

A Concise Dictionary for Feminism

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Prologue

The article before the book begins, which provides the author with the opportunity to interact with readers directly.

The theme of my capstone project of M.A. is to study the protagonists in *The Lost Daughter of Happiness* by Yan Geling and *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* by Guo Xiaolu under the perspective of feminism. These two primary sources are chosen to make a comparison because they are both contemporary novels that deal with Chinese female characters who migrate to western countries, namely England and America, encounter cross-cultural circumstances and develop romantic relationship with western characters. In addition, both writers are Chinese female writers who migrate to England and America as well.

When I read the literature about feminism, I obtain a deeper understanding of this realm. With the help of feminist theories, I have not only reached a more critical conclusion about the protagonists' complicated characters but also shaped my own views on several social topics related to feminism. I intend to share my understanding of feminist conceptions and my interpretation of related social phenomena and hot issues in the contemporary era with readers in this dictionary. I hope that this concise dictionary could help change the stereotype spreading in China and arouse readers' critical thinking concerning feminism.

The idea of organizing my thoughts in the form of concise dictionary is inspired by *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers*, one of the primary sources of my Capstone Project. The protagonist Z organizes her narration about her new life in England under the category of different terms in a dictionary and demonstrates her personal experiences and feelings associated with these terms. I here would love to demonstrate my personal interpretation and opinions of concepts and topics concerning feminism in the following chapters.

Feminism

A movement which calls for women's rights or a pair of spectacles which helps me to realize how the images of women are constructed and distorted by patriarchal powers and restore the way they should be.

I find it most difficult to define the term "Feminism". It is such a broad word with so many schools of scholarship expanding its territory continually. According to Register (1989), it starts with the study of women's images in the literature (3). Feminist critics observe that the images of women in literature either conform to stereotypes such as "passivity, irrationality, compliancy and incorrigibility" (3) or they are idealized, obscuring the actual social condition of women (5). It makes me rethink the Chinese classic literature which I have read before. Taking *Water Margin*, one of the four great Chinese novels as an example, there are 108 generals yet only 3 of them are females. The female characters in the text are either lascivious, who should be and finally are killed by male characters or they are portrayed as masculinized as their husbands, which means they are actually represented as a male character despite that the author states them to be women. *Water Margin* is a typical example of the large quantity of anti-feminist classic literature which I enjoyed reading before, but now, I begin to review these texts in a more critical way and pay special attention to the absent, suppressed, quiet and distorted images of women.

I have not only begun to examine the literature with new eyes, but also popular comments which I have taken for granted before such as "Girls are not suitable to study science because boys are born to be more talented in this field." Or "It is better not to get a higher degree for a girl because they will end up in domestic work" and realize how unjustified and discriminative they are. Therefore, as far as I am concerned, feminism provides me with a new perspective to reexamine the ideology which permeates my life. It is not only a movement described in the book, but also a pair of spectacles which helps me to realize how the images of women are constructed by patriarchal powers and restore the way they should be.

The Second Sex

A timeless book written by the French Feminist forerunner Simone de Beauvoir discusses how women are constructed to be the second sex and reminds women not to fall into the patriarchal traps.

The first time I get to know about this book is from one of my friends' post online:

“It is man’s luck—in adulthood as in childhood—to be made to take the most arduous roads but the surest ones; woman’s misfortune is that she is surrounded by nearly irresistible temptations; everything incites her to take the easy way out: instead of being encouraged to fight on her own account, she is told that she can let herself get by and she will reach enchanted paradises; when she realizes she was fooled by a mirage, it is too late; she has been worn out in this adventure.” (Beauvoir 610)

I realize for the first time that there might be prices behind the shortcut which my peers and I have envied before. When we study hard and make great efforts to find a job, other girls may choose to either marry a wealthy husband and do not need to take care of survival any more, or to become anchors who takes advantage of their beauty to attract male audiences who offer money and presents to them. It is common for women to obtain free gifts in their prime from men while men of the same age have to work and struggle for it. But Beauvoir reminds me that it is actually women’s misfortune. *The Second Sex* is a great book not only because Beauvoir has brought insights into feminist studies, but because it is of everlasting wisdom and enlightenment, for it reminds women of any time, even in the 21st century that we should always fight on our own account instead of attach ourselves to men.

The Third Sex

A term used by Chinese netizens to refer to the group of females who have obtained Ph. D. degrees.

According to the dictum in *Fortress Besieged*, a novel written by Qian Zhongshu, one of the most distinguished Chinese scholars and authors in the 20th century, “women who've done a little book learning are the hardest of all to handle. The man has to be a step above her, not an equal.” (Qian 69) He further elaborates that a male college graduate should marry a female high school graduate and if a female has obtained a Ph. D., a male with one Ph. D. dares not to marry her unless he has two doctorates. (Qian 69)

Time flies, yet such opinions have not changed, at least in China. Females are often discouraged to pursue higher degrees because it is believed that no men will dare to marry them. Chinese netizens even use the term “the third sex” to indicate female Ph. D. Clearly they do not belong to the group of men, yet they also are not women anymore, who in the eyes of these netizens should be inferior to males and are classified as the second sex. As a result, female Ph. D. holder are called “the third sex”.

This term displays male netizens' suppressing attitude towards females as they position them in the group of second and third sex. Moreover, their endeavor to marginalize and stigmatize highly intellectual females also reveals their fear and timidity at the disguise of the maliciousness.

Love

A state of emotion which means total devotion for women but a mere diversion for men.

When I browse the consultation column for romantic relationship in online forums, I notice that many girls complain of their boyfriends' failure to answer to their messages or phones promptly. They become angry and end up quarrelling with their lovers. The consultants always console them by registering that men and women hold different views towards love. While love is of uppermost priority in girls' lives, their boyfriends are likely to put it on the back burner until he finishes his job or computer games.

Z and her lover in *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* have come across the same problem. When Z comes back from a long trip, she is angry that her lover should invite other friends over. She longs to spend an intimate night with her lover alone, because love prevails in her life. In contrast, friendship and love are equally important to her lover, therefore, he could not understand Z's anger.

As Byron summarizes, "Man's love is of man's life a thing apart; 'Tis woman's whole existence" (qtd. in Beauvoir 608). Beauvoir (1953) suggests that men, even in their most frantic and emotional state, will not relinquish their subjectivity. Instead, they endeavor to take possession of woman and integrate her into their existence (608). In comparison, women regard love as the religion of their life, because she seeks to share the masculinity in her lover after she abandons her adolescent aspirations to be identified with males (609). Beauvoir's explanation of men's and women's different attitudes towards love is based on the assumption that woman without subjectivity tries to seek what she cherishes and aspires in her lover. But we now live in the contemporary era when women are presented with equal chance to get educated, to work, to realize our dreams and to experience lives as we wish. Therefore, it is time for us to be extricated from the state of total devotion described by Byron and go out meeting friends and develop our personal interests even when we are in love with our boyfriends as the online consultants have advised.

Sexual Politics

A term proposed by Kate Millett (1977) to describe how patriarchal power tries to control females through the imposition of ideology. In my view it also involves women's politics towards men such as monetary requirement before marriage. Sexual politics is two-way.

Have you noticed that females take care of domestic work such as taking care of babies or washing cloths and cooking while males play the parts of successful businessmen in many advertisements? Do you also regard the Chinese phrase “Xian Qi Liang Mu” which means a good wife and a good mother as a praise for women? These are two examples of the sexual politics proposed by Kate Millett (1977).



Figure 1¹

Millett (1977) registers that patriarchal power stipulates “temperament” as well as “sex roles” (26) under masculine and feminine category to construct the ideology which guarantees the superiority of males and inferiority of females. Qualities such as “passivity, ignorance and docility” are cherished in the female. In addition, sex roles which confines women to “biological experience” such as “domestic service and attendance upon infants” are assigned to females while most “human rather than animal activit[ies]” outside household are reserved for the male (26).

¹ Retrieved from: <http://www.lioncorp.com.sg/Top/top.html>

But I think that the concept of sexual politics could also involve feminine politics towards males. When choosing their spouses, women will require that men should be able to afford an apartment and a car, and moreover, in some regions of China, should be able to pay betrothal gifts worth several ten thousands of Yuan. This is the result of patriarchal ideology which stipulates that women should take on domestic work while men should work outside. In order to ensure men's ability to work and earn money, women have to resort to monetary standards to select their spouses.

Patriarchal power endeavors to confine women to biological experience and domestic work. Then women make it rule for men to provide them with monetary guarantee before marriage. That could be called two-way sexual politics.

Performativity

A notion which discerns gender from sex. Sex is what one is born to be, male or female. Gender is what one is constructed to be, masculine or feminine.

“I feel pretty, oh so pretty……” This is the song sung by Chandler’s father, a star in drag show in the popular American TV series *Friends*. Although he is born to be a man, he acknowledges himself as a female. He dresses up and behaves like a woman. So he is a woman socially and psychologically. His biological sex is male but she performs to be a female. That is performativity.



Figure 2²

² Retrieved from: <https://91mjw.com/video/1070.htm?Play=22>

Chinese Feminism

Feminist liberation movement in China.

It is another broad concept and is even harder to define. If Chinese women obtain the equal rights as males, does it mean they have achieved liberation? As Li Xiaojiang (1991) points out, western feminists observe that Chinese women work equally with men in society in the 1950s and they define it as Chinese feminist movement, however, they fail to realize that women at that time are compelled to assume both social and domestic labor because of the barren living conditions. Although they do enjoy equal right to work, they have to carry a very heavy burden of labor and that should not be considered as real liberation. (qtd. in Shih 99)

Li elaborates further that this equality between men and women hides “an implicit male norm, according to which women were equal to men insofar as they were like men”, thus women are deprived of femininity. (qtd. in Shih 100).

This process of “degendering” (Shih 100) women is not actual feminism. But is the process of “regendering” (Shih 101) women in contemporary Chinese society means liberation to women?



Figure 3³

³ Retrieved from: <http://www.ggzgc.com/pinpai/20181130/1630.html>



Figure 4⁴

The line in the center of the advertisement in Figure 3 reads: You are the most beautiful woman in the world. It conveys the information that with the use of the skin care products of Estee Lauder, you will be very beautiful. The beauty of the lady at the left side of the advertisement strengthens the credibility of the line. It is worth noting that this lady is very different from the labor women in the 1950s represented in Figure 4 who are stout and masculinized. Her outlook possesses feminized beauty. To obtain this beauty, you are supposed to purchase the product of Estee Lauder. Here we can see how capitalism associates regendering women with consumerism.

In contemporary Chinese society, the concept of feminism has been deployed and distorted by designing capitalists. Claiming that women should cherish or invest in themselves, they link women's self-love and self-improvement with consuming. Women have not achieved actual liberation either. Now they are under the control of capitalism and consumerism.

⁴ Retrieved from: <https://jianjiaobuluo.com/content/8886>

Foot Binding

A custom of traditional Chinese women who use a long strip of cloth to wrap up their feet and twist them so that their feet will become as small as a three-inch lotus.

I am so glad that as a modern Chinese woman, I do not need to forbear the misery of foot binding. As a Chinese saying goes: “to gain a pair of small feet, you will shed a cylinder of tears.” To make the toes twist, traditional Chinese mothers will even put stones in the foot binding cloth to help break the bones of the toes. Their daughters’ pain is unimaginable. However bitterly they cry, the mothers have to be stone-hearted and continue the process of foot binding, because they are fully aware that with natural big feet, their daughters will be despised and loses the chance to marry decent men.

Foot binding is one of the strong and vivid proofs of feminine suppression in ancient China. It is also a typical example to show how patriarchal power enforce their ideology through shame. Traditional women fear that their natural feet will bring about contempt and sneer, so they endure great pains to cater to patriarchal aesthetic standards.

The custom of foot binding has been abolished nowadays. Or has it? Does it still exist in another form?

It is now the mainstream taste of beauty to appreciate long legs. Therefore, many women wear high-heeled shoes to gain the height they otherwise lack, although they have been constantly warned of the potent health hazards.



Figure 5⁵



Figure 6⁶

Is that not a kind of modern “foot binding”?

⁵ Retrieved from: <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/27661700>

⁶ Retrieved from: http://blog.sina.cn/dpool/blog/s/blog_62488d470102eg51.html

“Doubly Feminized”

A notion proposed by Yoko Arisaka (2000) which suggests that Asian Women in western societies are “doubly feminized” (Yoko)2, firstly as women, secondly as Asian. They are “doubly submissive” (7) because of patriarchal requirement along with Confucian virtues such as gentleness and tolerance.

Woman Virtue

Traditional requirements of Chinese women such as submissiveness to their fathers, husbands and sons, sexual purity and no talent or scholarship, which have been bashed severely in the 19th century but is now beginning to revive again in China. Its reappearance is signifies the regressing of feminist movement.

Leftover Women

A derogatory term describing Chinese women who are still single at the age of over 30 years old. They are regarded as leftover in the process of men's selection and are urged to get married by their relatives as soon as possible even when they are unsatisfactory with their prospective marriage partners. This term is highly anti-feminist because it values women not according to their personal qualities but their marital statuses. It also indicates that marriage is of uttermost importance in women's lives.

Women worker

Female workers who seem to enjoy the right of equal pay for equal work as men yet cannot cast off the yoke of gender discrimination and suffer glass ceiling in the market for jobs because of the stereotype that family and children will become the main focus of women's lives after their marriage and scatter their strengths for the job.

Maternity leave

A kind of leave stipulated by law to ensure that pregnant women workers can enjoy holiday to give birth to their children and recover from the labor without being laid off by the company. The leave usually lasts about three months. Although the law intends to protect women workers' rights to breed and work, it leads to companies' increasing unwillingness to hire women workers because they have to pay for three months without the profit earned by the workforce. As a result, some women workers even promise not to get married before joining the company. The law intending to protect women workers' rights ironically turns into the accomplice in gender discrimination in workplaces.

Lady

A group of women who have to observe strict rules and disciplines to maintain their grace at the cost of their own will, freedom and happiness.



Figure 7⁷: Ross in the movie *Titanic* (1997)

⁷ Retrieved from: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/313985405242187008>

Vase

A derogatory term referring to woman without any capability who can only depend on her beauty to survive in her career or life. It indicates that women should possess abilities beyond biological level, which conforms to the appeals of feminist movement.

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