Gender and Literature: East and West

—A Female Scholar’s Particular Perspective

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As a Chinese American scholar, Professor Kang-i Sun Chang, at Yale University does possess some different subjective and objective advantages compared with ordinary Chinese scholars. Though her deep-rooted Chinese cultural genes cannot be altered, long edification and soakage of Western culture inevitably influence her on the study of traditional Chinese academic culture. It is doubtless that she intends to study Far-East China’s traditional culture and literature from an exotic and particular perspective, which is the very point making her different. Furthermore, she is an acknowledged cultivated and learned female scholar. Consequently, she is regarded as a pioneer in the research combining ancient Chinese literature and social gender. She co-edited the English version of The Anthology of Ancient Chinese Female Poets published by Stanford University Press. The work is the first large-scale English version of ancient Chinese female poets’ anthology in America so far and one of the most important English translation works of Chinese classics at present. Meanwhile, she and Stephen Owen, the famous Harvard scholar, co-edited The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature, which is to be a unique
Chinese literature history book introducing ancient Chinese literature from the Westerners’ perspective. The publication of that masterpiece is distinctive and valuable to Chinese counterparts.

Now this paper intends to discuss Kang-i Sun Chang’s research in the following two aspects i.e., the study of Chinese literature and culture from Westerners’ perspective and gender study in literature.

I. How to Study Chinese Literature and Culture

As a Chinese descendent, it is understandable that Kang-i Sun Chang does her research with the influence from her ethnical background. What attracts Chinese scholars is Westerners’ study of China and her literature, especially the study by Western Sinologists because even to the same works their points of view are definitely different from ours. That is the so-called “otherness” or “cultural misreading”, the hot topic in Western and Chinese comparative literature region. Kang-i Sun Chang introduces and discusses this problem specially.

Firstly, “classic” and “modern”. As we know, the academia in China inclines to divide the history of literature according to historic periods. Customarily, the literature before “May 4th Movement” in 1919 is called ancient and modern literature. After 1919, it is contemporary literature. To be specific, the literature before the Opium War in 1840 is called ancient literature. The one after that is called post-ancient literature. Modern literature is between 1919 and 1949 and contemporary one is after 1949. Of course, during recent years there are many new approaches on the division of the literature history with the research development and opening-up attitude such as evolution approach, no-time-division approach, the 20th century literature-oriented approach and so on. However, what should be emphasized is the difference between “classic” and “modern” i.e., traditional Chinese “classic literature” and modern Chinese “modern literature”. Westerners, to be specific, American Sinologists, hold quite different views. Kang-i Sun Chang tells us that present American Sinologists prefer the study of classic Chinese literature to the one of modern Chinese literature. Why? Kang-i Sun Chang argues that it is not because of the obsession with “otherness” (Generally speaking, Westerners regard non-occidental world as “others”. The image of “others” is constructed through their gradual understanding. In that case, modern Chinese literature is disliked due to its Westernization, modernization and lack of “Chinese nature”. [1] Kang-i Sun Chang points out that it is not the case. The very reason for
that is "Classic Principle" that ancient literary works have experienced the tests of history and been accepted as classics, such as *The Book of Poetry*, Tang poetry, Song lyrics, Ming & Qing novels and traditional Chinese opera. However, having been not tested by time, modern Chinese literature is not classified as classic. Therefore, it is ignored by the scholars which is similar in Western literary criticism region. Kang-i Sun Chang holds that the first-class writers and poets like Irish Joyce and American Whitman, are also tested by long time and finally ranked classic, and then studied by college students. She thinks the so-called "Classic Principle" as the principle of time and space testing. The writers and their works are naturally ranked classic if they conform to the principle. The second or third class writers and their works unfortunately have to be excluded. That is an objective law without doubt. Of course, the explanation and definition of "Classic Principle" are necessary. Various scholars may have various criteria. As literary works, they are related to social and political problems. That is why "power guideline" is popular in Western world. If literature also conforms to it, troubles come. Kang-i Sun Chang puts forward her own insight: the study of literary classics cannot be completely separated from power in present-day complicated social situation. However, it is quite mistaken and dangerous to think that classics recognition results from the use of power. She argues that Westerners’ bias against contemporary Chinese literature is not completely due to Western cultural hegemonism. Instead, we should consider whether or not contemporary Chinese literature has established its own mature aesthetic appreciation system. Do we (American critics including Kang-i Sun Chang) take efforts to improve the understanding of literary and art guidelines? In fact, some modern and contemporary Chinese literary works have been advancing to classic field. They are being or have been rendered into English and published in America (or the West). Furthermore, positive comments are made by American critics. On this point, Kang-i Sun Chang said, "the ignorance of modern and contemporary Chinese literature is not due to the First World had the prejudice against the Third World China. It is because the movement and guidelines of modern and contemporary literary criticism are not mature and the works related are also in the process of growing and being discovered." This author holds that Sun’s point is practical and realistic. On one hand, we realize that there are some unfriendly Western people who have the bias against China and her literature. They even take hegemonistic position to treat the Third World countries including China. On the other hand, we should know there are still lots of friendly Western people,
especially the scholars of Chinese origin, who do not have the prejudice and take pains to study China and her literature practically and realistically. Unfortunately, we have to say ancient Chinese literature does have more classics than modern and contemporary Chinese literature. (Just think of which modern and contemporary Chinese writer can match Qu Yuan, Tao Yuanming, Li Bai, Su Dongpo and Cao Xueqin! Just imagine which work can match the Book of Poetry, The Songs of Chu, Tang poetry, Song lyrics and A Dream of Red Mansions!) That is why American literary critics (even including world-wide Sinologists) sing higher praise for ancient Chinese literature than modern, especially contemporary Chinese literature. Every sober Chinese agree on the point. As for how to make the literary works classic, Kang-i Sun Chang’s perspective is very reasonable. For one thing, critics should improve their understanding of classics; for another thing, literary works should also try to enhance their own literary nature and value. Only through these ways, can we really master the extent to the problem.

In terms of how to treat the relation between Chinese and Western cultures, Kang-i Sun Chang advances a bold or ground-breaking point of view to Western scholars. She thinks that traditionally Western scholars always argue only Western critic theories can bring a new perspective to Chinese literature research, forgetting or even not realizing Chinese equivalent can do the same to Western literature research. This point of view is not only courageous and realistic but also completely correct and reasonable. It is quite difficult for a Western (or American) scholar. As we all know, in Western world, Europocentrism, Western hegemonism and Western culture are beyond everything else. The outlook that China (or the Far East) is the negative side of the West and “others” is popular and customary. It is impossible for people to imagine that traditional Westerners are willing to take backward and ignorant Orientals into consideration (Of course, it is not decent to make sweeping generalizations, for with the development of China’s national power the attitude to China has been more positive). Kang-i Sun Chang, the Chinese American scholar, definitely points out, “I think today Sinologists should take more efforts to illustrate what kind of broad perspectives Sinology is to bring to the West or even the global culture, how to promote the real dialogue between Western and Eastern cultures, and how to change the difference into complement while demonstrating the different character of traditional Chinese culture.”[4] Her points strike home. Those problems deserve more attention not only from present-day Western Sinologists, but also Oriental Chinese literature and culture researchers who may feel they are
beyond their competence. In reality, Kang-i Sun Chang’s argument includes an appeal to Chinese scholars. “Generally speaking, gender studies in Taiwan and the Mainland both have the flaw of total Westernization. Western theories are always applied mechanically without consideration and the latest one is the best. Therefore, the reading of traditional Chinese culture is decayed into the reduplicative borrowing of Western theories.” Here, she indicates the partiality of Western scholars’ thinking. In the meanwhile, Chinese scholars’ total Westernization is also criticized. Indeed, “foreign master’s slave philosophy” and “everything foreign worshipping” are obstinate since the Qing Dynasty. Even in the 21st century, those values have not completely perished. Kang-i Sun Chang’s direct sharp warning strikes home and deserves our more attention. This author argues what should be praised is to treat Western and Eastern cultures equal and compare them in the equal situation in order to find their similarities and differences. Besides, she points out the root of the problem: on one hand, it is because of the cultural blind spot of “other”—Chinese culture is “other culture” which means it is the opposite of Western culture, or even the marginal culture and not to be taken into consideration; on the other hand, according to some Westerners, traditional China is far away from modern time, so it has nothing to do with “modernity”. Therefore, there is the misconception of the relation between Western and Eastern cultures that Western culture is imported to Eastern counterpart one-way and has an affect on it and there is no bilateral communication.

From her points above, we know that Kang-i Sun Chang advocates Western and eastern cultures should be laid equal stress on and the scholars concerned should have broad perspectives instead of narrow ones that everything is studied from Western point of views. She argues both China and the West have merits and demerits and it is necessary to complement each other. Indeed, Western cultural theories can bring new insights to Chinese literary research. Meanwhile, Chinese literary research also gives new promises to Western criticism. This author thinks her point is scientific and comprehensive. As a Chinese American scholar living long in America, such a perspective is really few and far between.

II. Gender Study in Literature

In the field of gender study, as a female scholar, Kang-i Sun Chang has a particular insight. She shows special concerns and has written a series of essays, such as Feminine Style or Female Consciousness, Extrication or Indulgence—the
Intensive Reading of Gong Zhizhen's Love Poems, The Application and Innovation of Western Gender Theories in Sinology, Traditional Readers' Love Poems Reading Prejudice, What is Double Genders—on the Relationship between the Scholars and Female Poets in the Qing and Ming Dynasty, The Literary "Voice" of Widow Poets, The Diaspora Poetry by the Last Talented Lady of a Dynasty, The Comparison between Liu Shi and Xu Can: Feminine Style and Female Consciousness, and so on. Meanwhile, in her ancient Chinese poetry research works like An Introduction to the Poetry in Six Dynasties, she expounds her ideas systematically in terms of female subjects and techniques of expression. Generally speaking, male scholars' study of literary female figures, the works written by female writers, even the female consciousness, is always wishy-washy, for they do not have similar female characters' the experience, emotions and special feeling. Naturally female scholars have the advantages and their reading is often insightful. (Of course, that is not absolute. For example, Chinese American male scholar Kang Zhengguo with the department of Oriental Studies in Yale University published Coquettishness and Seduction, The Review of Romance, Body and Lust and so on which focus on gender study and make a distinctive study of ancient poetry and female poets' writing. This author holds he is not alone) Making full use of the advantage, Kang-i Sun Chang makes the special research in gender issues of literature, including figures, subjects, techniques of expression and so on. Therefore, she is praised as the best scholar applying feminism to the study of ancient Chinese literature in American academe. In other words, she is a distinctive scholar combining ancient Chinese literature research with social gender study.

Traditional Readers' Love Poems Reading Prejudice is the incarnation of her main perspectives in gender study. Firstly, she advances an argument on the reading of ancient love poetry: generally speaking, the gender of the poet plays a very important role in the understanding of his or her poem. Male poets always express his political experience by composing love poems comparing love to the relationship between the monarch and his subjects because both of them emphasize the constant unreasoning passion and may lead people to desperation and sorrow. Thus, the reading from a political perspective plays the basic role in the poem understanding. (Love poems are changed into political allegorical ones) On the contrary, the love poetry by female poets is mostly far away from politics, so those poems are treated as autobiographical poetry expressing their sincere emotions. Reading the poems, people can sense the poets' experience and feelings. However,
Kang-i Sun Chang thinks it is not absolute. Male poets also have the love poems diffusing their emotions and female poets may make up a figure using poems as their spokesman. We should not view the general as the absolute and go to the extreme. There are many examples in ancient Chinese poetry and in her paper she makes some case studies such as Ruyi Lady by Wu Zetian, The Ode to the Women of Moral Integrity by Zhang Ji, the lyric poems by Zhu Shuzhen etc. It is impressive that she puts forward a new term, “gender mask” which means that male poets make up female voices establishing allegorical esthetics. Superficially, the poet describes the disappointment in love, but in fact his political frustration is expressed. By nature, those poems are political allegorical ones depicting the unfortunate political experience in females’ voice. As for the word “mask”, Kang-i Sun Chang explains: there is an attitude in male writing and reading tradition that love or political poetry is just a “show”. The poets realize the necessary self-dissembling and self-manifestation. The distinctive feature is that by casting a “gender mask” or the objective artistic approach, male poets can get rid of the political pressure. Through a love song in a female’s voice, they may express their political complex publicly and courageously which is deep in mind. To the poets, the phenomenon is “gender leap” or “cross-genders”. This technique of expression is, in fact, created by the great poet Qu Yuan who originally compared love to the relationship between the monarch and subjects in the long poem Lisao. In the first half of the poem, the protagonist pays court to a man as a female; in the second half, the protagonist is changed into a man taking efforts to court a girl. In fact, the shift of genders shows the poet is comparing the love affair to the relationship between the monarch and subjects, which is Qu Yuan’s unprecedented artistic contribution and is the commencement of “cross-genders” in Chinese literature having a great influence on the following literary writing. The examples given by Kang-i Sun Chang are the successors to Qu Yuan’s creation including palace-plaint poetry, boudoir-plaint poetry, deserted lady poetry and so much. Therefore, at the end of her essay, she has the following meaningful words: Literary mode and creation are closely connected with the social context that both genders live in. The metaphorical aesthetics of “male-female and monarch-subject” reflects traditional Chinese male intellectuals’ difficult situation. From thousands of political allegorical poems, we know that many intellectuals’ political situation is of feminization: though they are males, their psychology is like female’s one. In most cases, all the people, from prime minister to common officials, are trying to flatter
one single emperor, which is quite like the case in the emperor's harem. Political allegorical poems are popular in the dynasty lacking the liberty of speech. Therefore, it is safe to say that continuous literary mode of "simulation", no matter "male-female and monarch-subject" or "dressed as opposite sex", is the special product of traditional Chinese culture and history.\[8\]

The remarks above by Kang-i Sun Chang hit the point of traditional Chinese culture and history. That is the penetrating conclusion on the base of her research combining traditional Chinese culture, history, and gender study with literary study. It suits the actual condition of Chinese society and ancient literary creation.

Besides, she also mentions a very interesting phenomenon which can illustrate the nature of Chinese literature. She said that there is an old saying, "Innocence is the virtue for women". It is believed that this saying was coined by males, but perhaps it was first put forward by females, to be specific, the females lacking talent. They made such a remark in order to protect themselves and strike the talented women to maintain their honor and social status. On the contrary, males respected those ladies who had talents and promoted them, giving them relatively high status. Furthermore, the males might even sponsor them to publish the literary works (mainly poems) and made comments and compliments. (That is why there were so many talented female writers with lots of female publications) For Chinese intellectuals, it has been a fashion to praise talented ladies since the ancient time, which can not be matched by the case in any other countries. The emperors in each dynasty appreciated the talented ladies very much and did not treat them unfairly just because of their gender. In the meanwhile, the talented ladies also identified with male culture and composed the works after mastering the gist of male culture. "In short, Chinese culture never excludes females. In reality, the poetry world is the shared field of both genders. This is a gender complement in Chinese literary voice, which I once called cross-voicing in one paper forming a delightful contrast with present-day popular phrase, 'cross-dressing'\[9\]. The phenomenon of gender complement in ancient China (like the harmony of Yin-Yang in traditional Chinese medicine) is the base form of traditional Chinese culture, which is quite different from Western gender war (or gender theory difference). That is why in the West modern female writers stick to feminism strongly and struggle for equal rights and position. On the contrary, Chinese female writers seldom take male scholars as their enemy and rarely feel their rights are threatened by male scholars. Kang-i Sun Chang quotes the point of the harmony of Yin-Yang advanced by a Western
Sinologist who is enlightened by traditional Chinese medicine. By that she illustrates Chinese culture have quite different body and universe outlook, which may cast some light on Western world. Based on that, she puts forward a point deserving our attention: people can compare Chinese “harmony of Yin-Yang” to the relationship between Western and Chinese cultures. Chinese culture and Western one are like male and female or Yin-Yang. Only by making up for each other’s deficiencies can they develop smoothly and one-way communication should be abandoned. Not only in Western America but also in China’s mainland and Taiwan, this one-way misconception exists. According to this writer, her perspective is correct.

Kang-i Sun Chang also finds an interesting phenomenon that in Chinese Ming and Qing dynasties that the male scholars widely formed female hobbies, and female scholars were in the fashion of masculinity. The former is because of their identifying with talented ladies, especially with star-crossed ones. From those unfortunate ladies, they could see their own shadow or the star-crossed ladies’ experience is the duplication of theirs. Thus they were interested in female hobbies and cared about females, which results in the female inclination in their works; the latter is just the expression of artistic and transcendental life style. The talented ladies liked composing poems, playing chess, painting, calligraphy, tea-tasting, flowers cultivating and travelling. They, like male scholars, emphasize spontaneous, casual and participating writing and prefer the natural, non-utilitarian and small-group creation. Kang-i Sun Chang names that “double genders” or “beyond gender”, which is special in the Ming and Qing dynasties and scarce in the West literary field as well (similar phenomena are dressing as a man, female bookworms, untimely death of female scholars and no remarriage). It is noteworthy that she studies the widow poets who lost their husbands early and did not remarry. She argues that before the Ming and Qing dynasties it was male writers’ job to show their sympathy to widows, describe widow images and composing widow poetry (that is the so-called “Inspiring Sensation”). In the Ming and Qing dynasties, things changed. The job was taken by widow poets. They were “sensation inspired” and focused on self-expression with their psychology wide open. They were the most miserable, lonely, wretched and emotional group in the society who understood life quite realistically and whose works are full of hardship and moving. The literary law, “Literary excellence is achieved only after many frustrations”, is proved here. Kang-i Sun Chang calls them “gender adherents” and thinks that they are similar
with male “political adherents”. Those ladies utter different literary voice beyond their gender because of the misery. The voice is unique, but it enriches traditional intellectual culture. Therefore, it is the special contribution to traditional Chinese ancient culture and literature made by those widow poets in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

Frankly speaking, Kang-i Sun Chang’s gender study combining ancient Chinese literature and culture is enlightening to us. It is beneficial to the further understanding of ancient Chinese literature’s intrinsic mechanism, especially to the feminine literature in the Ming and Qing dynasties. Another contribution by her, the systematic interpretation of the relation between Western gender theories and American Sinology, is noteworthy, which is important to the communication between Western and Chinese cultures. The Application and Innovation of Western Gender Theories in Sinology is the masterpiece in this field. At the beginning of the paper, the rise and evolution of Western gender theories are discussed, then the related application in American Sinology is covered, especially in the field of gender “voice”. Consequently, she lists up lots of studies on Western feminism and its relation to Sinology, emphasizing the peculiarity and theoretical significance of gender study. Finally, she concludes,

from the above, we know that the brand new gender perspectives in contemporary disciplines, such as history of literature, history of arts, medicine, anthropology, sociology and so on, are enlightening to traditional Chinese culture research. Especially, the application of gender study in Sinology has challenged traditional text reading. It is noteworthy that more and more scholars have begun taking efforts to do the study on gender relationship. However, we still have a long way to go. If we consider gender theory and traditional Chinese culture as two disciplines related to each other, we should not only study what the relation is, but also realize how the relation becomes part of the culture.\[13\]

Her conclusion clarifies the relation between gender study and Sinology. Furthermore, it points out the future of those two related disciplines, which is beneficial to our understanding of the relation between the two disciplines, mastering the cultural composition between them and promoting the complement concerned.

Notes:

[1] Kang-i Sun Chang, The Challenge of Literary Classics, Baihuazhou Press, 2002, p. 78.
[2] As for the literary classics or classic evolution, there is a chapter, "The Reading of Classics," focusing on it in the book, The Challenge of Literary Classics.

[3] Kang-i Sun Chang, The Challenge of Literary Classics, Baihuazhou Press, 2002, p 2.

[4] Ibid., p. 266.

[5] Ibid., p. 266.

[6] Kang-i Sun Chang, "Gender Study and Globalization from a Comparative Perspective (I)," The Knowledge of Literature and History, vol. 11.

[7] Kang-i Sun Chang, The Challenge of Literary Classics, Baihuazhou Press, 2002, p. 297

[8] Ibid., p.303.

[9] Kang-i Sun Chang, "Gender Study and Globalization from a Comparative Perspective (I)," The Knowledge of Literature and History, vol. 11., pp.74-75.

[10] Kang-i Sun Chang, "Gender Study and Globalization from a Comparative Perspective (II)," The Knowledge of Literature and History, vol. 12.

[11] Kang-i Sun Chang, “What is Double Genders,” in The Challenge of Literary Classics, Baihuazhou Press, 2002.

[12] Ibid..

[13] Kang-i Sun Chang, The Challenge of Literary Classics, Baihuazhou Press, 2002, pp. 265-266.

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