

TRACES OF TIME: SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR IN CHINA

I clearly remember my first encounter with Simone de Beauvoir and her *Le deuxième sexe*; that was some time in 1979.

What I read first was the second volume of the Taiwan version of *Le deuxième sexe*: the part on literature. I can still remember the shock and intimacy I felt. For the first time, the famous works written by male European and American literary giants, which I had read and indulged myself in, began to show signs of a gender dimension. That day, I also saw with pain that “women are not made by nature, but made by circumstances.” When I first read this, I felt shaken deep inside my heart. It indeed recalled and decoded my deep confusion during my maturing years. Although I was born in an era when “men and women are the same” and although I was full of a hero’s, a heroine’s dreams, my youthful life repeatedly ran into painful encounters with the strong though intangible gender rules and gender system. Therefore, I had a profound sense of uncertainty between my confusing psychological and physical experiences as a woman. I can say that *Le deuxième sexe* enabled me to rely on my own life’s experience to approach the expression of “feminism”, even though I did not know the label then. Also from that time on, feminism to me was no longer a “theory”, although it was as broad and profound as any theory after “linguistic transformation”. For me it was “self-expression”, which permeated and fused with my own experience with life.

Until today, I cannot remember the source of that copy of *Le deuxième sexe* – certainly it did not come from a “formal channel” such as a bookstore or library. I remember the book was old and worn, apparently having been read and passed over by many people. This was not unusual then. Indeed, it was a legacy of the Cultural Revolution. A book, especially a translated Western literature or philosophy book, often had countless readers. During the Cultural Revolution, once a book was checked out, it would not return, starting its odyssey of being read by many. This was especially true of the “books for internal reference” coming from high official ranks or translated works and overseas works on Sinology. Those books were mostly worn out over their prolonged travels. In retrospect, it was amusing that during the 1970s these worn-out and incomplete translations provided resources for the mind and brewed underground cultural trends and movements. In the 1980s many famous intellectual

and cultural waves based their “evidence,” or to put it more accurately “excuses” or “prefaces,” on mostly Western theories, “broken and incomplete works” by overseas Chinese, or simply “hearsay”. By this statement, I refer to the fact that after thirty years of refusal and isolation, in the 1970s and 1980s the introduction of European and American theories emerged with great force, but it was far from systematic. Furthermore, given the structural power of the socialist ideology during the Maoist era and the historical mismatch between China and Europe/America, the spread of such theories in China was mostly superficial, floating outside the streams of their original historical, social linguistic, and intellectual environment. The mismatch between European/American history and the present environment gave the intellectual resources introduced to China the appearance and value of some kind of “absolute truth.” In the meantime, a cultural fact that people of other times and places find hard to recognize is this: it was the history of socialism and the huge and effective agencies of socialist theoretical (originally Marxist) research, translation and publishing that “fed” generations of large clusters of readers, who came in contact with European/American thoughts, culture and literature history through the translated versions rather than the original texts and original works. Consequently, not only did the arrival of European/American works, which was a main part of the “intellectual liberation movement” of the late 1970s and early 1980s, experience the pioneering and sometimes accidental choice by “professional” foreign language and translation personnel, it was also subject to the distortion, second-hand translation, and excerpting by a small number of foreign language professionals.

There is no doubt that the “arrival” of de Beauvoir’s *Le deuxième sexe* in China meant the coming to European/American feminist theory. Furthermore, this “quasi-Dream of the Red Chamber” certainly pushed forward Chinese feminism with a magnitude hard to imagine today. It especially facilitated the emergence, formation and the wax and wane of feminist literary criticism. But the irony is de Beauvoir’s initial arrival and sustained popularity has not been the result of feminism. Instead, it reached the shore by riding on existentialism, or more precisely, by riding on the big ship of Sartre. In fact, with the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and a short transition period thereafter, and with the beginning of the Dengist era, one of the cultural symbols of China’s “new era” was the “sudden” burst of popular introduction of foreign philosophy, especially translated foreign literature works. Although the majority of the publications were of translations, supplements, new editions and

reprinting of European/American philosophy and literature between the Renaissance and the 19th century, part of what this author once called “China’s Re-encounter with the (European and American) World” was the emergence of European/American theories and literature. The most representative of the latter was the translation and introduction of the so-called “Western modernism”. It was by taking this special “flight” of Chinese culture that the existentialist, Sartre, arrived in China. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Sartre and the existentialist philosophy were first spread and communicated on university campuses and became the first wave of European/American philosophy and culture, which attacked and dissected contemporary Chinese culture. (As a cultural phenomenon, it appeared to be one of the undercurrents that occasionally rushed above ground to swallow the intellectual liberation movement of the entire society.) As a unique case of Chinese culture in the 1960s, Sartre was one of the rare twentieth-century non-Marxist thinkers and literary figures whose works were translated through the mainstream channels.¹ Therefore, the entry of existentialism symbolized and represented by Sartre not only had an impact as a resource against reality, but it was also in fact a pontoon bridge over the cultural rupture of Chinese society of the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The unprecedented prosperity of literature and the emergence of literature as a supra-vehicle was a particular cultural phenomenon of a different time. At one point, “literature” was a way of socio-political protest, and interpreter and constructor of a new ideology, and the most popular cultural form. Therefore, in addition to other more complex and profound social-intellectual reasons, it is precisely the identity of Sartre (Simone de Beauvoir) as a “modernist” writer and as a Nobel laureate in literature that made existentialism the first wave of European/American philosophy and thought to hit China. (Sartre’s refusal to accept the Nobel prize was taken out of the historical context of Europe in the 1960s and was used to enhance his “dignity”.) The

¹ Wahl, *Brief History of Existentialism*, translated by Ma Qinghuai, Beijing: Commercial Press, 1962. Luchachi, *Existentialism or Marxism*, translated by Han Runtang, Beijing: Commercial Press, 1962. Western Philosophy Study Group, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, *Existentialist Philosophy*, selections of modern foreign philosophy materials. Beijing: Commercial Press, 1963. Sartre, *A Criticism of Dialectic Rationality*, translated by Su Maoyong, 1963. Jean Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, translated by Zheng Yonghui, Shanghai: Writers’ Press, 1965.

representative figures of existentialist philosophy that swept through China in the 1980s and lingered in the 1990s were as follows: Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Camus, Rilke, Heidegger (who became the most lasting and influential one), Kierkegaard, and Jaspers. Thus, although the entry of Simone de Beauvoir accompanied the re-naming of feminism in China, the irony was she entered the new mainstream culture more as a “lifetime partner” of Sartre, a “great man’s wife” (outside the French circle and professional students of French literature, early introduction of Sartre called de Beauvoir “Sartre’s wife”)², and “the woman behind a great man”. Although de Beauvoir’s works were translated and introduced in large quantities in very popular foreign literature journals and magazines, because of the fever, popularity and debates regarding Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir only appeared to provide peripheral anecdotes. On the one hand, because of de Beauvoir’s identity as a woman and a “wife”, she appeared to be a secondary and supporting element in the construction of China’s new mainstream culture in the late 1970s and early 1980s and the cultural undercurrent of some kind of “re-writing of the gender system”. On the other hand, the massive translation and introduction of Sartre’s philosophical essays and works, pioneered and facilitated by his literary creations, made de Beauvoir – as a writer below the rank of a philosopher – again secondary in China’s “nineteenth-century” kind of intellectual and cultural scene in the 1980s.

As if in an ironic confirmation and response of de Beauvoir’s *Le deuxième sexe*, she became anonymous at the same time as the naming of China’s new mainstream of “elite” intellectual and cultural circles. In the two decades of the 1980s and 1990s, what people repeatedly talked about and translated was the “everlasting love” and “life long loyalty” between the “great couple” of Sartre and de Beauvoir. To some extent, this “great couple” almost became one of the “myths” among the intellectual elite of the 1980s. Because the “knowledge” of Chinese intellectuals about European and American culture was always brokered by foreign language professionals, or

² Even China’s French literature specialist Mr Liu Mingjiu stated in his 1981 book *Paris Dialogue*, “In my imagination, she (de Beauvoir) and Sartre are one un-separable entity. ... In simplified words, she is in fact Sartre’s wife. Sartre gained much strength from her in his life... I came to the door of Simone de Beauvoir as if I was coming to see Sartre.” Cited from Li Qingquan and Jin De, eds, “Study of Simone de Beauvoir” in *Study of Contemporary France* 730-731, 1992, published by China Social Sciences Press.

because there was a tacit understanding of “avoiding gossiping about respected figures”, because there was a special “anti-moral moralism” kind of cultural atmosphere in China in the 1980s, and according to this author, because there was doubtless some kind of gender system, it was not until the late 1990s that Chinese intellectuals became aware of Sartre’s many entanglements with young women, the tricky role of de Beauvoir in them, the successful or unsuccessful “threesome arrangements” and “third persons” in de Beauvoir’s life.³ But at this time, de Beauvoir, whether as an existentialist – existentialist philosopher or writer – or as a pioneering feminist, has already “exited” from the main scene of Chinese culture. Publications cannot “deny” or replace that “myth” of love and loyalty (there are still far more publications repeating the myth than otherwise⁴), in China’s post-dramatic change environment, they have become some kind of interesting anecdotes of famous people. But de Beauvoir’s advocacy of feminism and her struggle with gender roles and system during her life have become largely ignored by Chinese feminists who love her as a pioneer of feminism.

³ In 1998 China Three Gorges Press in Beijing published Bianca Lamlin’s *Sartre and I* (on the cover it says A Complete Translation of the “French version” of *Memoir of A Girl Seduced*), translated by Wu Yuetian, from *Memoires d’une jeune fille rangée*. In 1999 China Book Press in Beijing published *Love Letters Across the Ocean* by Simone de Beauvoir, translated by Lou Xiaoyan and Gao Linghan. This is a collection of the love letters from de Beauvoir to Sartre from 1947 to 1964.

⁴ Publications during this time that repeated the “myth” of this “everlasting couple” include the following: Simone de Beauvoir, *Sartre*, translated by Huang Zhongjing, Nanchang: Baihuazhou Art Press, 1996. Gallimard Press granted Baihuazhou the exclusive authority to publish this book. According to the 1981 French version, this book should have been literally translated as *Adieux: A Farewell to Sartre*. It was published also as *Ceremony of Saying Goodbye*. (Simone de Beauvoir, *Ceremony of Saying Goodbye*, translated by Lai Jiancheng, Taipei: Lianjing Publishing Company, 1991). Simone de Beauvoir, *Simone de Beauvoir*, translated by Hao Ma and Yu Wen, as part of the *Dual Biographies of Couples*, Wuhan, Changjian Art Press. Chen Mo, *Life Long Lovers: De Beauvoir and Sartre*, Beijing: Dongfang Press, 1998, in the series of *Everlasting Lovers*. Walter Van Rossum, *De Beauvoir and Sartre*, translated by Zhu Liuhua, Shenyang: Chunfeng Art Press, 2000, etc.

De Beauvoir's accomplishment as a writer made her more than a spotlight on Sartre's halo. But the myth of Simone de Beauvoir as Sartre's "everlasting lover" "softened" her image in the special context of the 1980s, making her the "ideal female" in a restructured "new" gender system, someone who successfully combines family or at least love with career. So interestingly, Simone de Beauvoir became another "pontoon bridge" kind of character that originated in the 1930s and ran through the gender culture of the People's Republic of China, a kind of "sequel" to Madame Curie (the shadow on her "perfect marriage" with Mr. Curie and the later "scandals" were also omitted), which does not expose the double standard between the sexes in modern society, but again serves as an effective disguise.

However, this is not the whole story of Simone de Beauvoir's "long-distance travel" to China. If in the mainstream culture Beauvoir was often seen as "the lifetime partner of Jean Paul Sartre", a prolific existentialist writer, a fully romanticized French woman intellectual in China, with her novels and plays often appearing in various new and revived foreign literature journals and translations,⁵ then she as a pioneer of feminism in the "new era" China was accepted through very different channels. To some extent, that feminism was the first European and American theory to (re) enter contemporary China was not logically inevitable. *Le deuxième sexe* was the first voice of this theory. It is my guess that the Taiwanese translation (which was in fact the only selected translation in Chinese) at least widely circulated among women intellectuals in big cities such as Beijing. But rather than a piece of scholarly work that influenced and facilitated the process of European/American theories affecting the rebirth of gender awareness and gender positions, *Le deuxième sexe* appeared in Chinese literature magazines as an introduction of Simone de Beauvoir and her feminist theory. It was even merely a label of the female/second gender, corresponding with and referring to a kind of anonymous

⁵ *Tous les hommes sont mortels*, translated by Ma Zhencheng, Beijing: Foreign Literature Press, 1985. *Le sang des autres*, translated by Xi Yanfen, as part of *Foreign Literature Series*, Beijing: Foreign Literature Press, 1987. *Woman Guest*, translated by Zhou Yiguang, as part of *20th Century French Literature Series*, vol. 9, Hefei: Anhui Art Press, 1994 (the same book was published by China Books Press under a different name in 1999). *Beautiful Image*, translated by Fan Rong, as part of *20th Century French Literature Series*, vol. 7, Hefei: Anhui Art Press, 1997.

experience of female gender existence that sharply differed from the reality of European and American societies.

At a different time and in a different place, despite the beginning of a profound social transformation, the livelihood of China's urban residents including women (i.e., the direct beneficiaries of China's socialist system under Mao) has not yet experienced direct attack and change. In other words, urban Chinese women in this different time are still located in a system of political, economic and legal equality formed by the socialist system. That is the result of Mao Zedong's practice of socialism eliminating differences (including gender differences) and is the last historical stage of the advocacy and practice of "men and women are the same" in (urban) social organizations and practices. In some sense we can say that what urban Chinese women – namely women intellectuals – face is not explicit gender discrimination or social exile of women, but the subtle double standard and double role under the surface of absolute equality: the heavy burden of meeting the male standard outside the home and the anonymous "nice wife good mother" standard at home ("lifting with both shoulders" in the "official terms"). Therefore, de Beauvoir's naming of the female/second gender, with all the "dislocations" and mis-reading, corresponded with Chinese women intellectuals' recognition and critique of the historical reality they lived in. By similar paths and methods, what this author calls the "broken and incomplete texts" and "hear-say", such as translated excerpts from *On Chinese Women* by Julia Kristeva about the "Hua Mulan situations" in the modern female existence and *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf, along with *Le deuxième sexe*, became the beginning and first stepping stone of modern Chinese women's, or more accurately, urban women's, struggle to free themselves from the new social existential namelessness and voicelessness.

Interestingly, in China at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s and the rest of the 1980s, the awakening of gender awareness and the emergence of feminist thoughts did not begin with an effort to strive for social equality, but rather with the exposition and revelation of gender differences. Within my own perspective, during the turn of the decade and the beginning of the Deng Xiaoping era, the "intellectual liberation movement", which forced, subverted and changed Chinese society, tacitly involved the re-establishment of the gender system, or to put it more accurately, the "revival of male power". Thus, European and American feminist theory, which entered China as part of Chinese society's "intellectual liberation movement", unknowingly joined the

cultural process of “re-writing gender”, trying to uncover the reality of *Le deuxième sexe* in the shadow of the social reality under Mao that “men and women are the same”. It also profoundly and inherently became an expression of resistance to the new structural gender fundamentalism. There was a line in the first influential and sharply feminist play at the turn of the 1970s to the 1980s, *Past Acquaintances Came in Wind and Rain* (*Feng Yu Gu Ren Lai*), which has become a much-repeated “slogan” in the last twenty years: “women are not the moon and cannot light up themselves by reflecting the glory of men.” As women who fought for their own collective name and who borrowed intellectual elite’s “anti-moral moralism” as a strategy of resistance, some women intellectuals of the 1980s often cited as evidence supporting their argument the facts or anecdotes that de Beauvoir and Sartre were “lifetime lovers” rather than wife and husband, de Beauvoir was admitted to the École Normale Supérieure of Paris with better grades than Sartre, and de Beauvoir questioned why she could be called “Sartre’s companion” but not the other way around. They also cited de Beauvoir’s famous statement that “the female gender” is not formed by nature, but by circumstances.

From a historical point of view, it is not hard to see that the appearance of Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* and feminist theory in China was in fact situated in multiple mismatches with societal reality. In the midst of the prelude to a profound social transformation at a different time in a different place, people could not predict where this process of saying farewell to the Cultural Revolution era, burying the socialist system and ending the rule of totalitarianism was going to lead China. In a new future of utopian picture, which spoke of “modernization” and yet did not have a detailed name, the socialist system remained the reality in which people lived rather than the huge and nameless “legacy and debt” it has become in today’s China at the turn of the century, or in the words of Derrida, a “ghost” of the past that would not leave. People could not predict that burying the socialist system did not necessarily mean burying and seeing off totalitarian rule forever. They could even less predict that this new process of capitalization pushed forward by a “communist party” was going to come at the inevitable expense of women’s collective interest. In other words, feminism as a new and rebellious intellectual resource fell far short of achieving its real significance. At that time in people’s social imagination, the future, a more ideal, harmonious and perfect society was based on today’s social structure and would be a “reasonable” revision of it. Therefore, Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* or feminism was simply referred to and actually served

as a cultural resource and cultural action of urban intellectual women and as a rhetorical form and expression. A serious dislocation herein was that Chinese feminists of the 1980s used the term “female gender/second sex” to highlight the existence of gender difference rather than to reveal the absurdity of gender fundamentalism. They used it to break away from women’s anonymous status under the principle that “men and women are the same.” Although it was pure accident, the Taiwan version of *Le deuxième sexe* only translated the second volume of the original work, the part on women and literature. This inevitably further constructed the initial orientation of Chinese feminism, which was a cultural and apolitical position, language and request. This was just like when people cited Virginia Woolf, they only highlighted her *A Room of One’s Own* and *Becoming Myself*, omitting or having no way to understand the meaning of her *Three Guineas*. Because they were situated in a social system where men and women were politically, legally, and economically equal, (urban) women were economically independent. To be paid equal income for equal work was taken for granted. This historical development and the difference between this reality and the realities of women’s life elsewhere almost never entered the thinking and observations of women intellectuals at that time.

In the meantime, Simone de Beauvoir and *Le deuxième sexe* (volume 2) became the first voice of contemporary women, corresponding with the rise of women writers from the late 1970s through the 1980s. To some degree, the grand appearance of women writers and artists was the direct result of socialist history and contemporary women’s liberation in China. It was also an unconscious waste of this unrecognized “legacy”. An interesting development in the middle of all this was that although there was no doubt that the women writers and artists who appeared on the stage of Chinese culture expressed a clear gender position and presented the second sex existence and secrets of Chinese women of various social structures from a variety of angles, most of them, especially the best among them, explicitly rejected the labels of feminist or feminist writer or artist. Therefore, although the rise of feminism in China was closely connected to the rise of women writers and artists, they appeared to be cross-cutting and sometimes parallel cultural streams. Parallel to the prosperity of women writers and their creations, from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, the core of feminism continued to be the translation and introduction of European and American feminist literature and theory by China’s “foreign language circles” (centered around the study of the English language and of English and American literature). From the

mid-1980s to the late 1980s, feminism became an important rhetoric and method of criticism of indigenous women's study and those who studied and critiqued women's literature.

As noted above, because the "foreign/English language circles" played an intermediating and interpreting role through its communication of "broken and incomplete texts" and "hear say", most of the European and American theories that came to China as absolute truth, or at least "advanced knowledge," contained large numbers of inevitable and fatal mis-readings or distortions. It was quickly read, spread, re-stated and applied to Chinese society, culture and literary criticism by those local intellectuals who could not read the original European theories and literature. This procedure supported the "Chinese version" of a certain European/American theory, but the translation of the original work (there is an interesting phrase in Chinese: complete translation⁶) came very slowly. This led to the loss of European/American theory's newness and popularity when its "original form" appeared on the Chinese cultural scene. Simone de Beauvoir's "trip to China" was just like this. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the name of Simone de Beauvoir and *Le deuxième sexe* already frequently appeared in the writings of Chinese feminist writers, especially female literature researchers. But it was not until 1988 that *Le deuxième sexe* was published in three versions of selected translations. Most of the translations were of the second volume of the original work or even simpler excerpts.⁷ It was only 10 years later that

⁶ In mainland China's social and cultural environment in the 1980s and 1990s, the so-called "complete translation" had two meanings. In the first and the more common usage, it referred to a "complete translation" vis-à-vis the various "selected translations" (or "clean translations") resulting from cultural censorship, removing the political and especially the sexual content. It corresponded with the uniquely Chinese "banned book" complex, and had a special kind of advertising effect on China's cultural market at the turn of the century. In the second usage, "selected translation" is what I mean. It refers to a selected translations of some European and American theories, often a simplified version of the theory, while the re-translation of the original work is called "complete translation" – although for a fair number of feminist works, "complete translations" may also mean the supplementary translation of some offensive sexual expressions.

⁷ These three selected translations were: *What Is a Woman*, translated by Wang Youqin, Beijing: China Wenlian Press, 1988; *The Secrets of*

a complete translation came out in China.⁸ Similarly, although for different reasons and purposes people enjoyed talking about de Beauvoir (Sartre)'s life, it was not until 1992 that a complete translation of the English version of de Beauvoir's memoir came out. *The Memoirs of Simone de Beauvoir*,⁹ which came out in four volumes and six books in hardcover only issued 2000 copies. In such a populous country as China, this was the equivalent of some kind of collectors' item. Also in 1992 *A Study of Simone de Beauvoir* was published. This was a "big book" that combined materials on the life of the author, selected translations of the author's work, and relevant European and American study materials. But compared to the same type of *A Study of Sartre* published in 1980, it came out too late. Even in the preface of this book, the compiler writes, "De Beauvoir's works throughout her life is a precious spiritual asset, whether seen from the perspective of her own role or from the perspective of understanding Jean Paul Sartre."¹⁰

As far as the China journey of Simone de Beauvoir and of feminist theory is concerned, 1988 was an important year. That year not only saw the three partial translations of *Le deuxième sexe*, which people had heard a lot about but never seen, but also the appearance of translations of two other early feminist works in English *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan¹¹ and *The Golden Notebook* by Doris

Women, translated by Xiao Yi and Zhang Yali, et al, Beijing: China International Radio Press, 1988; and *Modern Female*, translated by Hao Ma and Yu Wen, Wuhan: Changjian Art Press, 1988.

⁸ *Le deuxième sexe*, (complete translation), translated by Tao Tiezhu, Beijing: China Book Press, 1998.

⁹ *The Memoirs of Simone de Beauvoir*, translated by Tan Jian, et al, Nanjing: Jiangsu Art Press, 1992, translated from the English version published by Penguin in 1987: Volume 1, *Girlhood*, Volume 2, *Peak Years* (I and II), Volume 3, *The Power of Situation* (I and II), and Volume 4, *Accounting Is Over*.

¹⁰ Li Qingquan and Jin Dequan, eds, *Study of Simone de Beauvoir*, as part of *Contemporary French Study*, published by China Social Sciences Press, 1992, p. 15.

¹¹ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, translated by Tao Tiezhu, as part of *Opening Series: Intellectual Cultural Series*, Harbin: Heilongjiang Education Press, 1988. In the same year, another

Lessing.¹² It is worth noting that the year before, in 1987 the “reform and opening” of Chinese society entered a new and tricky stage. The march to “break forbidden zones” generated by “intellectual liberation” finally found the frontier of the new order. The “cultural fever” cheered on by many began to drop in temperature. The economic reforms or capitalization that had been invisible in the early 1980s was becoming a huge wave of commercialization that first appeared in the cultural market and pondered Chinese society. At this time, demands and contemplation of political reforms were still undercurrents gushing to find outlets. In the context of China in the 1980s, characterized by rising winds and rushing clouds and by frequent new plays, we can perhaps say that 1988 was a period of slowdown, a year of “intermission”. That European and American feminist theory and local feminist study, especially feminist literary criticism, should emerge at this time shows to us the peripheral and ambiguous status of feminism as a “new theory”. In some sense, feminism did not meet any frontal resistance and official ban in the 1980s. This is because, first, one of the major and basic social policies of the People’s Republic of China was to advocate and practice women’s liberation. Thus feminism did not seem to be alien. Meanwhile, in the 1980s the introduction of early feminist works from Europe and America did not show the political radicalism of feminism. Second, although the 1980s became a period of the re-establishment of a male power-centered gender system, some kind of “moral sense” and embarrassment on the part of the male intellectual elite who called for “liberation” and advocated “progress” prevented them from openly expressing hostility and rejection toward feminism. In addition, the “natural” authority and truthfulness of feminism as part of 20th century European and American theories also provided some protection for feminism on the “Westernist” cultural scene in China in the 1980s. Therefore, the translation, introduction and practice of feminism in China in the 1980s was mostly taking place under the somewhat contemptuous stare and tolerance by the male elite.

translation by Cheng Xiling was published by Sichuan People’s Press in Chengdu.

¹² Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook*, translated into Chinese as *The Crisis of Women*. The selected translation left out parts on the Soviet Union and the international communist movement in the original book. It was translated by Gu Tao, et al, as part of the *Translation Series on the Psychology of the Two sexes*, Shenyang: Liaoning People’s Press, 1988. In 2000, under the title *The Golden Notebook*, a complete translation was published, translated by Chen Caiyu and Liu Xinmin, published by Yilin Press in Nanjing.

However, the double legitimacy of feminism in China in the 1980s also displayed a double illegitimacy. On the one hand, although the subversive nature of feminism itself was not yet detected, the “smell” of irregularity was enough to cause some kind of alertness and concern. In the meantime, from the beginning the translation and practice of feminism had been in a potentially severe confrontation with the state agencies for women, or state feminism. On the other hand, a major line of thinking and cultural logic of the intellectual elite formed in the 1980s (in fact an extension of some sort of Cold War thinking) was critical reference to social history. Thus, as an important and basic historical fact of the Maoist period, women’s liberation “naturally” became “suspect” or “mistaken”. A feminist position was easily attacked as an official or state position. In addition, in the cultural logic of so called “enlightenment” and humanist eras, feminist position meant a kind of narrowness, a “bias”, a “selfishness” on the part of a minority that rejected or was incapable of transcendence. Most women intellectuals, including those active women writers who were obviously influenced by feminist thoughts, shared or at least tacitly accepted the expression of “transcending” of male intellectuals. People at that time had a hard time predicting that the theory of transcending was going to gradually become the declaration in the 1990s that “women’s liberation” amounted to unnecessary “historical price” and thus the expression of increasingly explicit sexual bias and discrimination. It ultimately became the supporting pillar of the realistic legitimacy of sacrificing women collectively during the economic reforms. Therefore, there is no doubt that the emergence of de Beauvoir and feminism in 1988 was a result of the translation, introduction, discussion and experimental implementation of European and American feminist theory and practice (especially practice in literature). It showed its peripheral, decorative and filling-in-the-blank nature. From another angle, the emergence of feminism in 1988 was no doubt a frontal feedback and response to the practice of restoring male-power culture, which had gradually become visible again. In 1989 besides the translation and publication of the first English language collection of feminist literary criticism,¹³ another important symbol of the localization and institutionalization of de Beauvoir’s *Le deuxième sexe* was the beginning of a “feminist literary criticism” column in *Shanghai Literary Theory*, which was used to carry

¹³ Mary Eagleton, ed., *Feminist Literary Theory*, translated by Hu Min, Chen Caixia and Lin Shuming, as part of the *New Scientific Construction of Culture Series*, edited by Liu Zaifu, Changsha: Hunan Art Press, 1989.

commentaries or essays by younger women scholars on contemporary women writers' works. In that same year, *Women's Studies Series* edited by a pioneer of Chinese feminism, Li Xiaojiang, was born.¹⁴ Ten books were published in the first round, most of which were studies of women's literature or feminist literary studies. By then, besides translators who introduced European and American feminist theories and cultural practice, China began to see the emergence of scholars specializing in studying feminism, especially women writers. Chinese departments at universities began to offer courses on feminism or feminist literature, producing a growing number of MA and Ph.D theses on feminism, feminist literature, and feminist literary criticism.

To some extent, the zigzagging, selected and even broken process of spreading feminism in China in the 1980s, symbolized by Simone de Beauvoir, was the first act of Chinese feminist practice. It gathered strength for the women's study institutions and some NGOs that emerged in the 1990s. Beginning with the UN Women's Conference in 1995, feminism widely spread at different levels in China, presenting a very complex and rich picture, just like Chinese society undergoing dramatic changes.

However, feminism's journey to China, led and symbolized by Simone de Beauvoir, and more importantly, Chinese women intellectuals including pioneering feminists, in fact shared the male intellectual elite's "farewell to revolution"/anti-official (socialist regime) sentiment. Therefore, although later translation and introduction mainly went through the English language medium, it still conformed with the urban middle class (white) feminism symbolized by Simone de Beauvoir and with the basic stream of culturalism at some level. Thus, feminism with some sort of socialist orientation, feminist class studies, the gender topics in subaltern studies, ethnic minority and third world feminism were almost completely absent from Chinese feminist discussions. At that time, it was difficult for people to realize that when gender topics re-emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, class topics had quietly disappeared from people's cultural perspective. After two decades of continuous new cultural construction, class topics have become the biggest "taboo" in China at the turn of the century, occasionally making their way into the "official rhetoric" in an embarrassing and pale fashion. At the same time, the whole society has experienced drastic and brutal re-stratification among

¹⁴ *Women's Study Series*, edited by Li Xiaojiang, Kaifeng: Henan People's Press, 1989.

classes and growing disparity. In the 1990s, while urban intellectual women push forward the increasingly radical and fashionable cultural practice in such expressions as “the individual is politics” and “I - my body - my self – my monster”, working women at the bottom of the society are being sacrificed and trodden-upon as an obvious “necessary cost”, especially the unemployed women workers in the cities and rural young women working in the cities are becoming notably absent from the feminist culture and feminist expressions.

Simone de Beauvoir has no doubt become an inherent part of contemporary Chinese culture through her long and twisted theoretical journey. However, a different history and reality requires the social practice of a new feminism, a broader and more active practice.

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