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ARTICLE

The Forgotten Sex: Modern Responses to Correlative Sexism in Kang Youwei and He-Yin Zhen

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Abstract

The oversight of Chinese feminist traditions in transnational feminist discourse is remarkable given China's historical importance and vast population. Despite historical suppression by Confucianism, Chinese feminisms emerged at the turn of the last century, drawing from Marxist, anarchist, and liberal movements. While scholars increasingly recognize overlooked female thinkers like Ban Zhao, contemporary discussions of China often revolve around reconciling Confucianism and feminism. This tendency underscores the perception of Chinese feminism as a derivative of Western feminism, where modern thinkers reject local culture for transnational movements. This paper contends that Chinese feminists, including Kang Youwei and He-Yin Zhen, remained deeply rooted in their traditions. While Kang incorporated foreign ideas to advocate for feminist goals and modernize society, he predominantly engaged with traditional philosophy to address its sexist elements. Similarly, He-Yin's anarcho-feminist approach integrated Western influences to engage with traditional Chinese thought rather than rejecting it outright. By examining prevalent gender and selfhood concepts in traditional Chinese thought, this paper elucidates the notion of "correlative sexism," and argues that women were not primarily regarded as a "second sex" as described by Simone de Beauvoir. The paper then demonstrates how Kang and He-Yin responded to this sexist discourse, offering novel perspectives on women's liberation and societal reform.

Unfortunately, it is uncommon for people to turn their attention to China when considering the great feminist traditions in world thought. Many recent transnational feminist readers fail to include any Chinese authors, and articles on Chinese feminist philosophers seldom appear outside of comparative or other specialized journals.[1] This situation is surprising considering that China is home to nearly one-fifth of the world's population and one of the oldest and most influential textual traditions in world thought. One possible explanation is that the dominance of Confucianism and its

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patriarchal leanings stifled feminist discourse through much of China's history, drastically limiting its influence. Indeed, much of Chinese feminist theory has historically positioned itself in opposition to this Confucian tradition. An explosion of Chinese feminisms drawing from Marxist, anarchist, liberal, and other Western intellectual movements emerged at the turn of the last century to critique an intellectual tradition that was perceived as rigid, hierarchical, oppressive, and deeply sexist. While scholars have increasingly worked to highlight the contributions of important, but often overlooked, female thinkers from Chinese history like Ban Zhao (45/49–117/120 CE) or He-Yin Zhen (1884–1920?) (Liu et al. 2011; Rošker 2021), most works related to Chinese philosophy and feminism tend to focus on the possibility of reconciling Confucianism and feminism. They argue that Confucian notions of relational selfhood provide a promising resource for alternatives to masculinist ethical theories and identify important similarities between Confucian ethics and feminist ethics of care (e.g. Rosenlee 2007; Lai 2016).

Yet the fact remains that widespread, serious critique of sexism in Chinese culture seems to have emerged only after its turbulent encounters with colonial Western powers over the course of the nineteenth century. This, combined with the prevalence of reconciliatory research, gives the impression of modern Chinese feminism as an ersatz feminism, one that was borrowed as a rejection of a sexist (Chinese) past in favor for a modern ("Western") present. Even the Chinese words for "feminism" like *nüquanzhuyi* are modern neologisms that emerged to translate the word from Western languages. These terms have even at times been met with critical suspicion in China among those wary of Anglo-European cultural influences (Wang 1999, 8). Works that do deal with modern feminist thinkers tend to discuss their critical rejection of local culture and analyze their connections to transnational movements.

This paper emphasizes the deep connection that the various strains of Chinese feminism retained with their own traditions and shows how they can be understood within that context. Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and He-Yin Zhen are two representative figures of major strains of Chinese feminisms. Yet neither of them exhibits an absolute break with traditional thought in favor of Western modes of feminist discourse. Kang Youwei is often read as part of what scholars sometimes refer to as the "eugenicist" or nationalist strain of Chinese feminism, where male elites humiliated by colonial powers used feminist goals as a vehicle for modernization and self-strengthening (Barlow 2004, 10; Wang 2021, 119; Liu et. al. 2011, 7). I will show that while he incorporated foreign ideas to advocate for feminist goals and modernize society, he predominantly worked within traditional philosophy to address its sexist elements. Likewise, although He-Yin comes from an entirely different strain of anarcho-feminism in China, her theoretic approaches utilized Western influences to engage with and respond to, rather than reject, traditional Chinese categories.

I will first outline some dominant features of gender and selfhood within traditional Chinese thought. I then explain how these features gave rise to a kind of sexist discourse referred to by David Hall and Roger Ames as "correlative sexism," and in what ways it is distinct from the kind of dualistic sexism described by thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. I will then show how Kang and He-Yin can both be read as responding to this intellectual tradition and how it leads them both to regard gender equality as fundamentally linked to broader social and political issues.

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1. Paradigmatic models of gender and selfhood in the Chinese tradition: an outline

To understand Kang Youwei and He-Yin Zhen's contributions to global feminism(s),[2] we must first recall that all liberation narratives assume some idea of the subject or self that is to be liberated. As Tani Barlow rightly observes in her analysis of the category of "women" in Chinese discourse, "subjectivity, the province of feminism, is shaped in heterogeneous time," as well as space (Barlow 2004, 16). Barlow uses the term "catachresis" to designate the erroneous or anachronistic reading of English terms like "women," "gender," or "feminism" into Chinese and argues that one must be mindful of assertions of equivalence when translating such terms across cultures and time periods. Hall and Ames (1998, 79) likewise contend that, "a failure to appreciate the real degrees of difference between prevailing Western assumptions about the self and their Chinese counterparts has had important consequences for some issues in cross-cultural studies. Perhaps none of these issues is more significant than that associated with the understanding of sexual difference." These differences must, therefore, be adequately observed in order to give a faithful rendering of Kang and He-Yin's major arguments.

Hall and Ames describe what they call a dualistic understanding of gender, which typically views women as one of two natural sexual categories. The task of feminism, in this view, is to emphasize the formal equality women share with men as rational agents, and on this basis argue for the equal rights and treatment that only men have traditionally enjoyed. They note that this argument generally follows a Christian-Platonic model of selfhood. It conceives of the true self as a reasoning soul that transcends other merely physical and transitory aspects of the embodied self. Originally, Plato posits a version of this model to draw attention away from the beautiful bodies of young aristocratic men toward the acquisition of beautiful and good souls. For Plato, pursuing philosophical knowledge of the Beautiful and the Good themselves, not merely their physical embodiment, is what qualifies someone as authoritative and fit to preside over others.[3] Both women and men have the potential to become philosopher kings, therefore, since they are equally capable of reasoning and philosophical reflection (despite women generally having weaker bodies) (*Republic* 451e). Thus, debates about women's equality in Plato and elsewhere in the Anglo-European tradition frequently focus on whether and to what extent women's bodies, being different from men's, preclude them from engaging in disinterested reason (e.g. *Republic* 453a).

This dualistic view often includes another prevalent dualism, namely, the opposition between sex and gender. Sex signifies the biological fact about a body and follows a further dualistic distinction: male or female. Gender signifies the cultural expression of sex through masculine or feminine performances. Just as the rational soul is the foundational self that is ontologically prior to the contingent aspects of the self, such as the body and its performances, similarly, sex is the real, material fact that grounds gender. Because of this parallel, many debates in Anglo-European feminism have centered around the question of whether and to what extent sex determines gender, that is, whether one's biological sex can or ought to determine one's roles in society.

Yet such dualistic understandings of "male" and "female" natures does not have an adequate equivalent in the mainstream of traditional Chinese thought (Wang 2016, 207).[4] For instance, in the *Book of changes* (*Yijing*),[5] one of the foundational texts of Chinese philosophy and religion, mutually exclusive oppositions are expressly rejected. The text, which originally served as a guide for divination, is divided into explanations of 64 distinct hexagrams, each with a particular meaning that aids the reader in

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interpreting divinations. Two of the most important hexagrams, named *qian* and *kun*, are typically associated with the principles of masculinity and femininity respectively. However, they are also related to other concepts such as "above" and "below," "hot" and "cold," "summer" and "winter," *yang* and *yin*. These pairs exist as patterns in a world of constant transformation. They are not permanent ideals, nor are they mutually exclusive oppositions. They mutually entail and transform into one another facilitating change. Moreover, they also manifest differently in different phenomenon. For instance, in birds they produce *mu* (male) and *pin* (female). For animals, they produce *xiong* (male) and *ci* (female). In human beings, they produce *nan* and *nü*. *Nan* and *nü* also correspond roughly to the English "male" and "female," except that these terms apply only to humans (Rosenlee 2007, 46). That is, they apply predominantly to human bodies (*shen*) which are distinct in that they emerge through integration into a ritualized community (Sommer 2008, 317).[6] *Nan* and *nü* require a cultural system and a community to manifest themselves. Non-human animals that lack complex cultural systems are thus excluded. Hall and Ames characterize this nuanced understanding of gender/sex difference in human bodies (*shen*) in the following helpful way:

> On the Confucian side, different players in the personalization of gendered roles can express their own uniqueness as persons in a way that can be compared with the way one "ritualizes" oneself to find a place in community. Neither human nature nor gender is a given. A person is not born a woman, but becomes one in practice. And gender identity is ultimately not one of kind, but resemblance … Males and females are created as a function of *difference in emphasis* rather than *difference in kind.* (Hall and Ames 1998, 95–96)

Ultimately, both masculine and feminine principles are present in all humans and in all things. Sexual difference in a particular body signals the presence of an emphasis of one of these principles rather than an exclusive identity. For this reason, early Daoist medical texts sometimes recognize a multiplicity of possible sexes/genders within this framework (Mann 2011, 29).

An important goal of the Confucian classics is to guide individuals to coordinate these and other principles to cultivate their *shen* bodies. In the Confucian classic the *Great Learning* the world of human activity is characterized as a great social theater within which roles must be appropriately choreographed and blocked to create an aesthetically and morally harmonious production. An individual becomes (rather than *is*) *nan* or *nü* by participating in the appropriate, expected performances of that particular identity (which certainly include, but are not reducible to, certain physical signs). Thus, as Robin Wang points out in her study of gender dynamics in Chinese thought, "the 'nature versus nurture' debate … has little relevance in classical Chinese texts (in terms of sex vs. gender). Sex and gender are not two separate realities or isolated entities" (Wang 2016, 207). The embodied performance of the appropriate ritual activities is how we come to embody things like male and female. If we remove these ritualized activities, what remains is a depreciated version of man and woman, not the *essential* one. Robin Wang argues that the familiar categories of sex and gender would instead be understood much like other oppositional pairs like *yin* and *yang*, that is, as codetermining aspects of a self-differentiated unity (Wang 2016, 209).

With this understanding of the sex/gender dynamic in mind, we can understand the kind of catachresis that goes on when discussing feminist thought in late nineteenth-century China. One of the most important categories for feminist thought, no doubt, is

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the category of "women." However, Barlow observes that the contemporary term for "woman" in the sense of "female sex" in Chinese, *nüxing* (literally "female nature"), is a recent neologism that she and others date generally to the start of the twentieth century. Preceding this term there exists rather a family of terms which might be translated varyingly as "daughter," "wife," or most generally "women of the patriline [*funü*]" (Barlow 2004, 40). In other words, "there is no term present before the 20th century that might indicate women as a group outside the family" (Barlow 2004, 40). None of these terms can be extended to range over all women as such regardless of societal role, that is, be read as denoting female sex apart from female-typed roles within patriarchal society.[7] Barlow points to the writings of an influential philosopher and government official of the eighteenth century, Chen Hongmou (1696–1771), as an example. She observes that Chen sought to clarify sexual difference in a way that was "explicitly normative and definitional" (Barlow 2004, 41). Yet the definitions he employs lack any attempt to ground themselves in pre-discursive facts. Chen's definitions "do not refer to women's bodies nor to their body parts" (Barlow 2004, 43). Rather he organizes the category *funü*, "primarily within the *jia* [family], because what defines and anchors *funü* is the ritual life within the family" (Barlow 2004, 43). In other words, gender is not read off of a pre-discursive, given sex, but always understood relationally within the context of a network of gendered relationships within the home.[8]

This cultural perspective has far-reaching consequences for how gender manifested itself in practice. Exemplary female models from Chinese literature like Hua Mulan, a young girl who dresses in men's clothing and fights in a war for her family and country, are often portrayed as skilled fighters with keen military intellects. Mulan is celebrated for her bravery, loyalty, and filial piety rather than condemned for her masculinity. Far from being seen as a subversive act of gender bending, her performance as a male integrated itself with, and contributed to, the well-being of her family and society and was celebrated as an example of filial piety. As Wang Zheng (1999, 20–21) further clarifies:

> Traditional Chinese heroines (*jinguo yingxiong*) were women who fulfilled their obligations to the ruler or their kin with remarkable deeds in warfare. The stories of ancient heroic women warriors appeared in both heterodox literature and Confucian orthodox history books. To be a Confucian woman was to fulfill one's obligations as a daughter, wife, mother, and subject. A woman's marital spirit (*shangwu*), demonstrated by fulfilling her obligations, qualified her as a remarkable woman rather than as a masculinized woman or an androgynous woman in the Western sense . . . [Likewise a] man's lack of marital spirit . . . did not make him feminized.

Thus, a pre-discursive sex did not necessarily determine a women's aptitude for certain activities. Different aspects of the complementary pairs could be cultivated or emphasized in individuals as they adapted to their circumstances.

Lastly, when discussing Confucian social obligations, it is important to note that traditional Confucian social theory categorized familial and social roles into five corresponding pairs (*wulun*): ruler-minister, husband-wife, father-son, older brother-younger brother, and friend-friend. In many texts, the five relations are treated as analogous to the more explicitly gendered husband-wife paring. For instance, the Confucian philosopher Xunzi (310–235 BCE) posits the relationship of husband and wife as the "root" of the other relations (Xunzi 2006, 38). The classic *Biographies of exemplary*

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women (*Lienuzhuan*), a text from the Han Dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) written as a guide for the self-cultivation of women, characterizes the husband-wife pair as the "beginning" of the other relations (Liu 2014, 67). The relationships of father and son, ruler and minister, etc., all in a sense follow the model of husband and wife. Within the father-son relationship, the father embodies the *yang* principle, and the son the *yin*, and so on. Ultimately, a balance of both principles is needed to create harmony. But this does not mean that the son or daughter *only* embodies *yin*. Sometimes cultivating one's character or fulfilling a role requires innovative solutions tailored to individual circumstances (Rosenlee 2007, 86).

Therefore, we can summarize these two approaches to gender by saying that the dualistic view was accompanied by a "gender-neutral" ideal of selfhood, a self that transcends the sexed body as a knowing soul or rational agent. *The feminist critiques that emerged out of this tradition were responding to a particular form of exclusion*. Simone de Beauvoir reveals in her analysis of these dualisms that this gender-neutral model of personhood nonetheless ends up excluding women from full personhood in practice by associating women with the body and emotions. Woman thus gets cast as a second sex, as "the negative, to such a point that any determination is imputed to her as a limitation, without reciprocity" (Beauvoir 2011: 5). Woman's ability to transcend the body through disinterested reason is suspect and must be continuously proven. Man, by contrast, gets defined as both "the positive and the neuter to such an extent that in French *hommes* designates human beings" (Beauvoir 2011, 5). Meanwhile, the correlative view that dominated the Confucian and Daoist traditions tended toward an "androgynous" model of selfhood. Many of the discursive features identified by Beauvoir do not show up in this context. The Chinese word for man (*nan*) cannot be used synecdochally to refer to humans generally. The word for human being (*ren* 人) is gender neutral. Neither are women seen as barred from full personhood because of a conceptual association with the body (*shen*). The masculine principle is not associated with the mind and transcendence. In the androgynous model, *yin* and *yang* are correlative pairs, not ordered binaries. The careful correlation of both masculine and feminine principles is necessary for the cultivation of the individual and society.

Yet, premodern China was no special haven for sexual and gender fluidity. Hua Mulan, after all, must hide her female identity in order to join the army and fulfill her filial duties. Far from being more permissive, Hall and Ames point out that correlative sexism was in many ways more brutal than its dualistic counterpart. Confucian theories of self-cultivation focus almost exclusively on men's roles and experiences. The only feminine-typed role mentioned among the five relations (that of wife) is portrayed as supplementary and supportive. The others all describe relations among male-typed social roles. Other social relations such as between mother and daughter or mother and son are discussed far less frequently despite historically having great importance in Chinese society. Confucius in the *Analects* is not interested in women. He does not teach women and rarely discusses feminine-typed social roles or relationships. And while some scholars insist on the controversial claim that there are no sexist statements in the *Analects* (e.g. Rošker 2021, 20), the few statements that are made in the text about women are unflattering. This, combined with the relative silence on women's lives and experiences in the canonical *Four books* of classical Confucianism (*Sishu*) suggests at the very best an attitude of contempt, if not outright misogyny. In fact, I take the comparatively late emergence of self-cultivation texts targeted toward women such as the *Biographies* and the *Four books for women* (*Nü Sishu*) as a delayed effort to compensate for this relative silence on women's cultivation of personhood in the *Four*

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books. The very fact that this correlative sexism was perhaps conceptually less pernicious than its Western counterpart made women's exclusion from full personhood all the more arbitrary and inexcusable. It was as though women, their relationships, and the unfortunate realities of their situation had simply been forgotten, their discussion emerging only later as an afterthought.[9]

Given the complex understandings of gender and selfhood in China, we ought to identify what question or sets of questions would concern a modern Chinese feminist confronted with new ideas coming from "the West." The strategies early feminists like Wollstonecraft and Mill developed for critiquing sexist practices and their ideological justifications were naturally tailored to the philosophical and cultural presuppositions of their received tradition. When attempting to understand modern feminist discourse in China we ought to assume that these thinkers were likewise responding to their own tradition even while they were adopting new ideas from Anglo-European thought. It would be inappropriate, therefore, to look for similar feminist strategies among philosophers operating with a largely different set of background assumptions. In the following sections, I will show how moments of catachresis have informed interpretations of Chinese feminist arguments and how Kang and He-Yin Zhen's philosophical programs are instead better understood against the background of correlative sexism.

2. Kang Youwei and He-Yin Zhen

Kang and He-Yin are two of the earliest and most important forerunners of modern Chinese feminism, representing two of its earliest strains. Kang argues largely from a Confucian and national strengthening position typical of male reformist intellectuals in the late Qing. Meanwhile, He-Yin draws from anarchist perspectives that, like many more revolutionary-minded individuals of the period, she encountered during her exile in Japan. Yet we can discern the influence of correlative sexism in their selection and interpretation of these influences. Both were concerned with the role women had played in the Chinese cultural system up until their time period and were appalled by a sense that women had been underutilized, forgotten, and ignored in the cultivation of society. Moreover, they both linked closely together the inclusion of women with modernization and political reform more generally. Neither saw women's liberation as a narrow goal of specific concern to women. Rather, their writings treat the oppression of women as part of a larger system of inequality that both thinkers sought to critique and overcome in their own ways. As we will see, they use the oppression of women to articulate more generally society's ills and seldom rely on models of rational agency or liberal notions of equality to ground their arguments.

Kang Youwei was one of the most well-known and influential modernizers of the period. His monumental influence extends down to the twenty-first century where his works have enjoyed a recent revival of intense interest among Chinese scholars, especially in the mainland. He was one of the first and most vocal advocates for gender equality in China and helped found the "Foot Emancipation Society," which opposed the practice of foot binding as discriminatory toward women (Wang 1999, 36). He worked among a generation of notable reformers including Liang Qichao and Tan Sitong to form what is often regarded as the first generation of feminist thinkers. Texts on modern Chinese feminist history typically skim over this important, but complicated generation, regarding it as primarily concerned with national strengthening and eugenics, rather than women's liberation. Certainly, these thinkers' imperfect assessment of women's

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issues was often wrapped up in their broader concerns for national salvation. However, what should strike us as remarkable is the fact that these men were so concerned for the situation of women at all. Kang and his contemporaries regarded gender inequality as a fundamental part of China's political and social problems. This outlook begins to make more sense when we take into account the culture of correlative sexism to which they were responding.

Kang's major work, the *Book of the Great Unity* (*Datong Shu*), presented to twentieth-century Chinese a radical new vision of justice and society. In the text, he envisions and describes a future utopian global society called the *datong*,[10] the "great unity," wherein all of humanity is united under a single global government. Drawing from both Chinese and foreign sources, he argues that an ideal society would emphasize equality among individuals in general and the sexes in particular. He asserts that, "human inequality manifests in three forms: devalued races, slaves, and women of the patriline (*funü*)" (Kang 2010, 62). He argues that the division of the sexes, like the division between countries, classes, races, and cultures, has been a hindrance to the realization of human potential. To overcome the suffering caused by divisions and inequality, we must recognize the fundamental interconnection and unity of all things.

Kang dedicates a major chapter of his text, titled "On women" (*Lun Nü*), to the problem of inequality between the sexes. Here Kang writes with shock and disgust about the treatment of women in world history, detailing the way they have been restricted and oppressed. At first, it appears that Kang employs familiar tactics to argue for women's equality. Like many feminists, he is quick to point out that the justifications for women's exclusion from certain institutions, their subordination to men, and their general marginalization from public and political society are specious. He asserts that women do not differ in intellectual capacity from men and therefore should be allowed to engage in learning and political affairs as much as men. Their physical differences are also not significant enough to justify the oppression or unfair treatment that often occurs within traditional marriages and family life (Kang 1958, 149). These arguments appear to invoke the familiar dualisms found in the gender-neutral model of selfhood. By arguing that physical differences do not affect their intellectual capacities, he appears to take the position that equality is established on the basis of rational agency; women should be treated equally because they share the same rational capacities as men.

However, we must remember that rationality is rarely posited as the essential feature of human personhood in the Confucian tradition. Instead, Kang Youwei follows the Confucian view of the human person as a ritual animal, one that possess at its core a "heart that cannot bear the suffering of others" or *buren zhi xin* (Kang 2010, 4). This feature forms the core of what Confucians call *ren* 仁, or humanity, the most important quality to which a person or society can aspire. Kang does not yet use the term *nüxing* to refer to women as a category in his work, he speaks primarily of *nü* and *funü*. This produces noteworthy differences that become apparent once one explores the broader argument made in the chapter. Difficulties in translating this argument into English become clear when we examine Laurence G. Thompson's translation of the opening passage of Kang's chapter. I cite his translation at length here to illustrate this point,

> All men have had [particular] persons with whom they were most intimate, whom they loved the most: [their women]. Yet [men] have callously and unscrupulously repressed them, restrained them, deceived them, shut them up, imprisoned them, bound them, caused them to be unable to be independent, to be unable to hold public office, to be unable to be officials, to be unable to be citizens, to be unable to

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> enjoy [participation in] public meetings; still worse [men have caused them] to be unable to study, to be unable to hold discussions, to be unable to advance their names, to be unable to have free social intercourse, to be unable to enjoy entertainments, to be unable to go out sightseeing, to be unable to leave the house; still worse, [men have] carved and bound their waists, veiled their faces, compressed their feet, tattooed their bodies, universally oppressing the guiltless, universally punishing the innocent. These are worse than the worst immoralities. And yet throughout the world, past and present, for thousands of years, those whom we call Good men, Righteous men, have been accustomed to the sight of [such things], have sat and looked and considered them to be matters of course, have not demanded justice for them, have not helped them. This is the most appalling, unjust and unequal thing, the most inexplicable theory under heaven. (Kang 1958, 149–150)

Thompson's 1958 abridged translation is the only translation of Kang Youwei's seminal text into English. In this, Thompson's contribution to the appreciation of modern Chinese thought in the English-speaking world is immensely valuable. However, we see here revealing moments of catachresis in his work. First, Thompson translates the gender-neutral character *ren* 人 ("person") as "man" following the sexist conventions of his own time. Other places where "man" occurs in the translation are rightly placed in brackets since the original Chinese text does not contain the corresponding character *nan* 男 or any of its variations (Kang 2010, 87). In fact, terms for "men" or "males" or any masculine-typed roles appear *nowhere in the passage*. Kang is talking explicitly about humanity or humans (*ren*) and their treatment of the category *nü*, which as we have noted, is not coextensive with the category of "female sex." *Nan* and *nü* are correlative social categories, gender markers for various expressions of the human *dao*, that is, the way of human ritual existence (Rosenlee 2007, 46). The target of the critique is not men but the dominant cultural systems of the world—their rituals, social roles, and ordered pairs of relations. Kang is claiming that humans have created a set of social roles marked as *nü* that have proved harmful to the people we love who fill them.

Secondly, what Thompson translates as "Good men, Righteous men" corresponds to *ren ren* 仁人 and *yi shi*. That is, "humane people" and "moral scholars." In other words, both men and women are guilty of ignoring the inhumane way society treats its wives and daughters. For example, a common target of criticism among many modern reformers was the abusive way that young wives were often treated by their mothers-in-law. These matriarchs, who often held significant power within the family, were infamous for their cruelty to younger women who entered the household. Kang appears genuinely shocked by this oversight among people who should otherwise have "hearts that cannot bear the suffering of others" and describes it as "inexplicable." It is as though society had simply ignored the suffering of the individuals who fill these thankless feminine-typed roles.

Thus, the focus of much of his critique is on the family system, which appears at length in the chapter immediately following the one on women. Kang constantly reasserts the claim that different historical periods require different cultural systems. Sages like Confucius developed a cultural system to deal with the practical demands and limitations of their time. For instance, Kang writes, "anciently, in the Age of Disorder, the family system was formulated so as to put in order the social relations; hence there was no help for it but that there was pitiless and unjust repression" (Kang 2010, 125). Because of the inhumane and chaotic nature of the ancient world, the system put in

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place by the early sages was a provisional one. It could not but be imperfect and to a degree inhumane. Now, however, the world is entering into an age of greater dialogue and cooperation, which will enable us to articulate principles that are more transcultural and equal (*gong*, literally "public") and less parochial and unequal (*si*, literally "private"). This requires each nation to revise their inadequate cultural systems until we reach a humane global society in the age of the *datong*.

The future that Kang Youwei describes for overcoming gender disparity is as radical as anything else he proposes. He argues that women have been regarded by the family in traditional cultures as private (*si*) property. He claims that selfish concerns such as inheritance, wealth, and ownership helped create these family systems (Kang 2010, 155). Therefore, in the *datong*, economic equality and communal ownership will render such systems unnecessary. People will not just be concerned with the welfare of their own children. Rather the global government will have developed institutions and social policies that focus on the welfare of children in general (Kang 2010, 165). Eventually, the family as it is understood traditionally will be abolished as unnecessary. Men and women will freely associate and choose their sexual partners. Marriages will be decided by the partners themselves (rather than families or parents). They will be voluntary, temporary, and will last one year upon which they may be renewed if desired. Children will become wards of the state and the care for the young and the old alike will be a public responsibility. All ritualistic distinctions between gender will be abolished to prevent conservative hierarchies redeveloping between people. Instead, all people will be educated equally and eligible for political and professional positions.

Despite first impressions, we never see rational agency asserted as the true self, which is shared by all people and serves as basis for equality. What forms the basis of equality for Kang is the ubiquity of human suffering caused by hierarchical divisions and the human instinct to overcome this suffering (Kang 2010, 6). This is important primarily because it allows him to avoid dismissing the embodied experiences of women as irrelevant in order to argue for their equal status as rational agents. Instead, the universal experience of suffering, our ability to sense the suffering of others, and our drive to alleviate that suffering is what binds all humans together in our humanity. Therefore, he can at once argue for something like equality *and* for institutions and practices that address the specific challenges that face women in society.

Kang's concept of equality finds its expression more comfortably in the language of universal compassion rather than that of universal equal "rights." The traditional conflict between equality and freedom that emerges in liberal societies does not present itself as an issue for Kang. While the *tong* in Kang's concept of *datong* can be translated as "equality" as well as "unity," it must not be conflated with the modern liberal sense of the term. As Gao Ruiquan (2010, 486) notes, the modern sense of equality implies both political and moral dimensions. That is, human beings ought to be equal citizens before the law, and equal as moral subjects. Gao claims that certain concepts in traditional Confucian thought indeed share in this concept of equality. For instance, he claims that Confucius' statement that one should not do to others what one does not want done to oneself suggests a kind of moral reciprocity that places the Other on an equal moral footing to the self (Gao 2010). However, Confucianism does not condone a broadly equalizing program focusing on free agency. The notion of *datong* describes not the equal status of individuals, but a state of harmonious equilibrium in society, and even more broadly, of harmony between human society and the natural world. This is how we should understand Kang's marriage of women's issues with the cause of national salvation. For Kang's politics retain a distinctive Confucian concern for self-cultivation

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and the creation of a humane (*ren*) society. He is not merely parroting nationalist or eugenicist discourse received from the West and incorporating women's liberation as part of that appropriation. These ideas are adopted as modern methods for the Confucian project of cultivating society. The problem for him is that this project has thus far ignored half of the population. How then could Chinese society really regard itself as humane?

Thus, the argument for the equal treatment of women is based on the interconnection of all beings and the universal struggle for liberation from suffering that all beings face. Only when this is understood and addressed, can a society truly become authoritative and humane. Because of his approach, Kang Youwei appears to be far more sensitive to what contemporary feminists might consider "structural" and "systemic" sexism. He tends to focus on the role social institutions like the family, the division of gender roles, economic conditions, and linguistic conventions play in the formation of sexist oppression. He focuses less on beliefs about "biological sex" and its relationship to "gender." He also tends to formulate arguments for equality by insisting on the necessity of women for the cultivation of a morally and aesthetically harmonious society and pointing out the ways they have been forgotten and ignored. For Kang, the source of all suffering comes from ignorance of the fundamental interconnection of things and the historical tendency among human beings to be narrowly concerned with their immediate selfish interests. It is the separating out of humanity into rigid *nan* and *nü* roles while marginalizing *funü* that has caused suffering. Therefore, Kang insists that, in the *datong*, people will follow the more "public" principle that the categories of *nan* and *nü* "do not diverge" (*wei you yi*) (Kang 2010, 87).

We see a very similar attitude reflected in the work of He-Yin Zhen despite being philosophically and ideologically opposed to Kang in many ways. Her main concern is not with national strengthening, and she is even critical of the preceding male feminist voices as being more interested in such concerns rather than the liberation of women. He-Yin is one of the first female voices of modern Chinese feminism and as such represents an important moment in its development. Intensely critical of tradition culture, her works draw inspiration from the anarchist and socialist theories that were coming out of Japan and Europe in her time. However, we should not emphasize these connections to the point that we ignore the influence Chinese thought certainly had upon her. Like Kang, we should instead understand why these theories would have appealed to her by looking at the tradition of correlative sexism that deeply informs her philosophical writings on gender. Moreover, her feminist critiques are intricately interwoven with her broader economic and political critiques, and the two must be taken together.

He-Yin was a prolific writer and a pioneering intellectual figure in early modern China. As one of the first female voices of early twentieth-century Chinese feminism, she is often credited with being one of its most important forerunners. Of her many essays, her work titled "On women's liberation" contains some of her central ideas about the nature of sexism and her theories on gender. Like Kang, her critiques focus on social institutions and the historical conditions that led to the unequal situation of female social roles in society. She criticizes marriage as a form of bartering and ownership over women, symbolized in conventions such as the woman's adopting the man's family name. Anticipating the Marxist critiques that would later become so popular, she claims that marriage, cultural customs, and military and economic power divided people into male and female "classes." These classes divide up labor, privileges, and power between those that occupy them in a way that has historically disfavored women. It is not merely

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that social institutions have treated the two natural categories of male and female unequally. Rather, she argues that historically war, the establishment of economic property, and ownership rights gave rise to the creation of "political and moral institutions, the first priority of which was to separate man [*nan*] from woman [*nü*]," and place them in unequal stations (He-Yin 2011, 53). In this way, her work regards woman not as a natural category, but as "a political ontology, or an endlessly reproduced principle of politicized and social practice" (Liu et al. 2011, 10). Like Kang, she does not primarily focus on the sexist actions of one group of people (men) toward another group (women). Rather, the focus of her critique is on the historical, political, and economic conditions that partition humans into unequal and exploitative social roles. Women and men are not primarily biological categories that precede power and politics. Rather these categories are constituted by economic and political forces. Any critique of gender inequality, therefore, must address these wider systemic issues.

This is not to say she does not recognize the reality that males have by and large benefitted historically from this socioeconomic system. She begins her essay by observing that, "for thousands of years, the world has been dominated by the rule of man. This rule is marked by class distinctions over which men—and men only—exert proprietary rights. To rectify the wrongs, we must first abolish the rule of men and introduce equality among human beings, which means that the world must belong equally to men and to women" (He-Yin 2011, 53). The introduction of the new terms for male and female sex certainly gives He-Yin new analytic categories with which to critique patriarchal oppression. Women as a category outside of familial roles begins to emerge, revealing the inequal distribution of property, rights, and power among the genders.

Yet for He-Yin, the crux of the matter is that economics and social institutions are the ultimate source of this inequality. The problem of women's liberation, therefore, is not as simple as how to resist male dominance. The root of the divisions of the spheres of male and female lay in broader systems of economic and political inequality. She writes, "in ancient times, the separation of the inner [women] from the outer [men] was originally instituted to prevent illicit sexual affairs. Unfortunately, this has led to a situation where a woman's lifelong responsibility has been restricted to the double task of raising children, managing the household, and nothing else" (He-Yin 2011, 54). The desire for progeny to carry on a man's property prompted moral systems of chastity for women and caused the division of *nan* and *nü* into separate spheres of inner (*nei*) for women, and outer (*wai*) for men. This has led to women filling the role of domestic property and servant. At the same time, she also believes that this division of roles imposes on men (particularly poor men) oppressive gender expectations. Men are burdened with being the sole economic provider for the family and may come to resent women for the economic burden they represent. Thus, the enmity between men and women, as well as the unequal division of labor and the exploitation that comes with it, has its source in broader systems of inequality.

Because of her sensitivity to these things, she is vocally skeptical about typical liberal solutions to gender inequality such as universal suffrage, increased political representation, or providing women with economic opportunities. She believes that, even though some women in Europe and America share legal equalities such as voting rights, education, work opportunities, and the ability to divorce, they remained far from free and equal. She points out that even where woman can vote or run for office they are rarely elected. Those that are elected typically come from a privileged economic class that has benefitted from the status quo, and therefore are more inclined to support the

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underlying system of inequality. Moreover, she fears that, in a liberal democracy, wealthy women would come to control public discourse and use their power to manipulate how poor women voted. He-Yin predicted that by merely adopting universal suffrage and equality under the law power would no more fall into the hands of Chinese women than it had to women in the West (He-Yin 2011, 66). It is not that she opposes women's suffrage, rather she opposes the idea that such rights can by themselves address these fundamental cultural, political, and economic practices that give rise to inequality between the genders.

Neither is she convinced that allowing women to be educated and to work outside the home are sufficient to alter the sexist political ontology of *nan* and *nü*. He-Yin points out that moving women out of the home and into the workforce benefits men as much as it does women. While perhaps not objectionable in itself, she wonders, "if this plan to send women to school was designed with the goal of advancing women's own interests or if the objective of turning women into teachers or skilled workers is not to help alleviate men's burden" (He-Yin 2011, 61). She worries whether the call made by certain male reformers for women to work is truly for the sake of women's liberation, or a new political tactic to strengthen a patriarchal government and merely relieve men's burden in their role of economic producers. Allowing women greater participation in the cultivation of society could end up only strengthening men's domination if the other fundamental cultural and economic issues are not addressed. Her fear is that outside the home women could merely become workers for a patriarchal society that still expects them to fulfill domestic duties at home for families controlled by their husbands. Ultimately, it is important for her that women take an active role in their own liberation and not leave it only to male reformers like Kang Youwei.

The tradition of correlative sexism informs He-Yin's skepticism about guaranteeing abstract equality before the law in the absence of fundamental cultural and institutional changes. Her analysis anticipates the insights of later twentiethy-century feminists by locating the source of sexist oppression in the politically constructed sexual binary itself. She believes that gender identities are more rightly understood as socio-political constructs used by those in power to divide people into groups in a way that benefits some and not others. Like Kang, she views this process as resembling the way that any class division originates. He-Yin, therefore, does not see the question of women's liberation as primarily an issue of making women equal to men simply by providing equal rights to suffrage and education. Rather, women's liberation involves overcoming the whole socioeconomic and cultural systems that continually produce disenfranchised groups. As she puts it, the fundamental question of women's liberation is: "how not to allow the struggle for universal suffrage as stipulated by parliamentary representation to limit our efforts?" (He-Yin 2011, 70). The concept of the subject presupposed by her project of liberation is one that is relational, historical, and constituted by a culture system. Effective resistance, therefore, cannot stop at providing women with education, the vote, and work opportunities. It must involve the disrupting of all hierarchical roles and relationships, including economic and political ones.

3. Appreciating Modern Chinese Feminisms

Since the turn of the last century, China has given rise to a multiplicity of feminist traditions that have been gaining more attention from sinologist. However, they have yet to receive the attention they deserve within transnational feminist philosophy. This is unfortunate, since one of the most distinctive features of Chinese modernity was that it

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awakened a sudden, widespread interest in gender equality among both male and female intellectuals there. Critiquing gender relations and identities was regarded by modernizers as essential to addressing China's political and intellectual problems. Occasionally, this intriguing phenomenon is discounted by claims that male thinkers were merely interested in imitating their colonizers, strengthening the nation, or improving the race. This criticism of certain male contemporaries is voiced even by He-Yin, and certainly many reformers had these goals in mind while writing. However, when approached from the perspective of correlative sexism, we can see that the language of self-cultivation and political strengthening so important to Confucian thought were tied up in a language that was, in many ways, consciously gendered. The broader reassessment of Confucian society and politics necessitated a reform in the understanding of the correlative pairs of *nan* and *nü*. It is no accident then that while many societies modernized in near complete apathy towards issues related to gender, China instantiated one of the most radical transformations of women's lives ever seen in a matter of decades.

The aim of this essay has been to show that these feminist voices that emerged during this period were not merely an ersatz of the Western movements that they took inspiration from. The intense interest in women's liberation was also occasioned by China's own intellectual tradition, which had a peculiar kind of gendered discourse. Understanding this discourse can help us to garner a deeper appreciation of the Chinese feminist tradition beyond its relevance to specialists of Chinese thought. One interesting consequence of this discourse is that it linked feminist theory more directly to broader political and social theory. Thinkers like Kang Youwei and He-Yin Zhen tended to focus on the evolution of cultural systems and how they create a whole spectrum of inequalities including those between the sexes. The interaction of different forms of systemic oppression foreground their considerations about the rights of women. As a result, Chinese feminist discourse continues to retain some distinctive features that do not always have clear counterparts in other parts of the world.

In addition to rehabilitating classical Confucianism for the benefit of feminist ethics, transnational feminism stands to benefit from the works of modern Chinese feminists like Kang Youwei and He-Yin Zhen. Over the past several decades, feminists have become increasingly aware of the deep interconnection between the needs of distinct minorities in their struggles for equality. Contemporary feminist critiques often venture beyond the concern for women's liberation to also address other forms suffering caused by ableism, racism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, speciesism, and ecological degradation. The theoretical challenges facing these sometimes conflicting liberation projects are enormous. They require developing a vocabulary for articulating complex systems of oppression and for identifying different marginalized groups that have been often overlooked by more traditional approaches. This must be accomplished while avoiding the erasure that can happen to groups of people who fall in between or outside of the identities modern discourse prescribes. The theories of Chinese thinkers like He-Yin Zhen, who have long emphasized the interdependence and plasticity of seemingly mutually exclusive categories have the potential for supplying new analytical vocabularies that may prove beneficial for these issues. Meanwhile, Kang Youwei's observation that what unites humanity and the broader natural world is the universal experience of suffering and our desire to overcome that suffering provides us with an intriguing way of framing the quest for justice and equality. Lastly, it should be noted that Chinese feminism truly blossomed when its intellectuals took serious steps to challenge the Sino-centrism that had dominated much of China's intellectual discourse, forcing their peers to take seriously the challenges from previously ignored foreign traditions. Amid an increase in anti-Asian hate in the aftermath of Covid-19 and

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international tensions, my hope is that we can do more to incorporate Chinese perspectives in both research and pedagogy for the development of international feminism.

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Notes

1 E.g. Saraswati and Shaw (2020) and McCann et al. (2021), despite their other merits, fail to include any Chinese authors.

2 Generalizing about "Chinese" or "Western" culture must be done with care. There is less clarity than we often pretend on what "China" or "the West" actually refer to historically, culturally, or even geographically. These traditions no more have an essence than "man" and "woman." Making general remarks about what these traditions believe inevitably glosses over the great deal of diversity of views across time and space within those traditions, however we might define them. Yet like our discussions of sex, we should not for this reason strike all talk of difference. What I seek to outline here are some paradigmatic models of selfhood and gender that came to dominate these intellectual traditions. Although there is a great diversity of views among those working in these paradigms, they were nonetheless all compelled to respond to these models in some way.

3 Knowledge of the Good as a qualification for political leadership forms the major thrust of his critique of democracy. See Plato (1997), 489a–490a).

4 Here Robin Wang argues that the materiality of the body and the social manifestations of gender were not seen as separate realities, but mutually entailing and establishing.

5 https://ctext.org/book-of-changes/yi-jing (accessed July 27, 2022).

6 Deborah Sommer notes that, while the term *ti* can be used to refer to the bodies of animals, the term *shen* typically cannot.

7 To illustrate this point, Lisa Rosenlee recalls an account of an anthropologist who was surprised to find that the Chinese women she interviewed struggled to define or describe the concept of "women" apart from female-type roles within society (2007, 47).

8 To clarify this perspective, consider what Judith Butler says about the view that sex terms describe a body that is given prior to discourse. She writes, "the body posited as prior to the sign, is always posited or signified as prior. This signification produces as an effect of its own procedure the very body that it nevertheless and simultaneously claims to discover as that which precedes its own action. If the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all. On the contrary, it is productive, constitutive, one might even argue performative, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification." Butler (1993, 6). The position that the sexed body is prior to our discourse about that body is itself a product of discourse, namely, a discourse that emphasizes the descriptive function of language. The argument being made here by Barlow and others is that, while male/female and *nan/nü* appear to have a kind of equivalence, these terms nevertheless evolved within different discursive environments. Therefore, the understanding of these terms and their uses were not identical. My argument is that understanding this will help us unpack the nature of sexism within Chinese society as well as how Kang and He-Yin address that sexism.

9 Rosenlee (2007, 122) contends that the patrilinear culture's focus on family inheritance, filial piety, and ancestor worship gave rise to this gender-biased focus). Others, like Robin Wang (2005), attribute it to the sexist theories of the Han Dynasty philosopher Dong Zhongshu, who makes the supportive role of the feminine principle far more explicit than it is in the *Book of changes*.

10 This term can be translated in a variety of ways. None of which is entirely satisfying. The term *tong* 同 generally connotes togetherness, equality, and mutuality. It is often used in a similar way to the English prefix co- as in "coed" or "cooperation." Thus, the "Great Unity" or the "Great Concord" are among several adequate translations.

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