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Politics at the Local–Global Intersection: Meanings of *Bentuhua* and Transnational Feminism in China

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ABSTRACT

This article examines contemporary Chinese feminism's processes of "connecting with the international tracks" as well as *bentuhua* (indigenisation), arguing that these processes are inseparable from both domestic and international power relations and thus asserting the need for a critical perspective on *bentuhua*. An "institutional-discursive" focus on both political and cultural contexts reveals that the usage of *bentuhua* can be literally and metaphorically spatial in quality, as well as regarded as a resource that is part of the grammar of social transformation in China. Neoliberal globalisation promotes a "project"-oriented approach to feminist activism that has benefits and costs. Transnationalism can be a source of resistance to the continued authoritarian party-state, as well as to homogenising effects of nationalist tendencies. Thus, from a theoretical standpoint it is useful to comprehend contemporary Chinese feminist thought from the understanding that the local and the global are inextricably interconnected.

KEYWORDS

Chinese feminist theory;
globalisation; localisation;
indigenisation

[W]hen I see the process of Chinese women's globalization, I also see the fortuitous process of her individuation.

—Li Xiaojiang (2001, p. 1277)

As China is gradually globalized, the inequality its women suffer is redoubled.

—Wang Anyi (2003, p. 252)

These quotes, from two of China's leading post-Mao women writers, signify the contested meanings of globalisation in China today. The contradictory effects of globalisation on individuals are ubiquitous, probably even self-evident, to any astute observer of the breakneck transformations and contradictions attending these processes. Who has not seen one or many of those images that represent the paradoxical manifestations of China's globalisation processes – the Starbucks with the uniformed security guards in front, the peasant workers toiling to construct gleaming shopping malls or assemble the latest iPhones, the magazine covers featuring Chairman Mao garbed in Louis Vuitton?¹

Yet understanding the deeper implications of such contradictions is a more difficult and elusive task. In cultural and discursive realms as well as those relating to consumerism and daily life, China's "reform and opening" has manifold consequences. One area in which this has been evident is in Chinese feminism as it has sought to "connect with the international tracks" (*jiegui*) and also (re)claim its own "local" or "indigenous" (*bentuhua*) identity. In this paper, I examine some manifestations of these trends in order to examine how ultimately they themselves are inseparable from domestic and international power relations, as well as in some cases tending to oversimplify and downplay the advantages of continued connections between Chinese and transnational feminisms. This paper is a set of theoretical reflections on *bentuhua* as one example of the complicated relationship between "local" and "global" in Chinese feminism. Although the *bentuhua* discussion in feminism mostly played out in the early years of the current century, and explicit interest in self-conscious ideas of *bentuhua* seems to have waned within the Chinese women's movement, this complicated relationship continues. Indeed, notions of *bentuhua* in varying forms have been an ongoing theme in discussions regarding China's relations with the outside world since the *ti-yong* debates of the late Qing Dynasty, with the ontological question of the meaning of being "Chinese" a central part of these deliberations. I also want to demonstrate the *strategic* nature of Chinese feminist contemplations regarding *bentuhua*.² Thus, a critical perspective on *bentuhua* itself is necessary in order to truly understand the costs and benefits of transnational feminist theory and practice for feminism in China.

Transnationalism and the "Local"

When considering the effects of transnationalism on feminist theory and practice, it is useful to differentiate it from but also connect it to concepts of globalisation. Feminists often emphasise the careful use of terminology; while it is important to note that even though much Chinese feminist discussion of *bentuhua* occurs in relation to Western feminism(s), "transnational feminism" itself is a term that seeks to allow for a more nuanced perspective on the nature of globalised and postcolonialist power relations than earlier emphases on "global feminism" (see, e.g., Grewal & Kaplan, 1994).³ More generally, "transnationalism" keeps the nation-state, and thus potentially the "local", more firmly in view than does the more thoroughly deterritorialised "globalisation" – although the question of what is transnational and what is not about Chinese feminism is an easy one to ask but a much harder one to answer. To a great extent Chinese feminism cannot be separated from China's relations with other countries and its international context; this is true through the entirety of China's "long twentieth century", not only since "reform and opening" in the last two decades of that century. In other words, if the "transnational" is defined by "practices that cross state boundaries but do not originate with state agencies or actors (although they are often involved)" (Sklair, 2005, p. 58), feminism in China is difficult to extricate from that country's long and ongoing usage of a mode of comparison with other states in its quest for development and modernity. For instance, Li Xiaojiang, the most important founder of the post-Mao women's studies movement beginning in the 1980s, writes that China has dealt with the introduction of new discourses with respect to women since its encounters with the West beginning in the nineteenth century, with both liberalism's ideas of "rights" and socialism's ideas of "class" being part of these (Li, 1999, p. 266). Subsequent to the introduction of these concepts, transforming women's traditionally low

status became a *sine qua non* of (mostly male) Chinese intellectuals' views of how to make China a "modern" power.⁴

Li's observation of the fairly obvious point of Chinese feminism's inherently transnational origins is somewhat ironic given that she is also one of the leading proponents of the need for a contemporary Chinese *bentuhua* feminism – Li, among other things, argues that the emergence of women's studies in China in the 1980s, largely under her own leadership, was different from that in the West in that it emerged as "the product of the equality of the genders" already present in China, rather than as the movement-based version of the West (Li, 2003, p. 17). Li disapproves of the influence of Western feminism on Chinese feminism and women's studies, being particularly "critical of the import of Western feminist theory" (Spakowski, 2011, pp. 36–37; see also Li, 2000; Shih, 2005) that has occurred in the wake of Chinese feminism's various efforts to "connect the tracks" of transnational feminism prior and subsequent to the convening of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995.⁵

Other Chinese feminists readily acknowledge the global influence on Chinese feminism both historically and contemporaneously, but argue that it is because of this global influence that there is a need for a *bentuhua* of Chinese feminism, for example advocating for "a synthesis of universal and national approaches" (Spakowski, 2001, p. 97). Different Chinese feminists and scholars of women's studies define *bentuhua* in divergent ways.⁶ For instance, Li Xiaojiang sees *bentuhua* women's studies in China as related to the need to "solve problems locally" (Li, 2006, p. 275). Women's Federation scholar Liu Bohong examines the "different path" of Chinese feminism vis-à-vis Western feminism, whereby "the liberation of Chinese women was achieved under the preconditions of national liberation and class liberation" and closely connected to "social development" (Liu, 2008, p. 101). The Chinese etymology of *bentuhua* would seem to emphasise its more "local" aspects – with *ben* (本) meaning "root", "original" or "native", and *tu* (土) meaning "soil", "land", "native" or "local" (Yao, 2000, pp. 28–29, p. 657). While *hua* (化) does add "to change" to the meaning, the emphasis on the "local" remains.

Observers use different English renditions of *bentuhua* that tend to be dynamic and processual in nature – including "localisation", "indigenisation" and "nativisation". Each of these translations has nuanced differences in terms of meaning. For instance, "localisation" has a more obvious spatial quality; the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "the action of making local, fixing in a certain place, or attaching to a certain locality". "Indigenisation" as "the act or process of rendering indigenous or making predominantly native; adaptation or subjection to the influence or dominance of the indigenous inhabitants of a country" and "nativisation" as "the action, process, or policy of making something native" are more cultural, discursive and processual.⁷ In this paper, I utilise various translations of the concept as well as the Chinese term itself, but I generally favour "indigenisation" as a translation as it is less place- and more process-based. *Bentuhua*, and ways of translating it into English, has varied connections with spatiality and temporality and especially with respect to other ways that agents in China seek to create and present an "alternative modernity" to that predominant in the West. In this sense, *bentuhua* is one source of connections between transnationalism and (alternative) modernity; i.e. how are concepts and theories from abroad "translated" into Chinese language, theory and practice?⁸ While explicit attention to *bentuhua* among Chinese feminists seemed to have reached its high water mark between 2001 and 2005 (Jiang, 2012), and subsided somewhat after that, there remains a concern in China with ideas of the "local", with manifestations of cultural nationalism and other ideas

necessitating feminists' continued engagement on some level with the "Chinese" nature of their work.

In subsequent sections of this paper, I trace the purposes and complications of *bentuhua* in Chinese feminism, examining the difficulties and even impossibilities of the "local" in this highly and ever-more-interconnected world. I am acutely aware of the ironies of drawing on Western-derived theoretical treatments of globalisation and transnationalism to elucidate Chinese *bentuhua*, but certain concepts are useful in conceiving of *bentuhua* and its negotiation of the global and the local. For instance, some theorists argue that globalisation is innately also "local" – e.g. that globalisation needs to be placed in "local frames" to be truly comprehended (Korff, 2003, pp. 2–3). Thus, *bentuhua* is a natural and inherent process whenever the "local" encounters the "global". These processes are also evident in discussions of phenomena such as cosmopolitanism and hybridity – for instance, in the views of some theorists that there is a continuum between the local and the cosmopolitan (Roudometof, 2005), or that some cultures are more innately cosmopolitan than others in that they are "carried as collective structures of meaning by networks more extended in space, transnational or even global" (Hannerz, 1990, p. 239). Given the views of some that feminism has long been a transnational enterprise (e.g. Mackie, 2001), feminism itself constitutes a potential "collective structure of meaning" that is trans-border in nature. To this extent, although there are definitely intra-movement power relationships to which attention must be given, feminism is itself a constantly changing cultural hybrid, evident in its often (though definitely not always) self-reflexive traits, and thus approaches to feminism might benefit from an approach of "postcolonial hybridity" that rejects repeating "the colonialist obsession with purity" and also "counterpoises itself against the rigid essentialism that often underpins Third World discourse" (Daniel, 2005, p. 263).

Thus, to comprehend the "indigenisation" of contemporary Chinese feminism, an approach that I will term "institutional-discursive" must be employed, sensitive to political and cultural contexts at the same time. It must trace aspects of *bentuhua* in theory and in practice at different conceptual levels, with attention to specific contexts of transnationalism and their "localisation". In a 2011 article, Nicola Spakowski also identifies three traits of Chinese feminism in recent years: namely, (1) the "introduction of 'Western' feminism" leading to (2) the "trouble" faced by "this import" as (3) Chinese feminism searches for its own "identity in a global context". Spakowski argues that Chinese feminists have turned to the "local" to "define their place in the world", especially vis-à-vis the greater "material and discursive power" of "actors located in the West" (Spakowski, 2011, pp. 31–32). While Spakowski's approach is useful from a theoretical standpoint, it perhaps does not adequately account for ways that Chinese feminism has long been global in inflection, as well as the potential complexity of motivations for *bentuhua* in Chinese feminism. When deployed self-consciously, or when occurring as an innate result of the "global" encountering the "local", *bentuhua* has varied purposes and meanings, and its usage can be both literally and metaphorically spatial in quality. It can create "space" not only in relations between Western and Chinese feminists and feminisms, but also in relation to an authoritarian regime, a neoliberal economic order, and a nationalist cultural turn. It can also hinder deeper understandings of power relations within China – for instance, between elite, academic, urban feminists and the marginalised and often rural women who are often the targets of their "projects".

In this sense, *bentuhua*, or the “local”, is best regarded as a resource that can be used, misused or even exploited as part of the grammar of social transformation in China. I will now examine various levels at which *bentuhua* has varied meanings in relation to manifestations of the “global” and/or the “transnational” in contemporary Chinese feminism: (1) neoliberalism, (2) political transnationalism and the Party-state, (3) culture and nationalism, and (4) transnational and Western feminisms.

Chinese Women and (Neoliberal) Globalisation

China’s transnationalism is obviously first and foremost connected to economic processes relating to “reform and opening”, and to components of global neoliberalism. Chinese feminism features ongoing discussion and debate regarding the effects of economic opening on Chinese women in all sectors of society, and the economic sphere is perhaps where both the benefits and the costs of “connecting with the tracks” of the world are most evident, though some are more likely to emphasise one side or the other of the equation. The consequences of this for *bentuhua* are significant – different views of the costs and benefits of globalisation without a doubt lead to conflicting positions regarding the need for, or what would even constitute, “indigenisation”.

From the 1980s when she pioneered women’s studies in China, Li Xiaojiang has been a strong proponent of the overall benefits of China’s post-Mao economic opening for women. For her, state-led women’s “liberation” in the Mao period surely had advantages, but led to women’s true nature and individuality being repressed.⁹ Thus, one “local” understanding of the global for Li Xiaojiang is the context of China’s economic opening and the opportunities this has given to Chinese women, rather than a perhaps more typically feminist approach that might have a more negative view of the “gender of globalisation”. For Li (2003), this is especially the case since the Chinese Communist Party granted women formal equality, an important achievement, but this process also limited women’s own thinking.

Tani Barlow thus examines how Li Xiaojiang can fit into post-Mao efforts among some Chinese intellectuals to “recuperate a viable Chinese Marxism”, but also ultimately characterises Li’s feminism as “market feminism” (Barlow, 2004, p. 270, p. 268). Although she does acknowledge that globalisation can create problems, Li Xiaojiang regards China’s opening and globalisation largely as a phenomenon that “brings new opportunities for vulnerable people and marginalized groups in China, as well as new opportunities for China’s development” (Li, 2006, p. 167). Probably one of the most prominent ways in which Li sees globalisation as presenting opportunities for Chinese women relates to “(individual) development” in terms of women’s search for their “self” as well as revaluing what have been seen as the “incurably” petty qualities of femininity” (2001, p. 1278; 1999, p. 272; 1994, p. 379). Thus, for Li, creating a post-Mao feminism involves a feminine individuality for Chinese women, one that is also independent of the Women’s Federation, of which Li has also been critical (see, e.g., Wang, 1998, p. 15). For Li also, this means that certain key terms from Western feminism, such as “liberation” and “the personal is political” are not necessarily applicable in the Chinese context (see, e.g., Li, 1999; Wu, 2005, pp. 41–42).

Such a perspective diverges from that of one of the other leading post-Mao feminist theorists, Dai Jinhua, who adopts a much more “anti-capitalist” position, which is critical of the emergence of what she regards as a “crass, massified, commercial commodity culture” under reform (Barlow, 2004, p. 306). Dai regards the entry of China into the global economy

as leading to a certain willed ignorance regarding the negative effects of globalisation: the “inability to confront and examine the inevitable conflict between transnational capitalism and the national welfare and interest of the third world within the sphere of globalism” as well as the market economy marking “the beginning of the reconstruction of the patriarchal order” (Dai, 2001, p. 174, p. 178). In this sense, Dai envisages the individual opportunities, which Li views as having been brought by the introduction of the market economy to China, as far more insidious in their effects.

The market also opened Chinese society to increased foreign influence in terms of organisations and funding, which had immense direct consequences for the nature of Chinese feminism, and in fact is one of the major sources of the recent quest for *bentuhua*. Much of the development of women’s studies as well as the more recent turn to “doing projects” in Chinese feminism relies almost exclusively on funding from foreign foundations such as the US-based Ford Foundation. While such funding indeed also can be located in the realm of “new opportunities” for Chinese feminist scholarship and activism and no doubt has enabled many activities to occur that otherwise would not have, it also has certain costs and is in fact critiqued by some foreign observers as well as by some Chinese activists, for, among other things, itself having neoliberal tendencies. Such a view partially stems from the fact that foreign funding has, among other things, served to step into a gap left by a retreating Chinese state in areas of welfare and service provision. While such funding has enabled Chinese women’s “non-governmental” organisations to develop in important ways, it also leads to pressures on them to do particular types of activities.¹⁰ These activities, often connected to various development and poverty-alleviation schemes, are referred to as doing “projects” (*xiangmu*), clearly a certain “indigenised” form of Chinese feminist activism (along with an analogous process, “gender training”; see, e.g., Wang & Zhang, 2010). This form has both costs and benefits. Min Dongchao argues that the emphasis on projects has led to an absence of indigenous theory-building in Chinese feminism: “Since the mid-1990s, being internationalized has replaced being mentally emancipated, translating imported theories has replaced developing our own, and doing projects has replaced promoting the discipline” (Min, 2009, pp. 204–205). Thus, for Min, “projects” are not an adequate basis for “indigenisation”. Another scholar, Song Shaopeng (2007), asserts that reliance on foreign funding to “do projects” has the effect of “ignoring feminists’ function in criticizing society and culture”; in other words, while projects might assist the situation of marginalised women, they make feminists less able to critique wider tendencies in Chinese society, thus in a sense “privatising” feminism and reinforcing neoliberal hegemony.¹¹ Other critiques of “projects” rest on their situational approach, rather than their examination of more “strategic” and “structural” aspects of concern to Chinese women.¹²

Thus, the “opportunities” of globalisation for individual action proclaimed by Li Xiaojiang have another, darker side, and this is without even considering the negative effects of neoliberal economic practices on certain groups of Chinese women. Some Chinese feminists are attentive to these issues – for instance, Liu Bohong writes of the negative effects of globalisation (also some positive ones) on Chinese women’s health (2008) as well as on women workers (2009). Jin Yihong (2008) also notes the “marginalisation” of women’s labour under globalisation in China. This is one vital way in which the inherently transnational context of Chinese feminism, in terms of being influenced by Western feminist theories and approaches, alters the potential meanings or usefulness of *bentuhua*. While, on the one hand, this might make the need for a more *bentu* approach to Chinese

feminism more crucial, it could also mean that merely local solutions to problems that are global in origin are themselves unattainable. In this sense, the level of the nation-state is both necessary and also outdated as a frame of analysis – “most of us carry our political actions as citizens of a particular nation-state” (Mackie, 2001, p. 185), but theorists such as Nancy Fraser also argue that it is a problem when

the claims of the global poor are shunted into the domestic political arenas of weak or failed states and blocked from confronting the offshore sources of their dispossession. The result is a special, meta-political, kind of misrepresentation that I call *misframing* (Fraser, 2009, p. 6).

Feminism, especially in its more recent multicultural, transnational versions, is not just the bearer or beneficiary of globalisation, but is also highly critical of the ways in which globalisation contributes to gendered and other inequalities.

Thus, just as feminism from its earliest days in China was inextricably tied to China’s openings to the outside world, today also it is more difficult and often even counterproductive to seek to separate the “local” or “indigenous” aspects of it from its more global or transnational characteristics. As will also be seen below, some contemporary Chinese feminists are seeking to locate one “indigenous” aspect of Chinese feminism in its Marxist heritage, which is ironic on multiple levels. Of course, Marxism itself is not indigenous to China, and although it might provide a useful lexicon for resistance to neoliberal globalisation – and some Marxist feminists have sought to use it as a way of resisting “Euro-American-centrism” (Wang, 2009; see also Wang, 2008) – it is of limited utility in China today. Wang Zheng and Zhang Ying write that “no legitimate language exists to express concerns for social justice and equality without suggesting a ‘backward’ identification with a Maoist past”, and in fact “gender” has replaced “class” as one mode of expressing social justice claims (Wang & Zhang, 2010, pp. 66–67). Thus, the “globally”-derived concept of “gender” provides a means of critiquing the localised effects of globalisation in the absence of other possible discourses, as I will discuss further below.

Chinese Women and the Party-state

Continued Party-state control of certain elements of social organisation in China indicates another aspect of the complications of “indigenisation” – transnationalism can provide elements of resistance to such statist domination, and *bentuhua* can in fact be the product of statist pressure rather than autonomous feminist desires. Consequently, while contemporary Chinese feminism has the worthy goal of establishing theories and practices independent of both the state-dominated mode of women’s “liberation” of the Mao era and of often-hegemonic Western theories and resources, this process is complicated and contradictory.

While post-Mao Chinese feminism originates in the 1980s efforts of scholars such as Li Xiaojiang to establish a local version of women’s studies, its developmental momentum increased due to the convening of the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing in 1995, and the formation of new women’s “non-governmental organisations” (NGOs) as well as a reformulation of the role of the All-China Women’s Federation as an NGO. Hence, the FWCW involved a renegotiation of Chinese women’s relationship with the Party-state commensurate with that state’s withdrawal from certain aspects of private life under neoliberal globalisation, but the FWCW and emergent NGO consciousness in China also contributed to that same state being rather attentive to and sometimes controlling of the nature and scope of NGO organisations and activities.

The introduction of NGOs altered the nature of the Chinese women's movement. The Marxist legacy and the domination of the All-China Women's Federation meant that in China, in the view of many feminists, the women's movement was "top-down":

By the 1980s, Li Xiaojiang had already claimed a Chinese socialist "top-down" (*zi shang er xia*) approach and a Western "bottom-up" (*zi xia er shang*) approach to be the decisive difference between Chinese and Western feminism (Spakowski, 2011, p. 39).

Thus, the introduction of women's NGOs in China in the 1990s, and the process of organising for and participating in the FWCW (e.g. Wang & Mi, 2009), led to a more "bottom-up" approach, of which Li Xiaojiang was supportive in her desire for women to occupy more of an "active subject-position" (1999, p. 272), as well as in her critiques of the Women's Federation's domination of Chinese feminism. If Li believes that China needed to adopt a more "bottom-up" approach, which she sees as characteristic of Western approaches to feminism, then the *bentu* aspects of this are unclear; indeed, some observe that the individualistic elements of Li's approach are not so different from Western liberal feminism (Shih, 2005, p. 11).

Other Chinese feminists seem to believe that the more "bottom-up" approach is itself a *bentu* aspect of contemporary Chinese women's activism. For instance, one Beijing NGO leader remarked in an interview that "*bentuhua* is the change from the top-to-bottom mode of work, into a bottom-to-top mode... We want to let each person be able to have their own responsibilities, to be socially responsible". Yet this is combined with an acknowledgment of the value of continued cooperation with the Women's Federation: "If we are the same as the West and are entirely independent from the government, in China this would be impossible... This is China's *bentuhua* characteristic".¹³ Thus, perhaps a more "indigenised" aspect of Chinese feminism is its distinctive non-governmental organisations that are independent of but also collaborate with the Women's Federation and the state; such a perspective thus allows for the "local" in "the space structured by an organization where a specific (local) knowledge has relevance" (Korff, 2003, p. 4). Some observers do deem such ties to the state an asset, granting feminists the ability to collaborate with and influence the state on matters of policy with "tremendous ease and confidence" (Z. Wang, 2010, p. 109). And there is a view that while perhaps the West has an "autonomy fetish", in the Chinese case there are benefits to the historical ties between the Women's Federation and the government; even if Fulian is sort of an "NGO", it is a distinct type of one with distinct benefits as a result (Zhang, 2005, p. 552).

At the same time, the dependence of other women's NGOs on the Fulian network for provision of their services, as well as their lack of true independence in organisational structure, makes it difficult to assess how much these so-called benefits of connections to the state are based on the genuine aspirations of feminists and how much they are the product of continued state control inhibiting organisational and discursive autonomy.¹⁴ Thus, while some Chinese feminists regard the Marxist legacy and the role of Fulian to be useful *bentu* aspects of Chinese feminism, it is unclear how much this is the product of genuine belief in these approaches, and how much is due to an absence of true freedom of expression and organisation. Ties to the state seem to inhibit the freedom of action of women's NGOs in many ways, and it seems that in the wake of government clamp-downs on calls for a "Jasmine Revolution" in China in the wake of the "Arab Spring" of 2011, there is increased government supervision of NGOs. Thus, one Beijing-based NGO leader noted in December 2011 that there is an increasing trend toward the government buying

“service projects” from NGOs as well as being less supportive of NGOs receiving foreign funding.¹⁵ This emphasis on “service” is consistent with the neoliberal trends discussed in the preceding section and could end up reinforcing gendered role divisions in society, with NGOs being the “feminine”, service-oriented side of an equation where the state maintains its masculinist nature.

In this sense, certain global or transnational influences contain risks, but some Chinese feminists also continue to use global references in their own claims for greater equality for Chinese women. Louise Edwards (2007, p. 384) looks at how “international shaming” can be an important pressure mechanism for improving women’s political status in China. Chinese feminists themselves employ international norms and discourses as a way of engaging in such pressures in areas such as political participation, with Tan Lin using a global perspective to argue that female political representation in China is still low (Tan, 2010). Liu Bohong examines the importance of global norms and agreements for promoting women’s health care in China, and relates this to the Chinese government’s adoption of “the United Nations gender mainstreaming strategy (*shehui xingbie zhuliuhua zhanlüe*)” (Liu, 2008, p. 106). The employment of this strategy by the Chinese government as well as Chinese feminists is a way of ensuring that gender concerns are not marginalised in policy and even of resisting the tendency to marginalise and “feminise” NGO activities and women’s issues (Tan & Jiang, 2006). In an interview, Liu Bohong connected “gender mainstreaming” to changing ideas of rights in China, advocating for a move from a situation where the government can “decide to give you a right” to a more “progressive, comprehensive view of human rights” (Liu, 2002, pp. 190–191). In the same interview, Liu also noted, somewhat critically, that in international conferences many Chinese feminists often “do not cherish the time and opportunity to exchange ideas with foreigners”, and prefer to talk “about all our accomplishments” even though “there is no way that we have fewer problems than other countries” (Liu, 2002, pp. 183–184). While Chinese feminists might be reluctant to critique their government and social situation in international forums, more “universal” ideas of human rights as well as of strategies for gender equality are a useful point of pressure that can be employed by Chinese feminists in their relationship to an authoritarian Chinese state that does also seek a certain degree of “face” in international settings.

Chinese feminist usage of “gender mainstreaming” as a strategic approach in fact indicates another important influence of the FWCW on Chinese feminist organising – the concept of “gender” itself and its newer translation as “*shehui xingbie*” (literally, “social sex” or “social gender”).¹⁶ “Gender” is an epistemological shift for practitioners and activists in women’s studies in China, providing new methods and topics for historical research (e.g. Du, 2009) and new modes of comprehending globalisation through telling the “stories of the loser” (Min, 2009, p. 3), alongside the above-discussed strategic usefulness of “gender” as a means of critiquing inequalities under market reform. Thus, the popularisation of “*shehui xingbie*” after the UN conference demonstrates both ontological and strategic aspects of the “global” and its indigenisation in Chinese feminist thought and practice.

Chinese Women and Nationalism

The place of China in the larger “global community” relates to another issue of complication in relation to Chinese feminists and *bentuhua* – the also often-complex relationship between feminism(s) and nationalism(s). *Bentuhua* itself contains potentially nationalist elements

in its motivations, and it also relates to the ways in which the contemporary Chinese Party-state seeks to rearticulate its identity in the wake of China's neoliberal globalisation. There are multiple implications for feminists as the Party-state promotes the latest version of a Chinese "alternative modernity" in the form of rhetoric involving a "harmonious society" and a revival of Confucianism, along with new formations of nationalism as overt communist rhetoric recedes into the past.

Some feminists have jumped onto the "harmony" bandwagon, seeking to reinterpret apparently Confucian ideas from a more woman-friendly perspective than the sage himself seemed to favour.¹⁷ Many feminists also seek to yoke gender equality to gender harmony; for instance, in the introduction to a comprehensive report on women's status in China from 1995–2005, Tan Lin and Jiang Yongping of the Women's Studies Institute of China (the women's studies organisation of the All-China Women's Federation), argue that

The values of gender equality and social justice have won identification from an increasing number of policy makers, research scholars and the public, and have become an important principle for the construction of a socialist harmonious society for China (Tan & Jiang, 2006, p. 3).

Some feminists have taken the regime's claims to be concerned with "people-centred development" to thus link the "harmonious society" rhetoric to "social justice" claims and in particular to gender equality.

The connection of gender equality to notions of "harmony" can provide a more indigenised version of feminism, in particular one that seeks to distance Chinese feminist claims from what are seen by many in China to be the more confrontational feminist approaches prevalent in the West, with respect to relations both with men and with the state. One approach to this version of Chinese feminism is to identify women's problems as part of wider social problems in China rather than as being distinctly gendered in nature; one example is female writer Wang Anyi who

does not feel that Chinese women are particularly oppressed. She feels that both men and women suffer hardships, and women's suffering is often not caused so much by their gender as by socioeconomic factors such as poverty and backwardness in development (Wu, 2005, p. 38).

In other words, one way to keep feminism "harmonious" in China is to downplay differences between the genders in terms of status. Although Wang Anyi said this in 1988, a more recent manifestation of this sort of "harmonious" feminism comes from Huang Lin, editor of the journal *Zhongguo Nüxingzhuyi* [*Feminism in China*], who has sought to create a "smiley Chinese feminism" (Huang, 2004, flyleaf; see also Spakowski, 2011, p. 40).

Yet the problems of this attitude should be self-evident. Resolving women's problems requires an awareness of how they are caused, at least in part, by gendered norms and structures. Connecting Chinese feminism to a Chinese cultural revival has some benefits, but also contains some potential difficulties. Feminist theorists have written extensively problematising the relationships between gender, nationalism and concepts of "national identity". For instance, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan argue that ideas of "national identity" can serve patriarchal interests, and that

global-local binaries dangerously correspond to the colonialism-nationalism model that often leaves out various subaltern groups as well as the interplay of power in various levels of sociopolitical agendas (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994, p. 22, p. 11).

In other words, the "local" can serve to oversimplify questions of identity, as well as reproduce power relationships, in ways that are not so different from colonialist relations. Such

a perspective is echoed by Uma Narayan in her critique of the ways in which anticolonial nationalism can have the effect of reifying local cultures in processes that are themselves highly politicised (Narayan, 1997). Some Chinese feminists are themselves aware of these hazards. Renmin University professor Song Shaopeng notes some of the problems for women and feminists inhering in the turn toward “cultural nationalism” among both Chinese authorities and the “New Left” school of intellectual criticism, with the latter school perhaps not overtly rejecting notions of gender equality but critiquing attention to questions of gender, ethnicity, homosexuality, and queer politics not only because they originate in the West, but also because they are trivial problems, and inessential issues in the establishment of a “virtuous modern Chinese society” (Song, 2007).

Thus, cultural nationalism can have the potential effect of rejecting what might be regarded as “Western” influences, even if it is done in the context of “progressive” political aims. This is not inevitable – feminism also has clear connections with notions of Chinese national identity. Du Fangqin writes in this vein that, in China, feminism was “a method to reform the society and revive the nation” although it was largely subsumed into the Party during China’s revolutionary process (Du, 2002, pp. 6–7).

Generally, the connections between (cultural) nationalism and *bentuhua* of feminism indicate the need to maintain a critical eye on the intents and effects of the latter process. This is true not only in the Chinese case – some feminist and other theorists regard the late twentieth century turn to “identity politics”, or the “politics of recognition”, in the West to be useful in certain ways, but in others an unfortunate departure from questions of socioeconomic equity and “redistribution”. For instance, Nancy Fraser writes that the “shift to a culturalized politics of recognition occurred at precisely the moment when neoliberalism was staging its spectacular comeback” and led to a process whereby feminists “unwittingly diverted feminist theory into culturalist channels at precisely the moment when circumstances required redoubled attention to the politics of redistribution” (Fraser, 2009, p. 106). There are ways in which *bentuhua* is a manifestation of “identity politics” that are a useful way of establishing distinctive identities for Chinese feminist theory and practice, but might also distract feminists from the ways in which cultural nationalism reinscribes statist and patriarchal norms and ideologies.

Chinese Women and Transnational/Global/Western Feminism

Finally, while *bentuhua* is surely an important and necessary means for Chinese feminists to create their own vision for promoting the equality and well-being of Chinese women, it is not straightforward to sort out what is “local” and what is “transnational” about feminism in China. As noted above, feminism has long been attached to China’s relations with the outside world in varied ways. While the discussion about *bentuhua* in China today seems to rest primarily on finding more “indigenous” manifestations of Chinese feminism in the wake of the influence of contemporary transnational feminism in today’s China, has not feminism in China been transnational since the early twentieth century?

There surely have been periods in Chinese feminism where it has been more or less exposed to transnational influences, as well as periods in modern Chinese history where feminist discourse was more or less present or absent. For example, Du Fangqin writes of the “silence” in Chinese women’s history research during the Mao period (Du, 2009). Similarly, Li Xiaojiang claims that during the Mao era feminism was “dismembered” by the “two main Western ideologies that had taken root in China” – nationalism and socialism (Li, 1999,

p. 268). For both Du and Li, therefore, the 1980s was a vital period for the revival of Chinese feminist scholarship. Yet, the 1980s was also the time of the “culture fever” (*wenhua re*) in China, when foreign influences were welcomed and spread widely; the (re-)emergence of Chinese women’s studies during that period cannot therefore really be separated from that wider cultural climate as well as from the longstanding connections between gender and conceptions of Chinese modernity (or alternative modernity).

Hence, Liu Kang’s assertion that cultural changes in post-Mao China “must be seen within the broad context of globalization” (2004, p. 2) is also reflected in Chinese feminism. While *bentuhua* is not necessarily a denial of global influence, it can lead to a reversal or rejection of what might be useful theoretical resources provided by transnational feminism. Such resources can be seen through the introduction of new discourses and concepts in relation to issues such as “gender”, development, human rights, and violence against women, about which many Chinese feminists have written and instituted “projects”. These resources, however, can and should be “indigenised” as they are placed into local practice and application, and such applications are part of the “struggle over discursive power and systems of production of knowledge” that are part of Chinese feminists’ negotiations with transnational influences.¹⁸ While many aspects of transnational feminist theory and practice are “against hegemony”, concerns that it might also “make itself a new hegemony” (Min, 2009, p. 7) mean that awareness of the potential “discursive power” of transnational feminism is a vital task.

At the same time, it does not seem truly possible to understand contemporary Chinese feminism in any way different from the “discursive hybridity” that Liu Kang argues currently characterises Chinese culture (2004, p. 24). There are a number of reasons why this is important, and this is perhaps why hybridity is a more useful theoretical category than *bentuhua*. One is that it allows for explicit recognition of the contributions made by transnational feminism to Chinese feminist analyses of Chinese problems, for instance viewing the concept of “gender” as a valuable tool of analysis (e.g. Wang, 2004b). Transnational feminism also offers explicit and innately critical views of the global or transnational origins of many of these problems (e.g. L. Wang, 2010, p. 25). Wang Zheng argues that the *bentuhua* of Chinese feminism perhaps might best begin with considering “how can we make use of our elite position and create a field in which marginalized people can be heard?” (Wang, 2004a, p. 88). Such attention to “marginalised women”, which Wang (somewhat ironically) mostly relates to the theories of US-based Indian feminist Gayatri Spivak, does potentially “indigenise” feminist concerns, but this also needs to be done with attention to the ways in which the origins of “marginal” women’s problems are not necessarily local in nature. For instance, one book on globalisation and Chinese feminism looks at various ways in which already-marginalised women are further exploited by global economic processes (Wang, 2008), featuring chapters regarding the differential effects of globalisation on “marginalised women”, including rural migrant women workers, as well as on minority Miao and Buyi women. Other thinkers consider how “marginal women’s position” in fact can help to clarify “local practice” that will further decentre Western hegemony (Wang, 2004a, p. 91).

Such perspectives may also assist in comprehending ways in which Chinese feminism seeks transnational interlocutors that go beyond Western dominance. Li Xiaojiang regards Western feminism as the primary “other” of Chinese feminist thought but also promotes “regional historical studies” as a corrective to the dominance of Western frameworks in much transnational feminist work (Chang, 2008, p. 293).¹⁹ Du Fangqin in some of her work also seeks modes to promote “regional” Asian women’s studies as part of *bentuhua*

(e.g. Du, 2002, pp. 3–29). While *bentuhua* is in many ways an essential way of historicising and “indigenising” ways of dealing with the problems that Chinese women face under globalisation, it can potentially lead to the conflating of “globalisation” and “global” or “transnational feminisms”, with the problems of the former, as well as its association with Western or American economic and cultural hegemony, being coupled unfairly with some of the critical potentialities of the latter. The pervasive influence of global economics and cultural forms, and their effects in political and social realms, mean that defining the “local” or the “indigenous” is more difficult than ever, with the potential danger that attention to the “local” might just repeat the “same general and singular logic” (L. Wang, 2010, p. 33) as certain universalising aspects of globalisation. Thus, as *bentuhua* of Chinese feminism continues, its proponents might want to consider also the “Chinese” implications of the “post-westphalian” world posited by Nancy Fraser, and the subsequent emergence of politics that are neither solely domestic nor international, but rather “intermestic” (Fraser, 2009, p. 5).

Conclusions

By way of conclusion, let me assert that I do not regard *bentuhua* and other conceptions of the “local” as wrongheaded or futile projects, despite the reservations that I have developed in this essay. The relationship between local and global in Chinese feminism needs to be worked out and understood with the same sort of careful theoretical consideration that accompanies the best of all theorising and activist practice, perhaps especially that in the feminist sphere. Awareness of the diverse contexts of transnational influence is a useful start for this approach, as is appreciating the various motivations and forms of *bentuhua*. Chinese feminism occurs on the terrain of multiple levels of power – not only those between Chinese and Western feminists, but also between Chinese feminists and a Party-state that clearly seeks to maintain its authoritarian position, between Chinese women and structures of neoliberal globalisation, and between local or national cultural forms and their own hegemonic potentialities.

Notes

1. For one online example of this, see, e.g., a Human Rights Watch slideshow with the original title “China’s Contradictions”. <http://www.hrw.org/chinas-contradictions>.
2. I am grateful to an anonymous *ASR* reviewer for drawing my closer attention to the distinction between ontological and strategic aspects of *bentuhua*.
3. In this article, I predominantly use the term “transnational feminism”, rather than “global feminism”, to indicate the inherently complex nature of the power dynamics of relations between Chinese and other (primarily Western) feminisms.
4. See, e.g., Wang (1999) and Lin (2006, pp. 113–114). Indeed, Liu, Karl, and Ko (2013) look at early twentieth-century feminist He-Yin Zhen as a central figure in the long “transnational” history and influence of Chinese feminism.
5. See, e.g., Wang (1997), Wesoky (2002), Wang & Zhang (2010) and Zhang & Hsiung (2010).
6. Commensurate with the long history of China’s wrestling with its proper relationship with the “outside” world, and with the post-Mao incarnations of such debates, discussion about *bentuhua* occurs in many fields, including anthropology (e.g., Zhou, 2000), political science (e.g., He, 2011; Wu, 2011; Wang, 2011a; 2011b), and social work (e.g., Cheung & Yan, 2006; Huang & Zhang, 2008). Such efforts are part of more general “third world” interest in “indigenisation” especially of the social sciences (Huang & Zhang, 2008, pp. 611–613), and while Chinese feminist *bentuhua* is part of such processes, I found no explicit discussion of feminist interest in “indigenisation” in relation to other spheres of knowledge in China today.

7. Oxford English Dictionary, “Localization”, “Indigenization”, “Nativization”, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/109559?redirectedFrom=localization#eid>; <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/94473?redirectedFrom=indigenization#eid>; <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/255490?redirectedFrom=nativization#eid>. Accessed 8 March 2012.
8. Min Dongchao (2007; 2009) writes extensively on translation issues in Chinese feminism.
9. This was of course true for many men under the Mao regime as well.
10. Interview with head of Beijing-based women’s NGO, 15 December 2011. In researching this article, in December 2011 I conducted four interviews and informal conversations with Beijing-based NGO activists and women’s studies scholars. Interviewees were personal contacts; the interviews were conducted by the author with a Chinese student present to assist in note-taking.
11. Aihwa Ong and Li Zhang (2008) argue that neoliberalism in China has led to privatisation in some areas while state power is retained in others, an argument I will also be making in the next section.
12. Interview with Beijing university-based women’s studies scholar, 15 December 2011. Xu (2009, pp. 201–202) also examines potential neoliberal aspects of the emphasis on “policy delivery” of some Chinese feminist NGOs.
13. Interview with head of Beijing-based women’s NGO, 15 December 2011. Wang and Zhang (2010, p. 62) also write that “For feminist NGO leaders, the collaboration with the Women’s Federation is a conscious decision that has led to a distinctive mode of Chinese feminism” that is both “bottom-up” and “top-down”.
14. Scholars also raise the questions of autonomy and “indigenisation” in other areas, such as political science, where the politics of knowledge is especially evident in debates regarding the need for “indigenisation” and its relation to academic freedom (or the lack thereof) in China. Wang Shaoguang, in a Hong Kong-based academic position, translates *jiogui* not as “to connect with the international tracks” as is common with feminists, but rather critically as “to fall in line”, and asserts the need for greater “indigenous” Chinese political science (Wang, 2011b, p. 301). On the other hand, Wu Guoguang, based in Canada, supports greater “scholarly independence and academic professionalization” rather than “indigenisation” as “the way to promote the study of Chinese politics in China” (Wu, 2011, p. 280).
15. Interview with head of Beijing-based women’s NGO, 15 December 2011.
16. For more on the complicated politics of the concept of *shehui xingbie*, see Spakowski (2011).
17. For example, Chen (2005); Hu (2009). Interestingly, neither of these articles mentions “Confucius” or “Confucianism”, possibly an indication of some reluctance to too-closely link the “harmonious society” push to the philosophy that the Communist Party-state spent so much time during the twentieth century seeking to discredit.
18. Interview with Beijing university-based women’s studies scholar, 15 December 2011.
19. One Li Xiaojiang book, *Women: Cross-Cultural Dialogues* (2006) in fact features Li in conversation with feminists from many locations, including Japan, Korea and India, as a way of locating Chinese feminism in relation to multiple global/transnational feminisms.

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