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Hearing Her: Comparing Feminist Oral History in the UK and China

Margaretta Jolly with Li Huibo; translation by Ding Zhangang

Abstract: This article compares the China Women's Oral History Project, directed by librarians at the China Women's University in Beijing, and Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project, directed by scholars at the University of Sussex in the UK. While the projects share aspects of method, our practices wrestle with distinct historiographical structures which are entwined with a history of state feminism in China and with dissenting, nongovernmental networks in the UK, as well as differing institutional contexts. As we have sought to develop a relationship as feminist oral historians, we have had to decenter our own frameworks to understand the local conditions under which we each work. The article concludes by analyzing what we share: the wish to find progressive spaces within universities and national funding structures, particularly as oral history work connects with community activists.

Keywords: China, feminist oral history, Sisterhood and After: The China Women's Oral History Project, women's movements, UK

Taping a woman's words, asking appropriate questions, laughing at the right moment, displaying empathy—these are not enough. What is missing from this list is the realization that the interview is a linguistic, as well as a social and psychological, event, one that can be better understood by taking into account the specific characteristics and styles of the group being studied.¹

The politics of interviewing have been thoroughly debated in the years since Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai challenged feminist oral historians to think hard about what experiences

We thank Professor Li Hongtao, former director of the China Women's Oral History Research Center and coeditor of *Listening and Discovering: The China Women's Oral History Project* (倾听与发现: 中国妇女口述历史项目), for her extremely helpful guidance; Chen Zhengong for her support; and Susan Jolly for interpretation and discussion.

¹ Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 9.

women really share. Less considered have been relationships between oral historians ourselves. Practitioners have become vastly more connected in the years since Gluck and Patai wrote the words quoted above in 1991. The International Oral History Association (IOHA), for example, which was established in 1996, now boasts members from every continent. As we consider this burgeoning international network, the practice of feminist oral history today raises questions about identity, position, feelings, and language itself, all of which require careful answers to support mutual comprehension and fruitful exchanges.

The China Women's Oral History Project, directed by China Women's University in Beijing, and *Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project*, directed by the University of Sussex in the UK, originated independently but were developed over the same period, from 2010 to 2014. In 2013, key members were funded by the British Academy to visit and train each other in the interests of a China-UK exchange.² This article compares our projects to show that while we share aspects of method, our practices wrestle with distinct historiographical structures that are entwined with a history of state feminism in China in contrast to the UK women's movements, which grew out of dissenting, nongovernmental networks. Our oral histories are also differently inflected by our institutional contexts. The China Women's University (CWU) builds on its origins as a training school for women Communist Party cadres for the All-China Women's Federation, and the University of Sussex reflects its well-established reputation for radical cultural studies. Coming to grips with these different contexts challenges Western simplifications of feminist oral history as uniformly oppositional, particularly to the state; it also reminds Western-based historians of a history of British colonialism in China and its place in Chinese memory and national narratives. It also helps us appreciate the variety and popularity of women's oral history practice in the People's Republic. At the same time, our exchange reveals that Chinese oral

² See <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/chlwr/research/hearingher>, accessed October 20, 2016.

historians also need to challenge tendencies to simplify versions of the past, as they navigate pressures to reiterate homogenizing narratives of national ascension. We argue that increased exchanges between Western and Chinese oral historians are mutually beneficial in pushing for (trans)nationally progressive perspectives on how we approach both each other and our own pasts.

Fig. 1: Pictured left to right are Ding Zhangang, Chen Zhengong, Margaretta Jolly, Li Hongtao and Li Huibo, China Women's University 2015. (Photo courtesy of CWGL.)

Sisterhood and After and the China Women's Oral History Project

I begin with what we share as women's oral history projects blessed with resources that permit scale and accessibility. Sisterhood and After (S&A), funded by the Leverhulme Trust and directed by the University of Sussex, was partnered with the British Library (BL) and the Women's Library in London. In 2013, the BL archived sixty interviews with feminist activists and intellectuals, collected by the S&A team and totaling 432 hours, as well as detailed summaries and a gateway website, which has since been viewed by over 450,000 visitors, with supporting narratives, audio clips, and teachers' notes.³ Although there have been important and community-led precedents, the S&A project was the first to address the entire Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s and 1980s, across the four nations of the UK, with funding to allow a permanent home. The China Women's Oral History Project began one year later, in 2011, also adding to existing records a sustainable, professional, and comprehensive collection. Housed in and directed by the China Women and Gender Library (CWGL) at CWU, it was funded by the Ministry of Finance's Special Fund and has collected over 200 life histories, totaling approximately 650 recorded hours, of women over seventy years of age who lived through the changes of China's gender revolution under Communism.

³ See <http://www.bl.uk/sisterhood>, accessed October 20, 2016.

The Research Center of Chinese Women's Oral History, founded in 2012 and affiliated with CWGL, leads the project team, which includes over 200 interviewers, many of whom are postgraduate students in gender studies.

Our two projects equally shared concerns with representation and reliability, wanting especially to reach women whose experiences are underrepresented in the historical record. For S&A, criteria for interviewing included involvement in the core UK campaigns for equal pay and opportunity, reproductive and sexual rights, childcare, and education. The S&A team sought narrators across race/ethnicity, class, religion, age, sexuality, disability, region, and national lines, as well as movement perspective or ideology, and recorded the more cultural and personal forms of contestation typical of Western women's movements during this period.⁴ Our narrators include national stars, such as Susie Orbach and Juliet Mitchell, and lesser-known women, such as Jan McKenley, included for her work in the National Abortion Campaign and the Organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent. CWGL's selection criteria were far wider because its aim was to document women's rather than feminist lives, allowing any woman over seventy to be interviewed, so long as she had a "good story to tell."⁵ Interestingly, this approach evolved from an initial focus on revolutionary women leaders or cadres, and CWGL did, in fact, seek out famous women, including Wu Changzhen, a lawyer-professor who drafted China's iconic Marriage Law of 1980, and Jin Maofang, a first generation woman tractor driver after the People's Republic of China was founded. However, CWGL came to consider that everyone's story is significant and so sought to document China's extraordinary changes in marriage, motherhood, and sexuality over the last half century of postcolonial development. Using a snowball method beginning from personal contacts, the range of narrators grew to include women's rights activists, Communist Party

⁴ Margaretta Jolly, Polly Russell, and Rachel Cohen, "Sisterhood and After: Individualism, Ethics, and an Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement," *Social Movement Studies* 11, no 2 (2012): 1-16.

⁵ Li Huibo, personal communication with the author at University of Sussex, April 11, 2013.

pioneers, minority ethnic leaders, and ordinary women, whether officials, lawyers, soldiers, engineers, farmers, mill-hands, or housewives.

Fig. 2: Preparatory CWGL oral history team, 2011. (Photo courtesy of CWGL)

Both projects were also determined to offer appropriate confidentiality and consent, including closure for up to fifty or more years. These are obviously generic issues for all oral history projects, and the CWGL conversed with China's Oral History Society on these matters, just as S&A consulted with the British Library's Oral History curator, who is also director of National Life Stories and secretary of Britain's Oral History Society.⁶ Here, however, differences began to emerge. The S&A team's relationship with older activists was typically one of deference, and our commitment to confidentiality turned on feminists' reputation within the small, proud, and often self-critical activist community. For CWGL, where many narrators were less educated than interviewers, archival negotiations could involve assertive or anxious relatives who were unsure what an oral history record might mean, or were not necessarily comfortable with the idea of a university archive as guarantor of good reputation. CWGL also manages sensitive relationships of trust with regards to possible histories of state or Party surveillance and turbulent times, factors that few activists in Britain have lived through. CWGL's collection, like S&A's, distinguishes itself by being open to the public and has developed an attractive website, but its contents are more closely guarded, requiring a password from the library. Since 2016, access has been in flux as the library waits for new national standards for confidentiality to be finalized.⁷

⁶ In 2004, the Chinese Oral History Society was established, housed in the Institute of Modern History at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, with Yu Heping as the president and Zuo Yuhe serving as the secretary-general.

⁷ See <http://en.chinawomenlibrary.com>, accessed February 1, 2016. The CWGL website is sometimes only accessible from within China Women's University, depending on permission and climate. Archival preservation and access are governed by the National Standard, under the State Archives Administration of China and the Central Archives, governed by the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China [CCCPC] and the State Council. State-sensitive archives are generally closed for a minimum of thirty years, as

We thus acknowledge our different contexts and the strikingly separate histories we were collecting. Although Sino-British relations have been framed by China's strong narrative of colonial humiliation, with Britain and then Japan as preeminent imperial oppressors, the CWGL focuses on gender experiences after the Communist Party took power in 1949, with little British reference. Similarly, S&A captures a history barely connected with these events, although it does contain fascinating glimpses of how the British Women's Liberation Movement saw Maoist China as an inspiration not just for women's equality but also as a consciousness-raising method.⁸ Today, of course, China has become such a global power that new connections are being formed; indeed, the British Academy's support for our exchange is part of an invigorated cultural diplomacy. At the same time, in the four years over which we have met, the space for feminist activism in China has become volatile in ways difficult for outsiders to make sense of and influence. This reflects the conservatism of the current government, which has been linked to a backlash against a tradition of women's rights. Conversely, the preoccupations of feminists in Britain are sometimes also difficult for those at CWGL to see as meaningful, whether over pornography or the impact of migration and black women's experiences, central in the UK context. Even as we both spoke of a shared commitment to decenter masculinist or patriarchal national narratives and foster the growth of women and gender studies, these contexts tested the identity of our common methods.

in the UK, but socioeconomic and cultural materials may be opened to the public sooner. The conception of archives as service stations, primarily existing to copy marriage certificates, property deeds, and work-related documentation, rather than academic resources with space and time for researchers, is slowly changing, but the change is bringing new pressures as the CWGL competes to establish itself as a nationally outstanding special collection, also responding to new digital standards. See Charles Kraus, "Researching the History of the People's Republic of China," in *Cold War International History Project Working Papers* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center, 2016); Wang Wenqing and Chen Ling, "Building the New-Generation China Academic Digital Library Information System (CADLIS): A Review and Prospectus," *D-Lib Magazine* 16, no. 5/6 (2010).

⁸ Sue O'Sullivan, *I Used to Be Nice: Sexual Affairs* (London: Cassell, 1996), 18-24; Christina Van Houten, "Simone De Beauvoir Abroad: Historicizing Maoism and the Women's Liberation Movement," *Comparative Literature Studies* 52, no. 1 (2015): 112-129.

It is obvious, no doubt, that communicating without a shared language proved to be a challenge. Despite the best efforts of our translators, even essential terminology was difficult to mediate effectively. Ding Zhangang, the lead in translation studies at CWU and initially little connected to the CWGL, thus became central, and indeed has translated this article. He explained:

“Sisterhood” is a common word, but not easy to translate in this context. I don’t agree with the original version of “妇女事件后” for “Sisterhood and After” because “妇女事件后” means “after the women incident,” and this is no doubt misleading, for it does not reflect the idea of your project. So I’ve come up with my translation for your title: 姐妹情谊及其后来： 妇女解放口述历史项目. As I understand it, “Sisterhood” is a politics and history-loaded term with specific connotative meaning historically related to the 1960s-1980s women’s movements in western countries, where feminists identified all women as “sisters”. My translation for “and After” is “及其后来”, which means “and thereafter”, or putting it more clearly, “what happened subsequently” or “what happened after ‘Sisterhood’”.⁹

In turn, Li Huibo, who provided most of the CWGL content for this article, put it that in China there are different ways of expressing *feminism*. One is seldom used: “女权主义” (*feminism*, “女权,” means “women’s rights”). It usually gives place to “女性主义” (also meaning *feminism* but where “女性” means just “women”) or “妇女研究” (women’s studies). This is difficult for non-Chinese readers to follow, perhaps, but what is clear is that Huibo preferred milder terms rather than those which emphasize women’s opposition to men. She stressed the tactical importance of using *womanism*, since, in her view, its “ultimate

⁹ Ding Zhangang, personal e-mail to the author, August 11, 2013.

goal” is to gradually raise women’s gender awareness through education.¹⁰ But, as we discussed this over tea in a Beijing high-rise apartment, project director Li Hongtao teased her younger colleague for her middle-of-the-road approach. These debates over terminology are much more than simply linguistic questions: Li Hongtao is of an arguably more radical older generation who is happier than Li Huibo to identify with “女权”—women’s rights. As for me, I was concerned that Ding translate an idea of sisterhood which conveyed its political limits as well as its metaphorical power. These polite exchanges over terminology and script are but small symptoms of the “linguistic event,” as Gluck and Patai might put it, which constructed and obstructed our ability to approach each other as feminist oral historians.

Locating Feminist Oral Historical Method

What do we understand by feminist oral historical method? The UK Data Service lists it as a discrete practice alongside “psychosocial, semi-structured” and other interview methods that “[promote] a more reflexive and reciprocal approach and [seek] to neutralize the hierarchical, exploitative power relations that were claimed to be inherent in the more traditional interview structure.”¹¹ Yet the literature is ambiguous as to whether feminist oral history is more than simply ethical practice. In 1991, Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai suggested feminist oral history should redefine itself to include awareness of distinct power differences in most interview contexts, and to analyze in general the constructed nature of an interview.¹²

Reviewing trends in 2007, Joanna Bornat and Hanna Diamond picked out the tension between women as subject and object as the enduring feature of feminist oral history.¹³ In

¹⁰ Li Huibo, in conversation with the author, May 28, 2015, affirmed in personal e-mail to the author October 14, 2017.

¹¹ The UK Data Service represents a consortium of universities and is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council: <https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/teaching-resources/interview/feminist>, accessed October 20, 2016.

¹² Gluck and Patai, *Women’s Words*, 3.

¹³ Joanna Bornat, “Oral History as Social Movement: Reminiscence and Older People,” *Oral History* 17, no. 2 (Autumn 1989): 16-24; Joanna Bornat and Hanna Diamond, “Women’s History and Oral History: Developments and Debates,” *Women’s History Review* 16, no. 1 (2007): 19-39.

China, similar debates roll. At CWGL's conference in 2015, Li Wen Fung, a doctoral student in sociology at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, emphasized the natural comradeship of oral history and "feminist action," in defining oral history as "the history of the common people" and those who bear "taboo subjectivities."¹⁴ But others were keen to pick up the potential power differences in interviews, as when, for example, urban women interviewed villagers, or feminists interviewed nonfeminists (one striking example was of interviewing sex workers in Shanghai using Picasso portraits as a prompt).¹⁵ Clearly in China, "feminist oral history" is invoked as a method in which the politics of interviewing is a major subject of concern. Yet in practice it remains difficult to isolate feminist oral history from general qualitative interviewing techniques, sometimes more psychosocial, sometimes more empirical in emphasis.

Comparing methodological conversations in the West and in China therefore suggests that feminist oral history may *not* be itself a method so much as a political perspective. Certainly, both our teams are going beyond taking women as objects of study to offer an analysis of gender and power, a position significant in China, where many academics still hold that "any historical research on the subject of women is women's history."¹⁶ This is evident in the questions we asked our narrators. Both S&A and CWGL adopted an unstructured, life history approach, wishing to maximize narrators' own interpretations and storytelling. In addition, S&A asked narrators whether being in the movement had affected how they felt about their body, about sexuality, about differences within the movement as to nation, race, and ethnicity, and how they compare their life to their mother's. S&A built in

¹⁴ Li Wenfung, "Oral History as Feminist Action," presented at Women's Oral History Research in Global Context Symposium, China Women's University, May 19, 2015.

¹⁵ Zhao Jie, Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences, "Interviewing a Sensitive Group with Sensitive Issues: An Experimental Approach," presented at Hearing, Recording, and Unfolding: International Seminar on Women's Oral Histories, China Women's University, July 14, 2013.

¹⁶ Gail Hershatter and Wang Zheng, "Chinese History: A Useful Category of Gender Analysis," *American Historical Review* 113, no. 5 (2008): 1419.

questions about the efficacy of the oral historical method itself, asking how the narrator felt about it at the end of the interview. The CWGL questions focused on tensions between private and public life and the contexts “through which the interviewer can understand how she has achieved her self-worth as a female,” as Li Huibo put it.¹⁷ Questions included: Did you receive any education? Did you witness or suffer from any domestic violence? Could you say something about your love life before marriage? Or your career development? After marriage, how did you handle the relationship with your own family and that with your husband’s family? What is your view on life?

A closer look at these questions reveals that the UK and Chinese projects generally worked to different priorities and imagined audiences. Although the S&A project was intended to demystify the lives of women considered, as feminists, to be “scary” or ridiculous by the wider public, we were also addressing internal differences within women’s movements (for example, arguments over race and socialist versus radical feminism). By contrast, the CWGL agenda was directed at revising or adding to national rather than movement narratives. Consciously or not, we are each formed by our own historiographical structures. In the Anglo-American world, a pervasive “grammar” of feminist storytelling organizes histories according to particular markers of progress (typically moving from a universal idea of sisterhood to a differentiated or intersectional model of difference), although it can also be structured as a narrative of decline, brought on by internal divisions and/or the appropriation of feminism by capitalism.¹⁸ Very differently, the CWGL inherits a powerful grand narrative of national restoration and renewal, framed within Marxist historical law, in which women’s liberation is a marker of modernity. These terms resonate in Li Huibo’s description of the Mao period as “phase one” of China’s gender liberation; she added that after 1980 it entered a

¹⁷ Li Huibo, draft contribution to this article, translated by Ding, sent to author October 3, 2015.

¹⁸ Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011).

“second phase, which, though not as grand and spectacular as the first, still mirrors the progress of people’s consciousness toward achieving gender equality.”¹⁹

Both projects, then, mediate and manage particular pulls in the way we construct and interpret our materials, even as we hope oral history methods will shed new light on our own pasts. Li Huibo pointedly explains that oral history is no longer defined by state ideology, as it had been in the Mao era, when it was directed by the Research Committee of Cultural and Historical Data of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. Although a Party-led oral history continues on an enormous scale that Britain could only dream of, dealing with topics such as land reform and family planning, the CWGL project belongs to what Li Huibo considers the second phase, the period beginning in the 1980s, when oral history was “geared to international standards.”²⁰ Notably, these reflect not so much a movement away from the explicitly political approach of the earlier era as a complex mix of European Marxist and feminist ideas of “history from below,” which was partly disseminated through a visit by socialist British oral historian Paul Thompson in 1986.²¹ Li Huibo explains that since then, oral history has focused on daily life as well as culture, science, technology, religion, and social customs, with a greater range of narrators and multidisciplinary approaches. This has combined with what she terms a “postmodern” approach, which includes analysis of the constructedness of both interviews and memories. It is in this context that feminist

¹⁹ Li Huibo, draft contribution, Oct 2015, as translated by Ding.

²⁰ Li Huibo, draft contribution, as above. The CPPCC Committee for Learning and Cultural and Historical Data, ed., *Selected Works of Cultural and History Data* (Beijing: China Literature and History Publishing House, 2009). As many as 300,000 eyewitness accounts to the project were administered by a staff of 3,000. By the mid-1990s, this had resulted in the publication of over 11,600 volumes of the Literature and History Materials Series, the best of it edited as *Literature and History Material in China*. See Liwen Yang, “Oral History in China: Contemporary Topics and New Hurdles,” *Oral History Review* 26, no. 2 (1999): 138.

²¹ This phrase emerged from the British Communist Party Historian’s Group in the 1950s but was much associated with oral history and the New Left in the UK. See Kynan Gentry, “Ruskin, Radicalism, and Raphael Samuel: Politics, Pedagogy, and the Origins of the History Workshop,” *History Workshop Journal* 76, no. 1 (2013): 187-211; Paul Thompson, Stephen Thompson, and Yang Liwen, “Oral History in China,” *Oral History Review* 15, no. 1 (1987): 17-25. Yang Liwen, who hosted Paul Thompson, opened a course on oral history methods, *Oral History in China: Contemporary Topics and New Hurdles*, at Peking University in 1996. Paul Thompson’s visit in 2016 to the Cui Yongnan Oral History Center at the Communications University of China led to its subsequent take-up in media studies as well.

researchers in China began to interview women to study the formation of women's historical awareness, to such an extent that it has become a trend.²²

Representing as well as remembering revolutionary experiences in these ways poses new challenges. This was revealed during a symposium, *New Feminist Oral Histories*, at the University of Sussex, when a young British-based Chinese student asked the visiting CWGL scholars why they were using propaganda-style photographs to illustrate their talk: heroic figures of women on tractors in the 1950s, shot from below. They explained that these images belonged to their narrators; their role was to use oral history to listen, not to judge or criticize. Their cautious approach clearly minimizes criticism of interviewees, yet it may also inhibit critical analysis of moments when interviewees may be styling their life stories within "safe" or stock tropes of good citizenry.²³

This is arguably also evident in the summaries of recordings written for the library catalogue or publications by the CWGL team's interviewers. Consider this treatment of the oral history of Yu Shoubo. Representing what the CWGL considers to be a typical interview from their collection, the interviewer heads her interview summary "A Tough and Independent Woman." She tells us that Yu was born into a peasant family in 1934 in Hebei Province; she witnessed the Anti-Japanese and Liberation Wars, struggled for food, and was prevented from going to school, in contrast to her brothers. "After liberation, she attended a literacy class. However, her mother ... married her off, for fear that she might elope with a soldier of the Eighth Route Army."²⁴ A transcript of Yu's own words (as translated by Ding) does suggest a "tough and independent" woman resisting her lot:

²² Shuo Wang, "The 'New Social History' in China: The Development of Women's History," *The History Teacher* 39, no. 3 (May 2006): 315-323; Kaiqiong Wei, "The Development of Chinese Women's Oral History," *Zhejiang Academic Journal* 4 (2012): 197-203; Yang Xianyin, "The Main Trends of Women's Oral History in the United States," presentation at the Women's Oral History Research in Global Context Symposium, at China Women's University in May 2015.

²³ Ding Zhangang, personal conversation with the author, July 21, 2017.

²⁴ This summary is mediated by translation.

A person of my fiancé's family came to advise us. He said that if you don't agree to marry and come back to Hebei, people would think there is something wrong with the girl, and my family would not like the girl. My mother agreed to our marriage. I was crying every night after I got married. I'm not satisfied with my marriage.

In 1952, during the Korean War, our country recruited women, and I went to sign up. But one person from my courtyard ... told my mother-in-law. I didn't go off. ... I just went to Beijing, I went to night school. I was very happy! My husband was not willing for me to go to school, and burned my book, but I still went to class. During my school years, I prepared the meal for my family every night, and I went to class, I come back at nine o'clock in the evening. ... One day, most people thought the task was not completed. I worked until everyone else had left to eat. They said, Miss Yu you should have a meal. I worked until ten o'clock in the evening. I was a little dizzy. I knew I didn't eat in the day. Someone gave me a little bit of cucumber, I began to work again. In my lifetime, I did a good job in my work, and let my family live better. My husband was not responsible for anything. When I had children, I went to hospital myself.²⁵

On one level, this woman's story is a testament to survival in the face of grueling conditions and the paradoxes of the period, as well as an example of how a "model worker" was deprived of love, health, equality, time, and fulfilment because of the postwar revolution's failure to transform private life, sexual relations, and the division of domestic labor, even as the rest of society was transforming. It exemplifies the CWGL project's focus on the gap

²⁵ Yu Shoubo, interview by Wang Junli in interviewee's home, November 11, 2011, and February 9, 2012; transcript in catalogue collection China Women's Oral History in the China Women and Gender Library, China Women's University, Beijing; translation by Ding Zhangang. This interview has been published in 倾听与发现：妇女口述历史丛书 [*Listening and Discovering: Women's Oral History Series*], vol. 5, ed. Zhang Li Xi and Li Huibo (Beijing: China Women's Publishing House, 2014-2016), 93-120.

between “collective liberation” and “individual liberation,” analyzing where these women have been shortchanged by the persistent double burden.²⁶ Yet it also embodies a particular narrative of an enduring investment in work and country, rising above uncaring parents, unhelpful neighbors, and a heartless, lazy husband. The interviewer’s summary of the rest of Yu’s life concludes as follows:

She gradually weakened as she grew older. Her husband was indifferent to her. In effect, they had not loved each other. She remembered that once she had to get up at four o’clock when it was still very dark to queue up for registration at the hospital. It was a freezing cold winter morning. She stood there, outside the registration room, in a temperature of minus ten degrees Celsius.... Then she came back home to prepare their breakfast, after which she took him to the hospital for a check-up.... She was very optimistic about life and would take an active part in social activities. She was a volunteer for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. She was always rushing, forever busy, in every stage of her life. She strived hard for her education, she spared no effort in her work, she was like a torch, forever burning, burning.²⁷

The summary or catalogue of an interview is not the place for extended critical analysis. Yet the poetic appreciation suggested, for example, in the image of the burning torch, might seem to be one element of the uncritical or cautious approach to which I have already referred.

Du Fanqin, founder of the first Women’s Studies Research Centre in China at Tianjin Normal University in 1993, commented that one of the project’s achievements was to restore the “spiritual lives and feelings” missing from previous histories of women’s lives in the

²⁶ For example, Wang Ying, “Work, Marriage and Family in the Mode of Collective Gender Identity—Focused on Women Going to the Frontier of Xinjiang to Support Its Construction after Political Mobilization”; Liu Chaohui, “Preliminary Study on New Fourth Army Female Soldiers’ Oral Histories”; Wei Kaiqiong, “Experience and Formation of Women’s Emancipation—Research on Three Women’s Life Courses”; Wang Xiangxian, “State Socialism and Gender—Case Study of Women Oral Histories,” all presented at Hearing, Recording and Unfolding.

²⁷ Interviewer catalogue summary of Yu Shoubo interview, summary track 3.

revolutionary era, especially in the form of the “hope” that older women maintained in the country’s common purpose, despite the “mistakes” of that time.²⁸ But how is this hope historicized, particularly at a time of public political rhetoric of the Chinese dream of national and individual self-making?²⁹ And how does it relate to the psychologies of “composure” and consolation, which are so often present in oral histories and which offer opportunities for self-construction, particularly of national trauma?³⁰ Li Huibo’s view is that

in the sources collected by CWGL, we find that no matter what classes those narrators came from, many of them were occupied by that “traditional” sense of humbleness, yet they were courageous enough to take on the heavy responsibilities of life; they consciously submitted to the patriarchy, yet they individually confronted the complexities of life. Their narrations might be incoherent and fragmented, but we could distinctly feel their female initiatives and subjective consciousness that unconsciously exuded in-between humbleness and resistance. To some extent, feminist oral history is a process of pursuing and searching in which the narrators recollect their past and redefine their roles.³¹

This extended expression of the CWGL’s approach suggests that the project’s determination to revalue women’s past struggles overrides the wish to analyze too closely. This celebratory approach is familiar to feminist oral historians the world over. It may also be determined by the fact that many of the CWGL interviewers were young students who felt, perhaps, that they needed to maintain a respectful approach not just to their elders but to elders who had

²⁸ Tani E. Barlow, “A Discussion of Prof. Du Fangqin’s ‘Developing Women’s Studies at Universities in China: Research, Curriculum, and Institution,’” *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies* 11, no. 4 (2005): 72-76; Du, Fangqin, presentation at the book launch of 倾听与发现：妇女口述历史丛书 [*Listening and Discovering: Women’s Oral History Series*], June 12, 2016, Beijing.

²⁹ Yui Fai Chow, “Hope against Hopes: Diana Zhu and the Transnational Politics of Chinese Popular Music,” *Cultural Studies* 25, no. 6 (2011): 783-808.

³⁰ Orlando Figes, “Private Life in Stalin’s Russia: Narratives, Memory, and Oral History,” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2016).

³¹ Li Huibo, draft contribution to this article, translated by Ding, sent to author October 3, 2015.

lived through legendary struggles. But the interesting challenge, at least from a UK feminist's perspective, is the way this is entangled with an attempt to recuperate elements of a state feminism which still both constrains and enables.

Mediating S&A's histories posed different challenges for the UK team, as we attempted to contextualize a narrative structured through social movement-led debates over "difference." Let us turn to an example that, superficially, provided a link with the CWGL's histories—the story of Grace Lau, a British-Chinese narrator, who, like Yu, was born in 1939 but whose life could not have been more different from Yu's. Lau, as a photographer working in 1980s London, specialized in images of sexual subcultures, including fetishists, cross-dressers, and dancers.³² In the following interview excerpt, we see her feminist understanding of her work as reversing the male gaze:

It was a vast, vast industry to explore and I realized that I think I was the only one at that [laughs] moment that I could find doing it, there weren't any other women. All the authors of nudes were male photographers, photographing female nudes, and they were the funny sort of—not workshops, almost Saturday afternoon kind of garage photography groups of men who'd pay a nude model, female of course, one of the page three models to pose for them, usually on top of a sports car, you know, very symbolic and so on. And [laughs]—and that just—well it was just not only outrageous, it was—it was extremely unfair. So I decided it was—it was really—I've really got to accept this challenge and go forward and I know how to use a camera and so I started to look for other women who were curious about the subject and who

³² Grace Lau, *Adults in Wonderful: Grace Lau; A Retrospective* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1997).

were courageous enough to come in with me and perhaps start photograph[y] or try to do workshops around the male nude and so on and I met quite a few in fact.³³

Recounting this maverick protest, Lau punctured her tale with laughter, and she was clearly at ease in the setting of the British Library recording studio as an independent artist who, in her twenties, had rented a room from the Library's China curator. I myself couldn't help enjoying the ways in which Lau's story awkwardly upset conventional feminist histories, for she was atypical as a libertarian relatively unconnected to the Women's Liberation Movement campaigning world; she worked with men in pursuing a (then) unusual interest in women-identified erotica. Nor was she socialist in orientation, in contrast with many in the UK Women's Liberation Movement. And finally, she did not share the background of many other minority ethnic feminists in Britain, including those of Chinese descent. Her father was a Guo Min Tang diplomat in the 1930s who sought refuge in England and became a restaurateur in Soho after the British government recognized the Mao government in 1950. Her family remained well off, so not only did Lau escape the trials her class would have endured in China, she did not experience the poverty or linguistic challenges faced by many other Chinese immigrants, although she was conscious of her ethnic marginality and narrow opportunities as a girl.

Lau also spoke of finally finding a "home" in a group of British-Chinese women artists, and here her story fits more obviously into the UK women's movement, which foregrounded cultural activism; identity-based art was particularly important for minority ethnic women. This is particularly so of her recent playful Shanghai-style portraits, where white British holiday-makers in the seaside town of Hastings are made, temporarily, to

³³ Grace Lau, interviewed by Margaretta Jolly, *Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project*, 2010-2013, British Library Sound and Moving Image Catalogue, reference C1420/60, transcript p. 38/track 2, The British Library and the University of Sussex.

inhabit the role of exotic.³⁴ Yet Lau's oral history as a whole provokes us to appreciate the diversity of Western minority as well as majority feminisms, where differences go well beyond crude simplifications of race, ethnicity, or nation. Just as Chinese feminists must guard against historiographical compulsions, so must UK feminists avoid opportunistically exploiting the stories of minority ethnic women, whether in lamenting a lost golden age of activism or in celebrating a march of progress through diversification.

The CWGL team found Lau's story hard to relate to when I shared it with them—I had wished to demonstrate the political diversity of UK feminism and was interested in how they would respond to a story of a British woman who remained attached to her Chinese heritage. This is perhaps unsurprising: Lau's family had left the world that they were recording. Furthermore, perhaps her struggles were less immediate than those of a woman like Yu. On the other hand, here again methodological differences may have been at play. I did not present her story heroically or lyrically, but, rather, as pleasingly idiosyncratic and challenging for a feminist historian. The interview summary style (following the British Library's template) is in its own way telling of a drier, seemingly neutral approach, as in this excerpt from the summary of the end of Lau's interview:

[01:08:33] Comments on impact of sexual liberation on own life. Notes women's liberation enabled her creativity. Comments on progress still to be made, particularly the hope that distinction between male and female gaze can be erased. Describes differences between HW [mother's] life and own life. Comments on lack of shared language and limited discussion. [01:12:49]³⁵

³⁴ Grace Lau, *Picturing the Chinese: Early Western Photographs and Postcards of China* (South San Francisco, CA: Long River Press, 2008).

³⁵ Catalogue summary of Grace Lau interview, British Library Sound and Moving Image Catalogue, reference C1420/60, track 3.

These abrupt lines return us to the question of how and to what end oral history has also brought British and Chinese feminists together. How, in other words, can listening to each other as oral historians enable better practice and—equally pertinently—enable better history and better gender relations?

Decentering Feminist Oral History from Within

Gluck and Patai's twenty-five-year old challenge to feminists to think about the politics of listening entailed scenarios of academic women interviewing others in less socially powerful positions determined by class, ethnicity, race, and place. We in the *Sisterhood and After* and *The China Women's Oral History Project* were, by contrast, speaking as equals, oral historians united through generous public funding that let us travel, eat, and walk together, symbolized by the matching topography of university classrooms, libraries, and cafés. Yet a politics of listening, and of *hearing* each other, remained in the obviously deep differences of history and language.³⁶ As Li Huibo sees it, Chinese women in the Mao period

contributed more to the nation as a whole than to their own gender awareness, because their movement was to a large degree related with the national liberation for the sake of getting rid of colonial rule. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, they seemed to have acquired liberation almost overnight, a course that had taken western women more than 200 years to cover.³⁷

In contrast to S&A, the CWGL works within a structure of state feminism. This is directly related to its home at CWU, the only state-run women's institute of higher education in China, affiliated with the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) and approved by the Ministry of Education. With a 99% female student intake, CWU aims to nurture women's

³⁶ In addition to Dr. Ding's work translating this article, Zhaoyuan Wan, Jianhua Zhangqi, Ling Yi, Qin Mingyu, Tong Qin, Ha Wenting, and Yan Lin kindly interpreted for us. See Norton Wheeler, "Cross-Lingual Oral History Interviewing in China: Confronting the Methodological Challenges," *Oral History* 36, no. 1 (2008): 82-94.

³⁷ Li Huibo, draft contribution to this article, as translated by Ding, sent to author October 3, 2015.

leadership in professions ranging from business to social work. In this regard, it reinvents its former function as a training school for women Party cadres in the 1950s and 60s and its oral history program began with echoes of that tradition. Mainstream in some respects, the university nonetheless provides a rich space for critical questions about gender relations, including hosting the only BA in Gender Studies in China. Moreover, the ACWF itself needs to be understood as internally diverse, despite its sometimes deeply conservative gender policies.³⁸ Indeed, Zheng and Zhang argue that its support for feminist activities and NGOs outside the system is one of the unique aspects of post-Mao Chinese feminism.³⁹

Understanding the spaces for civil society within institutions is vital, especially in view of the frightening targeting of autonomous feminist activism by the Chinese authorities in 2015.

In this light, the CWGL's mission to "advocate and spread advanced gender culture" supports an intriguing in-between space for feminist oral history. It also draws on the further "in-between-ness" of libraries everywhere as important, although often undervalued, engines of public engagement. This includes hosting an ongoing "salon" and supporting an annual "anti-domestic violence day" across the university. Symposia include speakers from community oral history projects such as the Beijing lesbian and transsexual oral history project, *Common Language*.⁴⁰ The CWGL lead at the time of the project, Li Hongtao, brought a background of work against domestic violence, feminist mental health activism, and masculinity education. The achievements of this "insider" work can be appreciated by the CWGL's subsequent project, *Recording Their Footprints over the Past 20 Years since the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing*. Funded by the Ford Foundation,

³⁸ Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China*, *Asian Argument* (London; New York: Zed Books, 2015), 92.

³⁹ Wang Zheng and Ying Zhang, "Global Concepts, Local Practices: Chinese Feminism since the Fourth UN Conference on Women," *Feminist Studies* 36, no. 1 (2010), 40-70.

⁴⁰ Xu Bin, *Common Language*, "Oral History of the Development, Organizing and Movement of Lesbian Community in Beijing," presented at Hearing, Recording and Unfolding. Other queer oral histories include the Shanghai Female Love Working Group; the Chengdu Love Working Group, and the Qian Yan Working Group. See Guo Yujie, "A History of Lesbians Organizing in China," *China Development Brief* 47 (2010), accessed May 13, 2017, <http://chinadevelopmentbrief.cn/articles/a-history-of-lesbians-organizing-in-china/>.

this project invited young interviewers to converse with activists who had attended this historic gathering. A turning point for the Chinese women's movement, the UN conference brought to Beijing 50,000 women from around the world, mostly non-official NGO activists whom the government kept separate from the governmental representatives and whose separate "Platform for Action" focused on economic justice as the primary demand of Southern feminists.⁴¹ The conference also introduced the concept of "gender" and related ideas of "gender-based violence, discrimination, inequality" to China, challenging hitherto essentialist ideas of "sex." Gender awareness was "mainstreamed" in training workshops and policy across the country, supported by international donors as well as the ACWF. However, as Wang Zheng and Gail Hershatter warn, this flowering of gender discourse was taking place just as the country shifted definitively to a market economy in which older ideas of equality and class liberation were becoming taboo. In this way

embracing "gender" expressed both a feminist attempt to promote the value of social justice against the resurgent ideology of Social Darwinism in the capitalist economy, and a feminist evasion of more sensitive issues such as class in the current context.⁴²

It is possible that the CWGL is positioned to try to combat this possibility of "feminist evasion" in its oral history projects, precisely *because* it combines old roots in Party feminism with newer networks.⁴³ You Jianming from Taipei's Institute of Modern History is the lead trainer for the CWGL project, bringing perspectives that reflect Taiwan's own relationship to oral history as a forum for questioning Chinese nationalisms, as well as a longstanding specialism in women's oral history.⁴⁴ You notably warned against over-

⁴¹ Devaki Jain, *Women, Development, and the UN: A Sixty-Year Quest for Equality and Justice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 142-148.

⁴² Hershatter and Zheng, "Chinese History: A Useful Category of Gender Analysis," 1418.

⁴³ Wang Zheng, "Rewriting Women's Oral History and Socialist History," presentation at Hearing, Recording and Unfolding. See also Zheng Wang, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁴⁴ You Jianming [Yu Chien-ming and 游鑑明], *Listening to Voices: The Use and Method of Female Oral History [Qingting Tamen De Shengyin: Nüxing Koushu Lishi De Fangfa Yu Koushu Shiliao De Yunyong; 傾聽*

emphasizing “country,” as a reified, over-generalized historical influence, arguing that many women’s actions should also be understood as following from the structures of “family” instead. (Conversely, the patriarchal family as a primary focus of Western feminist protest was hotly contested throughout the 1980s, when white activists failed to understand the different relationship to families in minority ethnic communities.⁴⁵) Significantly, the CWGL’s *Footprints* project interviewed many nonofficial NGO attendees, thus a wider and more critical political spectrum. The project asked, “What is the 1995 FWCW spirit? Why did so many women activists and leaders get involved? What influence have their actions exerted on women’s development? Does today’s generation, faced with the tide of marketization and rising economic inequality, know about that legendary conference?” The project captures new preoccupations with influence at the national level, gender equality at the community level, as well as the need to work with NGOs.⁴⁶ Interviewees included Zhang Youyun, gender advocate within the International Labour Organization, Fang Gang, pioneering gay rights sexologist, Hong Xuelian from the Hong Kong women’s movement, and Liu Bohong, ACWF research director. Notably, the collection also notably includes an interview with Zhang Lixi, former president of China Women’s University (2004-2014), who also, with Li Huibo, edited the ten-volume book publication of the CWGL oral histories.⁴⁷

她們的聲音: 女性口述歷史的方法與口述史料的運用], (Taipei: Taiwan Central Research Institute [Zuoan wenhua shiyeyou xiangong xi], 2002).

⁴⁵ Kum-Kum Bhavnani and Margaret Coulson, “Transforming Socialist-Feminism: The Challenge of Racism,” *Feminist Review* no. 80 (2005), 87-97. [Original publication 1985]

⁴⁶ Wang Ying, “The Construction of Gender Discourse and the Practices of Feminists Since the Fourth UN Conference on Women,” presentation at “Women’s Oral History Research in Global Context,” as above.

⁴⁶ This summary is mediated by translation.

⁴⁷ 倾听与发现: 妇女口述历史丛书 [*Listening and Discovering: Women’s Oral History Series*], ed. Zhang Li Xi, Li Huibo, et al., China Women’s Publishing House, Beijing, 2014-2016. The series includes: vols. 1-6, *Tracking Their Lives* (Interviews on Women’s Life Stories, since the 1930s), ed. Zhang Lixi and Li Huibo (vols. 1-5) and Lu Xiaofei (vol. 6); vols. 7-9, *Recording Their Footprints over the Past 20 Years* (Interviews on Women Activists’ Experiences, since the 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing), ed. Zhang Lixi and Li Hongao; vol. 10, *Understanding and Exploring the Values of Their Life Experiences* (Methodological and analytical discussion), ed. Zhang Lixi and Li Huibo.

To appreciate the value of CWGL's "inside-outside" approach, let me contrast it to the other large-scale oral history of women in China, *Let Women's Voices Be Heard—Oral History of Chinese Women in the Twentieth Century*.⁴⁸ Its director, Li Xiaojiang, captured Anglo-American feminists' imagination in the 1980s precisely because she explicitly proposed an obviously indigenous Chinese feminism. Separating female experience from class identities and thus challenging Maoist ideology, she also argued that Chinese women's land rights and the recognition of women's biology were more important to them than Western debates about sexuality or domestic labor.⁴⁹ Li Xiaojiang developed these ideas in the 1990s with an intriguing Women's Museum celebrating women's folk arts as well as a thousand interviews with women. But more recently, her argument with state feminism, including the All-China Women's Federation, seems to have left her uncritical of the effects of Chinese market-defined "liberation" and its aggressive reinvention of the gender binary.⁵⁰ Her complex relationship to Chinese historiography is today, perhaps, ironically more essentialist than that of the more assimilationist CWGL.

Western feminists can learn much from these debates. We, too, need to put our own sustaining narrative structures under scrutiny through and with oral histories. I suggest that UK oral historians have sometimes focused too reductively on internal ideological debates over sameness and difference, unity or division, and could learn from the CWGL's collection, looking beyond at wider political opportunity structures. Furthermore, listening to Chinese feminist oral historians' debates over nation and gender might rightly provoke us to attend to the new, assertive nationalisms of contemporary Britain, to rehear the voices of white, Afro-

⁴⁸ Her "Oral History of Chinese Women," launched in 1992, was published in four volumes in 2003, under the themes of *Women in War*, *Women and The History of Independence*, *Women and Culture*, and *Women and Ethnic Groups*. See Li Xiaojiang, *Let Women's Voices Be Heard [Rang Nuren Ziji Shuohua]* (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 2003). Interestingly, Li Hongtao was part of her interviewer team.

⁴⁹ Li Xiaojiang, "The Progress of Humanity and Women's Liberation," *differences* 24, no. 2 (2013): 22-50.

⁵⁰ See Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 27; Li Xiaojiang, "Responding to Tani Barlow: Women's Studies in the 1980s," *differences* 24, no. 2 (2013): 172-181.

Caribbean, and South Asian, as well as English, Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish activists. “Decentering” Western practice might also involve considering where UK oral history has, in its own way, been instrumentalized, through academia, the heritage sector, commemorative corporate projects, and the demands of the market. Sometimes this instrumentalization feeds off our own nationalist discourses, and sometimes it simply becomes academic method disconnected from progressive social movements.⁵¹ The University of Sussex’s own university oral history (in which I played a part) arguably exemplifies how a left-wing reputation itself can become part of a commemorative exercise, whilst at the same time might ignore the working-class communities living nearby, even when they form part of its workforce.⁵²

It is for this reason that Gluck in 2011 offered oral historians a new challenge in asking whether feminist oral history “has lost its radical edge.”⁵³ Of course, on one level, Gluck’s concern over the institutionalization of feminist oral history marks its enormous growth since its emergence in the 1970s. And, surveying projects about and by black, working-class, or lesbian activists, Gluck concluded that feminist oral history remains “a discourse of radical opposition” in the US and UK. Yet the key to understanding its potential in China, and indeed globally, must surely involve a nuanced and materialist view of “opposition,” including where the institution (whether university, business, funding foundation, or state body itself) is open to feminist agendas as they are pursued through oral history.⁵⁴ The S&A, for example, has benefited from the exceptional commitment to feminist history by British Library curator Polly Russell, who offers school workshops and “fourth

⁵¹ Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

⁵² Ben Rogaly and Becky Taylor, “For the Likes of Us? Retelling the Classed Production of a British University Campus,” *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* 14, no. 1 (2015): 235-259.

⁵³ Sherna Berger Gluck, “Has Feminist Oral History Lost Its Radical/Subversive Edge?,” *Oral History* 39, no 2 (2011): 63.

⁵⁴ Qi Wang, “Gender Knowledge: Power and the Change of Power Constellation in Feminism in Post-Socialist China,” *International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2015): 6.

wave” intergenerational conferences; it is also significant that the socialist Paul Thompson, influential in China’s oral history movement, was a founder of Britain’s own National Life Stories oral history collection at the British Library. In neither country is the national library a monolithic, conservative force any more than the university or state is; understanding where feminists can work within them is especially important in contexts where civil society is fragile and where austerity further limits funding options.

What, then, have our exchanges taught us about feminist oral history? Fundamentally, the answer must be framed as a commitment to the principle of gender liberation, more than any particular interviewing method, reflexivity, ethics, or institutional location. Yet this must involve a critical distance from easy narratives of progress—or failure—whether generated by women’s movements or nation states. In a world where ideas about gender are ever more fluid, gender-based inequalities are still deeply rooted, and this will become ever more important. Listening to each other as oral historians across our own cultural, political, and linguistic differences is crucial to developing these more complex accounts and decentering the powers that hold us—Western and Chinese—as well as our narrators. We must continue recording, listening, translating, interpreting, and “hearing her,” wherever she is to be found.

Margaretta Jolly is reader in cultural studies and director of the Centre for Life History and Life Writing Research at the University of Sussex. She is principal investigator to the Sisterhood and After: The Women’s Liberation Oral History Project. The article was conceived in consultation with Dr. Li Huibo, whose writing is drawn on throughout. Dr. Li is librarian at the China Women’s University Library and coeditor of *Listening and Discovering: The China Women’s Oral History Project* (倾听与发现：中国妇女口述历史项目), forthcoming. Dr. Ding Zhangang (丁占罡) is associate professor and director of the

Research Center for Translation Studies at China Women's University. E-mail:

M.Jolly@sussex.ac.uk.