Stereotype: a productive force and its new danger

Reinterpretation of Chinese women in sinology

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Abstract Thinking with stereotype is normally considered as a dangerous mindset in scholarship, because under this sweeping approach analysis is inaccurately conducted within a rather rigid and narrow spectrum; and thus it fails to reflect the diversity and mobility inherent in its subjects at best, and distorts the truth at worst. An acute awareness of the danger of stereotype has been well demonstrated in the studies of sinologists over the past two decades, and in a very subtle way this awareness helps to transform the stereotype, previously a negative and reductive term, into a positive and productive force in Chinese studies. However, while anti-stereotype plays a key role in inspiring new findings in Chinese studies, it meanwhile invites new dangers when it is overemphasized to the degree that its arguments are based on some minor details or even exceptions, without paying due respect to the solid foundation underneath that stereotype. This tendency can be evidenced in the major transition of post-feminist discourses on Chinese women in late imperial period, from the stereotype of Chinese women as victims of patriarchal society to the anti-stereotype of Chinese women as individuals with agency and subjectivity. Focusing on women studies by Dorothy Ko, Susan Mann and Grace Fong, this paper aims to showcase both the productive force derived from stereotype and the new danger involved in the anti-stereotype agenda, in which the anti-stereotype may become another kind of stereotype.

Keywords Stereotype · Anti-stereotype · Chinese women · Victim · Subjectivity

Stereotype is a crucial term and research subject in image studies (or imagology), an important branch of comparative literature, flourishing mainly in the hands of

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French school. Although its definition varies, most scholars agree that it is a condensed representation and collective understanding of people from another country or another cultural territory, and it is stagnant and illusory generalization. Recognizing its stagnant and illusory characters, the imagologists justify their scholarly analysis on this subject by claiming that it is not the degree of truth that matters, what really interests them and is worth exploration in the stereotype is what kind of collective belief people have vested in it at that particular moment (even that belief is subjective and may not be able to reflect the whole spectrum of the original image), and what kind of historical misconception that belief has engendered.

The awareness of the historical misconception urges scholars to rectify what has been distorted in this collective, romantic imagination of others, as ample evidence shows that the culturally biased stereotype inevitably leads to culturally biased treatment of people in real life.

In the anti-stereotype imperative, by refusing to follow the old rut and exploring those previously overlooked details, many scholars aim to yield some innovative conclusions that are against the old commonplace.

In case of Chinese women, much of the anti-stereotype reaction is congregated in the studies of late imperial China or Ming-Qing China, where the stereotype of victimized Chinese women was immensely challenged.¹ In this article, I mainly focus on three sinologists' studies (Dorothy Ko, Susan Mann and Grace Fong) to illustrate the productive force that has been generated by the stereotype as well as its new danger. To a great extent, the significant influence of their studies on Chinese women of the late imperial period can be mainly attributed to their shared interest and strong intension to challenge the old stereotypes imposed onto women of this period. Despite that it is still debatable whether the tendency of non-victimization constitutes the mainstream outcome of current studies on Chinese women, the influence of their research suffices to qualify it as a phenomenon worth notice.

¹ "Late imperial China" is a loosely used term in sinology, scholars tend to alter its definition and duration to better approach their specific research subject within its specifically continuous historical period. Basically, three versions of "late imperial China" are widely used in sinology: the first version, probably the most widely used version, refers to the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911), e.g., *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* by Benjamin A. Elman, in which the "late empire" was defined as the Ming and Qing period, *The Rise of Confucian Ritualism in Late Imperial China* by Kai-Wing Chow, in which late imperial China refers to the "Ming and Ch'ing Dynasties", although the author mainly centres on seventeenth century through the early nineteenth century, "Communication, Class and Consciousness in Late Imperial China" by David Johnson (in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, p. 34–74), in which the late imperial China means the "Ming-Ch'ing era", there is also a journal named *Late Imperial China*, published by The Johns Hopkins University Press twice a year, which specifies its research domain is the "Ming and Qing dynasties"; the second version refers to the period from the Song to the Qing, e.g., *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (1997) by Francesca Bray, "The State and the Economy in Late Imperial China" by Albert Feuerwerker (in *Theory and Society*, May 1984, Vol 13, Issue 3, pp. 297–326), in which the author regards the Song, Ming and Qing Dynasties, from the eleventh through the nineteenth centuries, as "late imperial China"; the third version dates from the late Ming period, e.g., "Economic and Social Foundations of Late Imperial Culture" by Evelyn S. Rawski, in which the author views the late imperial period as the period from sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, because she sees this period as "substantively different from its predecessors and was characterized by considerable continuity in key institutions and social-economic structure" (in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, p. 3). In this paper, I tend to adopt the first version.

Besides, although their research cannot be neatly reduced into simply radical denials of women's victimization, and it might not do justice to the complexity of their findings to say that their whole argument is based on a single intention to reverse the stereotype, the anti-stereotype imperative nevertheless does constitute a vital part of their motivation, as being made very clear in their own arguments which will be discussed in detail in the second part of this article.

Stereotype: victimizing Chinese women

Chinese women were first introduced and continually represented as victims of the patriarchal society and the Confucian gender norms in various studies of Chinese women's history since early 20th century. In her book *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*, Dorothy Ko gives a brief introduction of the trajectory of victimization.

The inception of this stereotype began in Xu Tianxiao's 徐天嘯 *A New History of Women of the Divine Land* (神州女子新史1912), the first general history of Chinese women according to Ko. In striking contrast with some outstanding western models, in this book, Chinese women were lamented as "lack[ing] lofty goals and distinguishing thoughts", with neither an independent will nor great enterprises.

This lackluster image of Chinese women was continued into the May Fourth-New Culture period (1915–27) when the backwardness and dependency of Chinese Women became the symbol of the Chinese nation itself. Associated with passionate and powerful nationalist sentiments, the victimized feudal woman began to gain currency in literature of this period and was consequently treated as unassailable historical truth. Among all the suffering Chinese women discussed in this period, Xianglin's wife 祥林嫂, the female protagonist in Lu Xun's 魯迅 short story "The New Year's Sacrifice" (祝福1924) remains the most moving and quintessential example for many Chinese readers.² It is fair to say the high status Lu Xun enjoyed as a serious writer for his protesting writings as well as the wide readership of this story helped to reinforce the stereotype of victimized women.

Later, this stereotype was further confirmed in a more systematical representation of Chinese women, *A History of the Lives of Chinese Women* (中國婦女生活史, 1928) by Chen Dongyuan 陳東原. By examining women's (miserable) lives throughout Chinese history, Chen aims to show "how the destruction of women was intensified, and how the weight of history is still crushing their backs today".³ With this a priori assumption in mind, Chen's book gleaned a whole range of historical evidence to make manifest women's long suffering in China.

If Chinese scholars haven't been able to, or refuse to address the many dimensions of Chinese women so far, the western scholars are more ready to view Chinese women as pure victims in their discourses on the so-called Third World women. With the label of Third World women, the cultural, social, racial

² Xianglin's wife, a widow, was sold by her mother-in-law for re-marriage. After her second husband also died and their only son was devoured by a wolf, she returned to her former master to serve as a maid. Stigmatized as impure, Xianglin's wife was barred from preparing food for the New Years sacrifice. She eventually went insane and collapsed on the street.

³ Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* p. 2.

differences within the category of women have been brutally erased; compared to western women, all the third world women are oppressed and need to be liberated from patriarchal chains.

The first representation of Chinese women as victims may be attributed to the foreign missionaries in late 19th century and early 20th century, whose works set the tone for the later narrative on Chinese women up until 1970s.

The Women of the Middle Kingdom (1903), written by missionary R. L. McNabb, portrays Chinese women as victims of Chinese society that need to be rescued or Christianized by the western missionaries. This idea is made very clear in the Dedication of this book:

To the woman's foreign missionary society workers of all orthodox churches, who are laboring for the uplifting and Christianization of the women of China, this volume is dedicated.

Throughout this book (especially in Chap. 1, The Trials of their Childhood and Youth, Chap. 3 Their Status in the Home and Society, and Chap. 4 How They are Betrothed and Married) the author gives very detailed description of how their miserable life as a woman begins from the moment they were born, and continues throughout their entire life.

When the girl baby first opens her quaint little eyes in a Chinese home—be it a hut or palace—she is greeted with a frown. No one in the household is made happy by her advent. She is, like her Redeemer, despised and rejected of men. Her swaddling clothes may become her burial clothes, for infanticide is a common practice in China.⁴

The position that women occupies in China is far below that allotted to her in Christian lands, but it is above her position in India and many other heathen countries.⁵

In whatever grade of society the woman is found she is held in subjection to the will of her husband. In the homes of the well-to-do and rich she is completely secluded from society, and among the lower classes this is true to a limited extent.⁶

In her article “The Construction of the ‘Traditional Chinese Woman’ in the Western Academy” (1996), Jinhua Emma Teng argues that the foreign missionary’s focus on Chinese women’s victimization and weakness can be attributed to their interest in “civilizing” the Chinese and the fact that they tended to work among the poor.⁷

Since then, Chinese women were repeatedly portrayed as victims, the custom of footbinding and widow chastity became frequently mentioned hallmarks of their miserable condition as a Chinese woman. Such a stereotyped narrative was well continued into 1970s, however it was also in this decade that this stereotype began

⁴ R. L., McNabb, *The Women of the Middle Kingdom*, p. 15.

⁵ Ibid., p. 37.

⁶ Ibid., p. 39.

⁷ Jinhua Emma Teng, “The construction of the “traditional Chinese woman” in the Western academy: A critical review,” *Signs* (1996). p. 121.

to be challenged. *Women in Chinese Society* (1975), edited by Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke, is usually regarded as the first influential work that successfully bring the multiple dimensions of women's life into view.

To sum up, the stereotype of victimized Chinese women, put women into a permanent status of being oppressed, thus narrowed the spectrum of women's lives down to a sheer experience of enslavement.

Anti-stereotype: exploring subjectivity and agency

In this section, I aim to show how the stereotype of victimized Chinese women was immensely challenged in the studies of Dorothy Ko, Susan Mann and Grace Fong.

In her book *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (2005), Ko made very clear the goal she aimed to achieve with this book in the introduction: "I started with a simple goal: to write a history of footbinding, which has never been attempted except in derision."⁸ With this ambition, instead of portraying Ming-Qing bound-feet women as the stereotype of suffering daughters and wives, she claimed that "each woman with bound feet lived in a complex world, each facing a changing constellation of motives, choices, sufferings, and rewards".⁹ Taking into consideration the duration, geographical and social scope of this custom, she argued that male desires and tastes alone could not account for this widespread and long lasting phenomenon, female incentives also had their roles to play in this process, as she pointed out, "footbinding was not merely an announcement of status and desirability to the outside world, but also concrete embodiment of self-respect to the woman herself".¹⁰

Leaving aside today's discourse of "free choice" which for Ko is inevitably a hindsight, Ko addressed the limited subjectivity and agency allowed within this social custom for women. The bound-feet women may have their own perceptions of what is footbinding and what is that for, through binding their feet, they may manage to redeploy this act into meaningful sacrifice that is in favor of their own benefits.

Her intension to challenge the stereotype was more apparent in her earlier and more influential book *Teachers of the Inner Chambers* (1994) in which her overall arguments were based on and shaped by an anti-stereotype mission.

While admitting that the image of victimized women was not without its grain of truth, she reminded the reader that the fatal danger of this stereotype lies in "an analytical confusion that mistakes normative prescriptions for experienced realities",¹¹ and the overwhelming popularity of this image has "obscured the dynamics not only of relationships between men and women but also of the functioning of Chinese society as a whole".¹² Therefore, by focusing on a privileged

⁸ Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters*, p. 1.

⁹ Ibid., p. 189.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 228.

¹¹ Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers*. p. 3.

¹² Ibid., p. 4.

group of educated women (teachers of the inner chambers), she aimed to “highlight the possibilities for fulfillment and a meaningful existence even within the confines the Confucian system imposed upon women”,¹³ the considerable range of flexibilities that women enjoyed in practice, as well as the individual personality or subjectivity that was not able to be eliminated by the dominant gender norms. In other words, apart from being victims, women are also “actors maneuvering to further their perceived interests from within the system”,¹⁴ authors of their own lives who were able to derive meaning, solace and dignity from rewriting the rules without directly challenging them.

Guided by this main agenda, Dorothy Ko restored a fuller and more comprehensive picture of Chinese women’s lives through examining various “unofficial powers” women enjoyed at that particular moment.

A great deal of space has been devoted to demonstrating the enlargement of women’s place and the concomitant enlarged flexibility and possibility of women’s life. By showcasing the legendary life experience of Huang Yuanjie 黄媛介 and Wang Duanshu 王端淑, two outstanding female teachers whose career required them to step out of the inner chambers thus violated the designed domestic boundaries,¹⁵ Ko emphasized the unprecedented freedom (although limited) elite women managed to derive from male-dominated system, and how their efforts and talents were recognized and endorsed in public arenas.

Stepping out was not the only sign of the permeable domestic boundaries, in 18th century, the inward turn of men from public area to family also blurred the spatial distinction. Retreating to family, men were not necessarily isolated from the public space; on the contrary, they introduced all sorts of cultural activities, which used to take place mainly in the public area, into the private space, what Ko called the “privatization of Chinese cultural life”.¹⁶ Ko believes this trend facilitated by and together with the family wealth, served as a favorable environment for the enlargement of women’s horizons, offering better opportunity for women to be educated and get involved into public affairs.

The domestic boundaries were also violated in the sense that elite women were able to establish cultural and emotional bonds with other women and men outside their family in various occasions, one major way is to establish literary societies, official and unofficial. Dorothy Ko examined three types of literary societies that were most popular in the 18th century China: domestic, social, and public communities.¹⁷

¹³ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁵ Other noticeable examples in this book are the remarkable life experience of Wen Shu Gui Maoyi, Cao Jianbing and Su Wanlan.

¹⁶ Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of Inner Chambers*, p. 157.

¹⁷ A domestic community was the most informal and was constituted when mothers or mothers-in-law gathered with female relatives after dinner to discuss literature or when they composed poetry while strolling in the garden. It was familial in the sense that all women were related by kinship ties and that activities were enmeshed in everyday family life. A social community was made up of a group of related women together with their neighbors and in some cases friends from afar. Although social communities cast their net wider than domestic communities, their activities were just as informal. In many ways they

Along with the enlargement of women's space were the multifaceted roles and activities women undertook in the society. As a product of both the favorable environment and their ability to redeploy the unfavorable elements, women's real life in practice has gone far beyond the normative gender roles designed for them. The momentum was so strong that it eclipsed the traditional formula of womanhood (womanly speech, womanly comport, womanly virtue, womanly work), the new concern became "how are we to construct new concepts of womanhood that can accommodate old values to that reality".¹⁸ Dorothy Ko noticed that the four requirements of traditional womanhood had undergone subtle redefinition during the 18th century under the pressure of the real condition of women's life. Womanly speech, once only referred to spoken words, has been extended to the written words, with the emergence of women writers; womanly deportment, which used to highlight the inner beauty of women, began to encompass the physical beauty as more and more women were keen to cultivate their looks; womanly virtue was downplayed, rather than the primary mark of an ideal woman, it has been juxtaposed with other two equally important measurements: beauty and talent; at last, womanly work was successfully transformed by creative women from necessity to art.

Even in the custom of footbinding, the seemingly incontestable symbol of women's suffering, Ko managed to transform what was considered as physical mutilation into some meaningful activity in which pride tinged with "a secret delight" serves as an incentive.

While emphasizing the agency and subjectivity of women, Ko also noticed the limitation. As she pointed out, "the gender system allowed women the possibilities for a considerable range of movement and fulfillment, but only in terms of trade-offs: agility in the male domain came at the price of heightened dependence on men, freedom and pleasure in the female domain, in turn, entailed an acceptance of exclusion from a host of public activities."¹⁹

The anti-stereotype complex was also the key motivation in Susan Mann's studies on Chinese women of 18th century.

In her article "Learned Women in the Eighteenth Century" (1994),²⁰ she took issue with the "uniform picture of women in premodern times" drawn by scholars.²¹ It seemed to her the previous and existing research on Chinese women has so far confined them to a rather narrow spectrum,

They stress the low status of women in traditional Chinese society, and they emphasize the marginalization women experienced in the patriarchal, patrilocal, and patrilineal kinship system. At worst, women appear as victims; at best, they become strategists forced to achieve their ends by manipulating men, especially their sons. They seem to act as their own oppressors, binding

Footnote 17 continued

can be thought of as a transitional type between the other two. A public community is so called because it was publicly visible as a result of its publications and literary fame of its members. pp. 15–16.

¹⁸ Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of Inner Chambers*, p. 159.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

²⁰ Christina K. Gilmartin, *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State*, 1994.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

their daughters' feet and tyrannizing their daughters-in-law. As historical actors, they are portrayed as agents of a larger process, their individual identity forever obscured.²²

As a counteraction against these stereotypes, in this article, Susan Mann intended to explore and emphasize the female consciousness, female voice and female perspectives that have been endowed with new features and meanings along with the great historical changes taking place in late eighteenth century.

Through reading poems of learned women in late imperial China, she suggested instead of being the obedient murmurings of complicit victims, "many of the poems are highly personal, passionate, often anguished ruminations on individual lives".²³

In her article "Grooming a Daughter for Marriage: Brides and Wives in Mid-Ching Period" (1991), against the traditional idea that women were confined and oppressed in their marriage in late imperial China, Susan Mann underscored how "the unprecedented mobility of women throughout the stratification system prompted enormous concern about how to keep women in their place".²⁴

Mann was of the opinion that the unprecedented mobility enjoyed by women in mid-Qing was greatly facilitated by the classical revival. Rather than resorting to the second hand resources, mainly the interpretation of Confucian classics by Song scholars, Qing scholars would look to pre-Song texts for the original meaning of Confucian norms and languages. Under this guidance, a closer reading of *Liji* 禮記 reveals a totally different picture:

On careful reading, then, the *Li chi* could be interpreted to emphasize distinctions and difference more than hierarchy, dominance, or submission. A proper marriage was arranged and celebrated to underscore gender differences and to emphasize the complementary and separate responsibilities of man and woman in the conjugal relationship. Marriage was the primary human social bond demonstrating the "righteousness," or "propriety" (i), of each distinctive human role. Like all primary relationships, marriage required deference and submission (wives are to husbands as sons are to fathers and subjects to rulers). But the *Li chi* stressed that husband and wife interact to demonstrate harmony, and it implied that a filial son would learn how to establish a warm and responsible relationship with his father, not by observing his mother's deference, but by watching his parents' loving interaction. A father who abused his wife would invite only his son's resentment and rejection, and a resentful and rebellious son, as everyone knows, makes an unreliable subject. Thus the *Li chi* revealed how a wife mediates the critical filial bond tying father to son. She was the pivot around which loyal and compliant subjects were socialized (LC 44:1b).²⁵

²² Ibid., p. 27.

²³ Ibid., p. 14.

²⁴ Rubie Watson et al. *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society*, p. 209.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 209.

In her seminal monograph *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (1997), by placing women at the center of High Qing history, she intended to “challenge a century and a half of scholarship (1843–1993) in which both Chinese radicals and western missionaries saw Chinese women as oppressed victims of a “traditional culture” who were liberated only by education and values imported from the west.”²⁶ This stereotype was worth taking issue with because, as she criticizes later, “This assumption has locked the study of Chinese women in a response-to-the-west paradigm that most scholars in the China field thought they had long since cast aside. Worse, it has forced an orientalist view of gender relations on studies of Chinese history for which western scholarship is largely to blame.”²⁷

Therefore with the ambition to dispel the orientalist analysis shrouding the studies on Chinese women, in her own analysis, Susan Mann was well aware of the women's agency and subjectivity that has been long neglected in western scholarship.

Similar with Dorothy Ko, Mann also addressed women's subjectivity within the privileged group of elite women. She believes that “Free of the compulsion to study for examinations, the woman writer in High Qing China used her erudition to develop her own subjective reading of her place in family and society as well as her views on life and art”.²⁸ According to her, both women writers as prodigies and women writers as moral instructresses, two types of elite women in her analysis, posed great social pressure and threat to elite men,²⁹ since they inserted into writing highly personalized meaning and even challenged the accepted meaning.³⁰

Unlike Dorothy Ko, Susan Mann does not confine her research subject to the elite women. She is also interested in reexamining the everyday life of ordinary women.

Compared with men in High Qing, women enjoyed a more fluid social mobility. Although women may be sold into slavery, lowborn women could shed their pariah status and move upward mainly by marrying a commoner as his concubine, a path which is closed to men, as men usually either marry a woman of the same status or lower status.³¹

If women's writing is where their agency lies, the importance of women's labor bespeaks the immensely improved social status of women. In high Qing times, women became more productive members in the household as the commercialization of Chinese economy deepened. Therefore, women became more valuable and respectable for their labor and the income they guaranteed. Besides, the promising financial gains also reduced the incidence of female infanticide in poor families.³²

Another factor Mann took into consideration in analyzing women's life is age. Being senior was a privilege for women in high Qing times. As a woman grew old (after 50 *sui*), she was considerably less labored by housework, and most of her job

²⁶ Susan Mann, *Precious Records*, p. 223.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 223.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 206.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 119.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 55.

³¹ Ibid., p. 43.

³² Ibid., p. 174.

fell onto the daughter(s)-in-law, thus she was free to pursue her own spiritual quest (e.g. Buddhist religious practice).³³

One merit of Mann's analysis is that while it was her intension to challenge the stereotype of victimized Chinese women, she did not deliberately downplay women's suffering in her book, nor did she overemphasize the agency and freedom of women.

Dorothy Ko and Susan Mann's exploring women's agency and subjectivity are merely a small sample of an extensive feminist theorizing practices. The agency-seeking project has long been launched in feminist agenda, as demonstrated in Lois McNay's book *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (2000).

Besides Chinese women's real life, some other scholars also began to explore the agency exhibited in women's writing, as Maureen Robertson indicates in his studies of Ming-Qing women's self-representation, women "changed the subject" in poetic representation from the feminine object constituted by male poets to active writing subjects in their lyric poetry.³⁴

Women's agency in their self-representation was also a key aspect of Grace Fong's research on Chinese women in late imperial period. Although she admitted that in permodern China, there was no transcendent or foundational category of woman/women conceptualized outside their kinship-defined roles, Grace Fong believed a certain degree of transcendence can be expected if we "examine writing produced in certain temporal-spatial instances", as in these circumstances, women could assume agency that is "exceeding the family-or lineage-centered structure, whether momentarily or figuratively acting in non-kinship defined roles, as friends, travelers, critics, artists, and connoisseurs, in which they make space for a degree of difference, of change, even of authority and autonomy, through taking up the tool of writing and reading".³⁵ Thus, through examining women's autobiographical poetry collection, poetry produced by concubine, records of journeys and poetic criticism invented by women, she intended to bring into view the gendered subjectivity of Chinese women.

Too limited to be true

So far we have seen how an acute awareness of the danger of stereotype helps to transform the stereotype, a previous negative and reductive term, into a positive and productive force in Chinese studies. However, while anti-stereotype plays a key role in inviting inspiring new findings in Chinese studies, it meanwhile invites new dangers.

It has been noticed that the agency-seeking project has been taken too far. In this matter, Tani Barlow argues that we should not be too positive about the female agency in premodern China, as there was no transcendent or foundational category

³³ Ibid., p. 68.

³⁴ Grace Fong, *Herself an Author*, p. 5.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

of woman/women conceptualized outside their kinship-defined roles at that particular moment.³⁶ Although Barlow's contention is contestable, however, it reminds us that the celebrated women agency is not without its limitation. To a certain extent, the agency is merely a product of "patriarchal bargain",³⁷ a decision to accept gender rules that disadvantage women in exchange for whatever power one can wrest from the system. It redeploys the system to one's best advantage, however it leaves the system itself intact.

Some western scholars have noticed the new danger even in the relatively less radical arguments of Dorothy Ko. In her book *Beauty and Misogyny* (2005), Sheila Jeffreys read the beauty standards inscribed by men on women's body as a form of oppression. With this agenda, the Chinese footbinding is undoubtedly viewed as a condemned cult to satisfy men's foot fetish at the expense of women's physical health. Therefore, she was not content with Dorothy Ko's attempt "to rescue it [footbinding] from its association with women's oppression".³⁸ Taking issue with Ko's addressing the multiplicity of practice and the instability of meaning in the cult of footbinding, Jeffreys argued that Ko thus adopted "a cultural relativist, postmodern perspective in which it is impossible to name any practice as oppressive to women because there are just too many meanings and everyone can have a different interpretation".³⁹

She criticized Ko's book *Every Step a Lotus: Shoes for Bound Feet* (2001) as problematic since it is a full color picture book full of large shiny photos of the shoes made for bound feet. It is very likely, she argued, the main market of this book would be male shoe fetishists, and it would encourage interest in this form of cruelty towards women.⁴⁰

She also found Ko's description of bound feet as pretty rather than deformed is a surprising one, and insisted that Ko ignored the unbearable pain women endured in a rich array of rituals evolved around the binding of feet when she preferred to depict these rituals with a "lighthearted" tone and "upbeat approach".⁴¹ It is apparent in Jeffreys' account that she thinks Ko's anti-stereotype mission has been taken too far.

As women's agency and subjectivity increasingly became a powerful weapon to challenge the stereotype of victimized Chinese women, in some cases, they nevertheless have been overemphasized at the expense of overlooking their limitation.

In her article "The cultural significance of suicide writings by women in Ming-Qing China" (2001),⁴² Grace Fong examined the agency exhibited in three women's poems (Du Xiaoying 杜小英, Huang Shuhua 黃淑華 and Ling Zhinü 凌軼女) composed before their suicide. Without exception, all these three women committed

³⁶ Theorizing Woman: Funv, Guojia, Jiating (Chinese Women, Chinese State, Chinese Family), in *Body, Subject&Power in China*, edited by Angela Zito and Tani Barlow.

³⁷ Deniz Kandiyoti. "Bargaining with Patriarchy", 1988.

³⁸ Sheila Jeffreys, *Beauty and Misogyny*, p. 133.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 133–34.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 134.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 135.

⁴² In *Ming-Qing Literature and Gender Studies* 明清文学与性别研究, pp. 92–126.

suicide to preserve their chastity and reputation, and their poems served to preserve their individual life experience and explain what had motivated them to commit suicide.

By writing poems on their suicide, Grace Fong believed that both these texts and their bodies became the meaning-creating locus. Through combining self-inscription with self-sacrifice, these women claimed their agency and demonstrate their determination to die was not a blind choice.⁴³

In this sense, Grace Fong read their words and suicide as an attempt to change the ethically despicable situation, both in the discursive level and physical level, thus to reintegrate themselves into the dominant discourse.⁴⁴ Their poems, an act of self-inscription, revealed the power of their subjectivity and individuality in the face of death, as they aimed to preserve and perpetuate their soon disappearing self.⁴⁵

At the end of her article, the author claimed that these poems should be read as these women's subject position, and the vital expression of their agency.⁴⁶ By this claim, the author's main concern was to take issue with the traditional paradigm of self-erasing as recorded in many biographies. She is against the idea of taking the act of self-erasing (e.g. burning the manuscripts before they die) as the normative mode thus neglecting other forms of self-expression.⁴⁷

It is very incisive and accurate to notice the subjectivity invested into these women's last writings, and it makes perfect sense when she claims that in writing, women open up alternative subject positions beyond kin roles;⁴⁸ however for several reasons this subjectivity is too limited to be admitted as valid. Her anti-stereotype imperative has been taken too far.

First and foremost, the subjectivity preserved in this form is subject to a great degree of uncertainty, since upon their death, their manuscripts did not circulate according to their own will. What these women could possibly do to maximize their existence is unfortunately confined within quite a narrow spectrum. As mentioned in her analysis, they made elaborate efforts in the rhetoric dimension, to evoke their potential reader's sympathy and admiration, or they hide their manuscripts in their body, hoping that people will find them when examining their corpse and make their story known to a wider range of audience. Thus all the subjectivity delivered in their poems is dependent on some precarious or uncertain elements, which in turn immensely weakened the power of their subjectivity. Rather than being solid, this subjectivity is rendered contingent.

We have solid evidence that this agency is contingent. Ling Zhinü's original manuscript failed to be fully preserved. Fan Kai 範鏞 only included a part of her poems into his book *Books edited by Fan Baifang* (范白舫所刊書) according to a later version found in the local gentry's publication.⁴⁹ Thus what is available to us

⁴³ Ibid., p. 95.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 95.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 97.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 121.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 96.

⁴⁸ Grace Fong, *Herself an Author*, p. 5.

⁴⁹ *Ming-Qing Literature and Gender Studies*, p. 118.

today is Fan's selection and representation of Ling Zhinü's subjectivity, which is two steps away from her original one. Du Xiaoying's manuscript has been preserved in Ji Liugu's 計六奇 *Mingji nanlüe* (明季南略) however in this book Du's name was lost.⁵⁰

Secondly, the extremeness or rareness of her examples in this article renders these women's agency as something rare and unusual, thus rather than convincing the reader of its wide existence, it inevitably gives an impression of the opposite. Suicide itself is a very rare action, suicide caused by lawsuit (as in Ling Zhinü's case) and social turbulence (as in Du Xiaoying and Huang Shuhua's cases) is even rarer.

Thirdly, the stylistic feature of this special literary form also to some extent precludes the possibility of thorough expression of women's agency. As the author noticed, Huang's poems were very similar to Du's poems, and she attributed this similarity not to the direct influence of one to the other, but to the common act of suicide which may have determined the stylistic feature of its writing.⁵¹ In this light, what has been delivered in these texts, is more of a collective cultural code than the individual subjectivity, as in some crucial point, these women had to sacrifice some individuality to fit into the cultural norm.

To sum up, women's agency, no matter seemingly how splendid, when displayed only at the end of one's life, its value and significance is immensely reduced. The agency of a subject, for men and for women, should be more visible in their efforts and struggle to cope with the question how to live or survive, not how to perish. If this subjectivity is only visible on the brink of one's death, this subjectivity is dead.

Conclusion

Stereotype is generally caused by a confusion of the normative prescriptions and experienced realities. The gap between was made clear in French scholar Michel de Certeau's distinction between the concepts of *strategy* and *tactics* in his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). While the producers of dominant ideology use all sorts of strategies to make the normative best fit and serve their own intention, the consumers of these norms are not necessarily all passive, they have their own tactics to redeploy this ideology, and transform it into raw materials that can be further employed to serve their private purposes. Therefore, the power of the dominant ideology can never be thorough but will inevitably meet resistance from the grass-roots level which renders the ideal of a coherent society impossible.

Another distinction made by the American anthropologist Robert Redfield between "great tradition" and "little tradition" may also help to support my point here. Under this theoretical framework, we can assume that in Chinese society there is "great tradition" which is shaped by a long history of Confucianism, and there is also "little tradition" which reflects the real lives and real thoughts of the masses, a

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 119.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 105.

tradition that struggles or negotiates with the great tradition.⁵² And in terms of gender, women's lives may have never been completely covered by the official history, and to cite Dorothy Ko, there always exist three levels of shifting realities: ideal norms, practice, and self-perceptions.⁵³

While stereotype is often accused of being distorting the individual reality, the anti-stereotype is not a guarantee of restoring that reality either.

As Spivak aptly pointed out in her critique of postcolonial studies, postcolonial studies may ironically reinscribe, co-opt and rehearse the neo-colonial imperatives of political domination, economic exploitation and cultural erasure, despite their genuine intention to speak for the subaltern or to let their voice heard.⁵⁴ In this sense, the post-colonial critic might be unknowingly complicit in the task of imperialism.

This nuanced relationship between colonialism and post-colonialism is embodied in the way stereotype and anti-stereotype interact with each other. In the representation of Chinese women in sinology, while the stereotype discourse may function as the dominant or institutionalized discourse that anti-stereotype discourse seeks to dismantle, what has been actually achieved in this anti-stereotype imperative might be merely the creation of another myth, another stereotype that further conceals the reality of its subjects. In this sense, both the stereotype and anti-stereotype become an "epistemic violence" done to the Chinese women.

Thus being aware of the stereotype can get us closer to the individual reality, however, we should also be aware that the individual reality is not necessarily to be in direct contradiction with the stereotype, rather its relationship with the stereotype can be a diverse one: they could be complementary, they may differ in degree rather than in kind, in scope rather than in nature, in its perspective rather than objective.

Surrounding Chinese women, the transition from stereotype to anti-stereotype (saying so, I do not imply the transition here is necessarily lineal) not only reveals the ambiguous relationship between the agenda of neo-colonialism and that of post-colonialism, but also involves the matter of deterritorialization and reterritorialization.

Deterritorialization is first created as a philosophical concept by Deleuze and Guattari. As an emancipating performance, an achievement of non-identity (which for Deleuze and Guattari is the access to freedom), deterritorialization primarily refers to the fluid and dissipated nature of human subjectivity. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Deleuze further distinguishes between relative deterritorialization and absolute deterritorialization in which the former is inevitably accompanied by reterritorialization, and only the latter can lead to a plane of immanence (pure or absolute immanence).

As soon as these terms were brought up, they were borrowed into other fields. When referring to culture, deterritorialization presupposes, or aims to establish culture as a fluid or cross-boundary phenomenon, thus to weaken ties between

⁵² Robert Redfield, "Peasant society and culture: an anthropological approach to civilization," (1956).

⁵³ Dorothy Ko, "Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China," (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994). p. 8.

⁵⁴ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. pp. 271–313.

certain culture and certain location in space and time. However, in most cases, this deterritorialization is inevitably relative, and thus seamlessly conjoined with reterritorialization, since culture cannot be created in vacuum and without a subject, any creation and interpretation of any culture is subject to subjectivation and reterritorialization.

The anti-stereotype imperative around Chinese women can be viewed as an action of relative deterritorialization. By trying to read more agency and subjectivity into women in late imperial China, these aforementioned scholars are actually refusing to regard Chinese women as a separate phenomenon which is intelligible only within a Chinese backdrop. On the contrary, they choose to regard them as human being in the first place, emphasizing what is common among all human, rather than what is thought of as peculiar to Chinese women at that particular moment.

However, the same anti-stereotype imperative is at the same time an action of reterritorialization. What comes after a subjective deterritorialization is by no means a value-free zone, but a new round of discursive occupation. Another whole set of subjective assumptions are projected onto Chinese women once again, competing for the dominant discourse. This reterritorialization is not necessarily a bad thing, but it should be made clear that it is neither in any sense superior to the first step territorialization.

In a similar vein, the anti-stereotype imperative, whether understood as deterritorialization or reterritorialization, or both, is not necessarily superior to its previous step of stereotype imperative.

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