotion seems to say that, if the elimination of the inferior through competitive selection were not achieved, the human species could never be improved . . . . Human lives, from then on, have been made as instrumentalized puppets on stage and passive pieces of a machine.

In Lu Yin’s rendition, the natural theorem of “victory to the superior and defeat to the inferior” (“yousheng liebai”) or the historical necessity of “the weak are the
prey of the strong” (“ruorou qiangshi’) has nothing humanly “natural” or “necessary” about it. What is at work therein is a retrospective logic, human-made and socially promoted or enforced, that functions to fixate the defeated as the inherently inferior and define the prevailing aggressors as the naturally superior. Searching into the richness of Chinese women’s written and life stories since the 1890s, this book shows how those women confront, each in her complex ways, such retrospective logic at work in the thick of the arranged human hierarchy as a deployment of double violence. In the terms of such deployment, the living bodies that are variably violated, appropriated, or destroyed must bear their second sentence announced with the category of “the weak,” standing as witnesses to the naturalness of their coerced “inherent” identity and imposed “inevitable” destiny. I call such social operation of double violence bioethnic politics, a regime of intelligibility that renders lived histories of Chinese women as those of “life-prisoners” and “slaves on earth” into the very evidence of their state of natural being and imminent becoming, a material body and signifying trope of the socially weakened or destroyed as bioethnically destined “weak species.”

The ways in which the category and problem of “the weaker sex-cum-weak species” are figured in those Chinese women’s writings as an unflinching measure of such double sentencing are taken hereby as the focus of this book. So are the ways in which those women writers contest and foil such double violence, which amounts to a register of a feminist empowerment of the “weak species” central to the making of modern Chinese cultural consciousness. One of the emblematic examples can be found in Ding Ling’s novella “New Faith” (Xing xinnian), which is discussed in the last chapter of this book. Suffice to say here that, written in 1939, this novella is about the revolutionary energy and/or anticipatory powerfulness of an old village woman, “Granny,” who was gang-raped by Japanese soldiers. To survive, Granny must dislodge herself and her world of the Chinese villagers from the double violence that inscribes her as the “dirtied-broken-weak” human foil for the modern “strong” to stage their claimed status. She must confront a regime of intelligibility that fixates her as a living sight of horrid shame. Such a dislodging process for survival requires much more than “writing back,” namely, inscribing the “shame” onto the “strong” that proclaim their rape of peoples, countries, continents as humanly natural and historically necessary. She must bring about a transformation of herself to undo her internalization of the logic of bioethnic politics that coerces painful acceptance of the rapist forces as “the strong” and fixates her “wretched body” as a material document of “the weak” even in her own eyes. The disavowed sense of shame about “her misfortune” that is festering and suppurating in those closest to her, namely her sons, families, fellow villagers, really the human fabrics of her lifeworld including herself, indicates the scope and depth of such transformation. My final chapter probes how, in Ding Ling’s novella, Granny brings about this transformation in such a disturbingly powerful way that it far exceeds familiar vocabularies about war-time rape, women as embodiment of victimhood, or figurative trope of catastrophe calling for vengeance or redemption.
The power of Granny recurs in women’s works and their life stories gathered here with intricate variations. Centrally featured and leveraged by the bodies of the “weaker sex,” it evokes a paradigmatic empowerment of the “weak species” whose paradoxical resilience is the heart of modern Chinese women’s literature and the center of gravity of its imagination. Bing Xin’s epigram of this profound paradox comes to my aid as it speaks to their lifeworks with penetrating acumen: “I am weak and therefore I am strong.”

Rhythms of the Unreal: Sites of Living Legacy

Imagination as such is usually understood as an active energy that does not constitute material reality. Yet considering the human bodies that breathe with it, imagination does not have to and indeed should not be conflated with the purely imaginary. Fictional writings are after all not simply productions of falsehood. Ding Ling’s fictional works for instance evoke the actual existences of human ruin and social wreckage including in particular multiply ravished women in the history of the war, with such an imagination that empowers them to become sites of possible transformative relations as potential agencies. Such empowerment of the otherwise “naturally” powerless that move and motivate the lines of writings, as scholars of Chinese history have traced, did occur in the lives of actual women throughout different moments of twentieth century China, over and again, as evinced in part in the life passages paved by the women writers studied here. The following chapters explore how those women confronted their personal crises that were also registers of structural changes in China as in the world. By various ways, they refused to take social stipulations for “the weaker sex” and scripts for the “weak species” as their bioethnic destiny, survived the force fields of double violence, and stayed on in the tumultuous social movements while working through the yearnings of their times: in print or in the streets, on theater stages and cinema screens, at university lecture halls, public forums or conferences, as well as in prison cells, popular rallies, and armed uprisings. As social individuals and as a group in society, their struggles for survival amount to no less than acts of charting unknown waters and opening up passages of “normally” impossible possibilities.

Appearing in this book with the literary figures who are “weak and therefore strong,” specifically, are the unprecedented public expressions of writing women. Active throughout the first half of the twentieth century, these women range from the activists of the 1890s in the Constitutional Reform, Qiu Jin and her female comrades in the 1911 revolution, Bing Xin, Lu Yin, and others of the May Fourth Movement in the 1920s, Bai Wei and women soldiers in the Northern Expedition of the late 1920s, Yuan Changying, Xiao Hong, and Wang Ying in the War of Resistance against the Japanese Invasion in the 1930s and the 1940s, and Ding Ling in the literary movements of the 1920s and the Chinese revolution since the 1930s. The imaginative empowerment of the prescribed powerless and their counterparts in actual life dialogically inform, engender, and underlie one another throughout the history of the modern Chinese women’s
social movement and their literary writings, amid protracted socioeconomic crises and disintegration, civilizational collapse, and endless eruptions of globally interlocked violences. The potency of Ding Ling’s fictional figures such as the gang-raped “Granny” and her gained agency, like other female-bodied figures occurred in women’s works discussed here, is explored as the key to the modern tales of Chinese women and their feminist imagination. This points to an immense legacy of a ravished humanity struggling for survival that inherently challenges and finally bursts her bioethnic “destiny.”

This empowerment of a powerless humanity seems un-measurable in the bioethic terms of modern classification, and hence often appears to be one of modernity’s “best kept secrets.” It tends to be simultaneously enlisted and elided in the chronicles of modern times as well as its commentaries. A growing range of scholars in the arts and humanities, such as those that specialize in theater and performance studies, have been reprising critical legacies such as those of Merleau-Ponty and others, while proposing the notion of “embodiment” as a key term for critical inquiry into culture and politics, as well as history. Foregrounding the concept not as a term for “clothing a spirit with body or giving concrete forms or expressions to ideas,” theater scholar and theorist Erika Fisher-Lichte, for instance, posits embodiment in such a way that it “means the very process of bringing these two worlds [i.e. the spirit and body] together.” Prominent materialist feminist scholars in performance studies foreground the idea of the female body in relation to her live vibrations on the theater stage and everyday arenas, thereby unpacking the material forces and symbolic implications inscribed, re-functioned, or re-enacted therein. What is important to my book is the fact that such prepositions enable one to raise questions, within the specific context of scholarly discussion in the English language about twentieth century Chinese women writers, pertinent to the actual life passages that those women paved or the actions taken in relation to their imaginative writings. If one begins with the methodological argument that “whatever cultural activity or product we have... whether it is a spirit, or an idea, [it] cannot be conceived of independent of the body. It is always embodied” as Fisher-Lichte puts it, one can and must trace the scenes and occurrence of those women’s real live acts and bring them into a constellation with their literary writings.

This constellation designates the terrain of a methodological distinction, as a dialectic motion at work. On the one hand, what is unreal in the form of the imaginative writings appears here to be form-giving traces evocative of the real dynamics of their writers’ female bodies as lived passages in life. On the other hand, what is real in terms of those writers’ life passages appears here to be imaginative configurations of the vanishable mortals central to the active energies of their fictional works that remain physically in the actual world after the mortals have vanished. An unreal and yet undeniable presence located in the connection or intersection between their fictional writings that continue to exist into the twenty-first century and their actual bodies that have all disappeared into the past, in other words, engenders and inhabits such a terrain. As if rhythms of the unreal, such a presence designates the site for my exploration into the specific
ways in which those women's writing and living are shaped up as mutually constitutive and transforming processes, giving rise to an imaginative making of a real humanity. Such rhythms of the unreal cannot be adequately traced through word-centered and linguistic-leveraged terms bound up with the vocabulary of Western metaphysics and its many self-consciously “revolving” critiques. Conditioned by if not following the word-centered paradigms of postmodern theory, a range of contemporary studies of Chinese women writers also posits its operation on the linguistic dimension of all historical materials that marginalize the living bodies of those women and their writings, incapable of addressing the question of how those living bodies in motion actualize different social impetus and enable scenarios of cultural traditions that are irreducible and incommensurable to – while persistently haunting – textual-cum-discursive evidences. The emphasis on the semiotic itself demarks its limit, either in the version of semiotics that claims the inclusion of the problem of embodiments or in the version of semiology as operating on the terrain above the body only; the former marginalize and the latter bypass the body actual. In the context of this study, it is not so much being mistaken as it is limiting to center-stage the play of the linguistics. The creativity and creation of modern Chinese women writers cannot be adequately approached without bringing into the center of analytical focus the actual changes they made in and with their lived life to survive and inhabit an otherwise uninhabitable time. The lifework of Qiu Jin, as discussed in Chapter 2 in detail, is a case in point. Qiu Jin is often skirted in linguistic-leveraged studies for her work in print form is “thin” in terms of quantity compared with other women authors. Yet any study of writing Chinese feminists is inadequate if Qiu Jin is marginalized let alone excluded. Her significance begins to show when her writing, an innovative force in the formation of twentieth century Chinese women’s literature, is traced as inseparable from her radical reconfigurations of her physical body. As a battlefield for re-imagining and re-making modern Chinese womanhood and femaleness, such a body in reconfiguration is both evocative of and central to women’s struggles to reposition themselves in the world of the modern at the turn of the century. Her act of unbinding her feet and literally restoring their deformed bones to their irrecoverable former shape is one of those non-textual details that caution us to take what she said about her poems seriously if not literally. The words in her poems about women’s radical reformation, she wrote in 1904, “are stains of blood and tears.” Indeed, “blood and tears” are insisted upon and evoked as the resources or really the physical sources for imaginative writings by all the women writers encountered here. The recurrence of such evocation makes one pause and ponder how to feel, touch, see, and dialogue with what stirs therein, not only as an instrumental intimation of the limit of our discursive articulations with printed words, but more as a reverberation from the past through the present as if moving and rising in our own human constitutions. Such real blood and tears cannot be seen just as their actual various bodies cannot be in those women’s writings at the time or in their many reprints over the decades. Yet their painful potency haunt the written words just as the centrally felt impulses at work in such words evoke those once
lived bodies and their life passages, at once present to and invisible in any representational schematizations of life scenes or history scenarios.

The intersections between such present invisibles and invisible presences are the sites that configure the subject and demarcate the body of my study. Or more accurately put, they are the energies with which my book is engendered, not as a positivist record of their unmediated existence in an authentic past, but as an act in itself to trace, feel, as well as inhabit those recurrent rhythms of the unreal, defying of the bioethnically posited rubrics and categories of modern intelligibility. What I revisit here is incommensurable with the more general postmodern attempt, in Nietzschean or Heideggerian fashions, to collapse the Hegelian binary between the “real” and the “unreal” by positing a doubling of the “two sides” on the terrain of the metaphysical absence of “the real” itself. Rather, the “unreal” is based on a specific historical phenomenon charged with human rhythms instead of a key problematic of Western metaphysics. It refers to what does humanly exist (hence is not “absent”) but is denied of recognition (hence is closer to the notion of “lack”) at material and symbolic levels involving, fundamentally, the question of power relations operating through modern regimes of intelligibility.

Hannah Arendt once defined “the unclassifiable ones” as “those whose work neither fits the existing order nor introduces a new genre that lends itself to future classification.” I would recast the gist of her line in a more enabling turn. The unclassifiable ones that do not seem to fit the existing rubrics and mechanisms of cognition or to introduce other regimes of recognition also do many things. They issue imperatives to find ways to allow potential actuality and transformative appearances of the denied lives, as sources for opening alternative horizons of seeing and being. They work through our minds and invite us to open ourselves to their undeniable rhythms of their unreal presence. This book is my way to open myself up as a dialogical witness to and an active receiver of such unintelligible-cum-unclassifiable rhythms. It is hoped that this attempt may indicate how much such rhythms inform and transform our assumptions about what it meant then and could mean today to be “modern,” “women,” “Chinese,” and “feminist” in one of the most embattled theaters of the twentieth century and beyond.

Such a witnessing of the rhythms of the unreal presumes the role of the scholar-historian as a reflectively participatory agency in the process, the implication of which is revisited briefly in the Afterword.
1 Unseen Rhythms, Sea Changes

What is it? What is it? It is the life and death turning point for us women as for China.

Chen Xiefen, 1904

You are so fortunate to have found yourselves in such a moment; you are so unfortunate to have only such a moment to find!

Ya Lu (Liu Yazi), 1904

In her narrative script for a southern-style performance (tanci) written in 1904, Qiu Jin arranges a scene in a gentry household wherein the father is engaged in a conversation with an elder cousin who tutors his son. The teacher first reports on the scholarly merits of his pupil and then proposes to offer his pupil’s younger sister the same schooling: “She is highly intelligent and has been learning to read and write remarkably well.” The father replies with questions: “What’s the use of such study to a girl, since it’s impossible for her to bring glory to the family like a man? Even if she were endowed with eight bushels of talent, when did the government ever establish official exams for women?” Those questions implicitly confirm recent feminist historiography that explicates how elite Chinese women gained high level of literary cultivation in “the high Qing period” (1683–1839) with a developed female writing tradition behind them that can be traced as early as Tang Dynasty. The Confucian teaching that “virtuous women are those who do not have literary talent” in this sense ironically invalidates any assumption that women by their bioethnic definition lack the thinking and writing faculty. The father’s objection is not based on any notion that marks “femaleness” as such inherent lack. Rather, he points to the unavailability of institutions whereby women’s learning may gain social values. The problem about women’s reading and writing, then, is a problem about the structures of institutional recognition, mechanisms of regulatory rewards, and arrangements of social worth.

Qiu Jin was then an emerging woman writer, revolutionary activist, and a member of the numerically small group of women students in Tokyo. She witnessed how militant elite women partook in social upheavals across the
country since the 1898 Constitutional Reform, precipitating hostility from the hard core of the gentry. Schools for girls set up by European and Euro-American missionaries in China since 1844 had been growing, their impact on society though was as uncertain as it was unsettling. Those Chinese who took the idea of women’s public education seriously, meanwhile, found themselves in predicaments. The first Chinese school for women founded by reformers in Shanghai in 1898, Shanghai Women’s Public Academy (Shanghai nüzi gongxüe), for instance, was closed down in 1900 under political pressures and financial difficulty. Women who dared to found and head schools were besieged. The tragedy of Ms. Huixing is a case in point. A Manchu from Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, Ms. Huixing attracted public notice when she sold her property and jewelry to found a women’s school. She committed suicide on November 25, 1905, leaving a letter explaining that when the funds promised by official and private patrons were inexplicably discontinued, her efforts to find support were met with not only refusal but gendered slander. Since “this is the first women’s school in the city of Hangzhou, no woman would dare again to found and run schools for women if I let it fail,” she wrote, “I exchange my life for public opinion to help it survive.”

Such scenes indicate the magnitude of the challenge that those women must confront in their attempt to find social space and institutional articulation for women, and how such challenge gave a distinctive definition to their acts of reading and writing. Indeed, those women distinguished themselves from their literary predecessors. They were no longer “talented women” (cainü) housed in the cloistered inner chambers (guifang) of the gentry family with however extensive a reach over literary venues. Rather, they had become “learned” and “learning” women whose effort amounted to a revolutionary program to remake themselves and their social relations. This status, which was highly fluid or precisely because of its fluidity, asserted their cultural and political presence beyond the structure of gentry family which was foundational to the imperial system while the system was itself in total crisis. The destruction of the first Chinese navy in the war with Japan in 1895, the failure of the Constitutional Reform of 1898, and the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion Movement by Eight-Allied-Forces in 1900 were all catastrophic events for China. The effect of these events was to place the country on the brink of becoming another Poland, Burma, or India in colonial subjugation, where “native women” were re-made only to be the “slaves next to the [native male] slaves” to the colonial masters. The imperial decree issued by the precarious Manchu court in August 1905, that abolished the centuries-long system of civil examination, not only resulted in the formal loss of Chinese male gentry’s privilege and the institutional foundation upon which they built their career, livelihood, and authority. It was also constitutive of the fundamental disintegration of a civilization. Such civilizational disintegration did not automatically give rise to women’s gain in terms of institutional articulation. Rather, Chinese women found themselves in a double state of emergency where they were suffering the retaliation from the hard core of the gentry and caught up in a historical confluence of violent fluidity.
Bioethnic Convicts: An Anatomy

Without ready-made maps for navigating such historical rupture, those Chinese women seized the moment and made it into a social opening by reflecting upon their own lives through public writing. Imagining an institutional space for women’s appearance amid a civilizational collapsing, they gestured toward a reading public as the human dynamics of such space in the making. Women’s publications appeared in waves from 1897 to 1919. A total of fifty-four women’s journals were published during these years; forty-seven of which appeared between 1905 and 1912. Half of those had their base in Shanghai and others had headquarters in Guangzhou, Tokyo, Beijing, Chengdu, and Hong Kong, quickly gathering a group of women authors largely from the gentry-class background. That most of those women’s public journals appeared in China’s coastal areas or treaty ports and many were initiated overseas right after the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 and throughout the Reform Movement (1897–1898) may interest scholars specializing in the problem of the “West-East” encounters or the dialectic of modernity. What centrally concerns me here is how those publications afford us some of the earliest materials produced by Chinese women when they articulated themselves with distinctive feminist impulses. Women’s Paper for Learning (nüxüebao), one of the earliest, was founded by Chen Xiefen in 1902. Women authors Du Qingchi, Jiang Suixing, Wang Heqing, and more made themselves known by writing, theoretical essays (lunshuo), public speeches (yanshuo), women’s history (nüjie jinshi), literary writings and poetry (cihan), and personalized correspondence with readers (chisu), where their imaginations for a “modern China” were engendered with an impetus to alter women’s social status and forms of being. In her article On independence (“Duli pian”), one of the earliest documents in Chinese women’s feminist thought, for example, Chen Xiefen evoked the issue of “traditional” women’s formation as the bodily site where her envisioning of a “modern China” was shaped up through a critical analysis of the lives of women and a call for radical change of such lives:

Practices such as piercing the female ears for inserting metal earrings, and binding the female feet for marking the crippled sex, are manifestations of the elementary phase of the social law of corporal punishment (chuji xingfa). Those who refuse to be punished will be forced into submission, with cries of pain and tears of agony going unheard and unseen. The second phase of the social law of corporal punishment (ciji xingfa) is matchmaking that regards women’s own feelings as irrelevant. Wedded to strangers without any consideration for their feelings and wishes. When the promised husband dies before the marriage, the woman is forced to remain “widowed.” Let us not even talk about the servant girls, whose labor is enslaved and whose bodies are bought and sold like cows, horses, pigs, and chickens! (my italics)

The class-differential forms of social injustice are rendered here as a gender-specific problem of women’s oppression. In Chen Xiefen’s eyes, while the “servant girls”
are openly dehumanized, the gentry women are penalized in culturally naturalized ways. When her social value is marked with her bound feet and pierced ears, she turns into a gender-specific “beauty” which is an effect of male-gendered masochistic desire and a signifier of the status of the gentry family in Chen’s critical examination. Unpacking such effect and signifier, Chen focuses on how the female body is crippled literally for life and confined to a life of social un-freedom as the naturally given form of existence for the crippled, an in effect “social punishment in two phases.” Her “own feelings and wishes,” along with the possibility of her being a subject, are written off by the way of her bodily deformation as a designation of her given function. Chen Xiefen regards such an operation performed on women as “particularly against human feeling and reason (qingli)” as it renders their body into a witness to their own being as emptied of self-defining humanity and in need of a lifelong arrangement of dependency. While unpacking the double violence at work here that cripples the woman and marks her into a sign of proper and desirable womanhood, Chen discloses the pain of such “beauty” as the “crippled sex,” a painful scene of the gendered arrangement of human relations operative in and emblematic of the power structures of the imperial Chinese regime.

Che Xiefen’s indictment of this double violence as “against human feeling and reason” is discernibly evocative of the humanist discourse of the Enlightenment and its concept of reason. Such citations were common in the works by leading Chinese reformers and modernizers at the time; yet irreducible differentiations internal to the citational acts are noteworthy. It is striking that a wide range of writings by women including Chen Xiefen foregrounded the bodily suffering of “the crippled sex,” whereas volumes written by most male leaders enlisted such “crippled” body as an expression of the mental or cognitive state of the “traditional Chinese woman.” Chinese women were rendered into social tropes of the “most unenlightened,” “idiotic,” and “useless Chinese females who only know how to use up wealth and have no idea about how to produce wealth for their family as for their nation” (zhizhi yongli, buzhi shengli). A regime of modern intelligibility was ushered therein, in the light of which the value of humanity was now hinged on her re-assigned function harnessed to the acquisition of “the wealth” of “nations” as “enlarged families.” Such a regime turned women’s bodies, once packaged for the reproduction of the male-centered genealogy of kinship and traditional hierarchy, into evidences of their incapability of being functionally “modern” or their culpability of being the “origins of troubles” and sights of a “backward” nation in danger of being annihilated by the “modern world of competitive nations” and justly so according to its protocols of human normality.

Breaking away from the gender rubrics of the ancient regime, Chen Xiefen’s unpacking of the female-bodied effect of its “law of corporal punishment” at the same time resists modernizing discourses that convicted the bodies of “the crippled sex” as newly found examples of “useless humanity.” Such an anatomy recurs in women authors’ writings, haunted by and precipitating often an unspoken sense of anxiety. Chen Chao writes in her noted essay titled “To Mr. Meibo and My Friend Chen Xiefen” as follows:
Our two million women are made unable to produce wealth and earn their own living. Women of rich households only know luxury and air of arrogance; women of poor family or low social status are viewed and treated as slaves and mindless servants by their masters and mistresses. [We are taught that] the woman must follow her husband and care for her children; but how many of us can live in this way or make our life into something outstanding? This is why we should create women’s journals, using our gentle hands to work with powerful pens; this is why we should sell our jewels and offer our bridal money to publish newspapers, and light the lamps by which we can produce books and ideas. I suggest that we all begin to acquire skills . . . we have our share to do in confronting and overcoming the crisis of our times (my italics).

Chen Chao was more aware than Chen Xiefen of the class difference among women as a problem irreducible to the category of gender. Like Chen Xiefen, she leveraged on the gender-specific links among women in their pressing need to gain economic means and socio-cultural resources for independent living in the midst of a civilizational crisis. This advocacy for women to “acquire skills” involves an overt rejection of the old arrangement of the gender economy and an implicit recognition of the new stakes for women to learn the “skills of living” in a changing world full of uncertainty. It would be fatal if “crippled” women remain chained to a ruling power mechanism that crippled them but was also collapsing itself; and those who refused to sink with the mechanism must simultaneously seek ways to re-form their existences and inhabit a time when the gender roles were shifting and yet the gendered power relations were reinventing themselves. The anxiety inherent in such unchaining-cum-remaking project is in other words a felt cognizance of the modern predicament of Chinese women. As “traditionally” deformed, they are likely to be re-nailed as the “useless” and logically disposable body parts in a “fast-forward” moving time-regime.

Gender-specific, such cognitive anxiety is yet not gender-confined. Rather, it kindles a feeling cognizant of the links between the operations of gendering and other modalities of power relations in China’s shifting social geography. As early as in 1903, Chen Xiefen noted with overt anger and hidden anxiety how, in the past, “Chinese high officials were subordinated to the court, lower-ranking officials to the high officials, common people to the lower-ranking officials, and women to men. But as of 1903, all of them – the royal court, high officialdom, lower officials, commoners, men, and women – are subordinated to the foreigners! They all become the ignorant subordinate!” Chen apparently did not have a critical category to designate the historical contents of those “foreigners.” She was nonetheless in tune with the meanings of the fact that such “foreigners” came from the major powers of the modern West, encroached on China and other countries to claim their extraterritoriality, and regarded those countries they encroached upon as “backward” elements of modern humanity in need of their civilizing leadership and redemptive authority. Other Chinese women went further (as did Chen Xiefen herself a few years later). They traveled
to and studied in those places from where “the foreigners” came, came to grips with the power relations implemented in a range of institutions including that of juridical classification there, and reflected upon such encounters with poignant acumen. Xū Jinqin, one of the earliest Chinese women students traveling to the U.S. for an education, for instance, left on print record an incident that occurred at the moment she and her fellow students reached the land of “the new world” and, more interesting to my discussion here, her own reflection. In an interview in San Francisco for Women’s paper for learning (Nüxüe bao) in 1903, Xū Jinqin told the reporter how, when the steamer reached the harbor, “passengers of all nationalities went ashore except the Chinese. We were interrogated over and over again. Why were we so interrogated if the modern law stipulates that only those who have committed crimes be detained and interrogated? I began to realize that we were regarded as convicts without any evidence of criminal offense other than our being and being so regarded – We are convicted by our given ‘Chinese nationality.’”25 (my italics).

With similar anger and anxiety, Xū Jinqin articulated how the apparatus of juridical classification at the metropolitan centers of world modernity hailed her and her male Chinese fellow travelers. In such a hailing, they were not only “subordinated” in a generalized political sense as Chen Xiefen noted but also in specific ways that find converging descriptions in Chen’s anatomy of Chinese women’s specific predicament: They were disempowered in a specific bodily way, twice. First they were rendered into bodies whose features had been classified as that of social liability, and then they were convicted as species of such social liability by the evidence of their corporal features. They were walking human deficiency. Without the aid of theoretical notions such as bioethnic politics and its retrospective logic, Xū Jinqin revealed the double violence of the bioethnically posited body politic and its ethno-rationality she encountered in the U.S. and made it disturbingly palpable. At work in “conviction of the convict,” such bioethnic politics evokes what was performed and inscribed on the body of woman in “old China” and doubles it into a modern mechanism with a tyrannical logic that claims variable casualties worldwide. You are being convicted, therefore you are the convicts; you are being crippled, therefore you are the cripples; you are being othered, therefore you are the other; you are being dirtied, therefore you are dirt. Categorized as “the Chinese,” which is a bioethnically constituted trope deployed as the very definition of the “weak-kneed,” the “diseased-ridden,” the “sick,” or the “yellow peril” in the modern book of natural science and the law of genetics,26 Xū Jinqin and her fellow travelers “are [already] convicts by our [convicted] nationality” as the humanly crippled, regardless “our” actual sex.27

The double violence registered in those bioethnic convicts in this specific bodily ways may have been psychically shattering for some Chinese male writers28 and politically eye-opening for others in their encounters with the force fields of those metropolitan centers.29 Its effects, strikingly enough, afforded most early Chinese women writers some of their vital insights central to the development of Chinese feminist thought and practice. While dissecting the female-specific corporal deformation that seemed peculiar to the Chinese cultural tradition,