

## Global Gender

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### Abstract

In *Global Woman* (2004) Barbara Ehrenreich has problematized the focus in the 1960s and 70s feminist movement on Western gender issues and changed the emphasis on white, middle-class men and women to their others in terms of race, class and topography. Michel Foucault has also, with his work on *heterotopoi*, uncovered the hidden aspects of modernity, the residual spaces far from centers of power, whose inhabitants have recently found western publishers and audiences and changed Western discussions of gender already begun. Inside and outside China, writers have offered glimpses of rural Chinese heterotopias, and of gendered experiences both in their native China and in the United States. This paper, "Global Gender", focuses on gender issues in recent Chinese and Chinese American fiction and engages with Foucault and other theorists to uncover hidden network of relations, the interdependencies between men and women with and without power that now await attention, or, if global inequalities turn into violence, explosion.

**Keywords** Gender, Globalization, Chinese American literature, Jia Pingwa, heterotopia

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Western activists and feminists can no longer ignore the global inequality Barbara Ehrenreich addresses with *Global Woman* (2004), which prods the underbelly of feminist victories and world-wide globalization. Contributors zoom in on the waste products of first-world privileges, enabled through the invisible lives of a global underclass: sex workers in Thailand, Filipina domestics in Hong Kong, and exploited maids in the United States. But even the authors of *Global Woman* work as cultural ethnographers in the neglected territories of globalization. Men and women residing in or remembering these spaces have begun to write back, with a fiction of their own. Chinese and Chinese American writers especially have called attention to the bloody 20th Century in their native country and its impact on men and women. Their subject matter includes The Great Leap Forward (1958-60), when Mao boosted domestic industrialization, with starvation and millions of deaths as a result. They further seek to break historical amnesia by narrating The Cultural Revolution (1966-76), when student Red Guards destroyed most of China's cultural heritage and persecuted so-called counter-revolutionaries. Also the silenced June 4, 1989, Tiananmen Square massacre on student protesters returns in contemporary Chinese American fiction, along with the costs of speedy urbanization in post-Maoist China, paid by migrant workers and impoverished peasants. The Xian-based writer Jia Pingwa has offered glimpses of gendered lives in remote Chinese villages, while Ha Jin and Yiyun Li relate gendered experiences both in China and in the United States. In this article, I argue that these writers enhance Western investigative journalism and fiction by offering new perspectives on global migration, enslavement, and gender arrangements untouched by first-world feminism and activism. Rural Chinese women may inhabit recent Chinese fiction, but they do not own their stories, or their destinies.<sup>1</sup> The Chinese and Chinese American authors explore the hidden aspects of modernity, the spaces far from centers of power where underprivileged laborers make possible Western two-career families and middle-class economies.

The drastic changes in women's roles and perspectives began in the West, where feminist authors and activists protested existing gender roles with bestsellers such as *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1971) by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective and *Fear of Flying* (1973) by Erica Jong. In France, psychoanalytically trained femi-

nists such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous theorized a new language intended to articulate feminine bodies and experiences outside of “phallogocentric” linguistic orders. Cixous associated feminine sexuality and marginality with Africa as a “dark continent.” In her influential essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1975), Cixous allies herself with blackness and flees to Africa, where non-Western practices and sexualities might fare better, though this destination implicitly suggests her alliance with colonial traditions. Like 19<sup>th</sup>-century explorers, she enters a dark continent, the Other of Western civilization, and inspects its horrors, which she colonizes to destabilize conventional gender structures. Her linking of Europe and Africa nonetheless suggests the interrelatedness of spaces that Michel Foucault theorized in his speech “Of Other Spaces” (“Des Espace Autres”, 1967). His theoretical framework helps explain the often forgotten connection between invisible men and women in the East and middle-class life styles in the West. Foucault points to the interconnectedness of spaces in a global world and to the power differentials between those left behind by modernity, residing in the waste sites of globalization, and those prospering from global economies, whose privileges the residents of developing countries sustain.

Foucault states in “Of Other Spaces” that place is defined by close relations and networks. In stressing the relation of one location to others, Foucault moves on to spaces he labels utopias and heterotopias. Like Cixous’s “Africa”, utopias interact with social realities, but they “present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces” (Foucault 1967, 1). Foucault’s heterotopias exist, however, as a liminal space between reality and utopia that breaks down binary oppositions of this kind. Foucault maps this space through a mirror, “a placeless place” like utopia, but still with material form (Foucault 1967, 4). His heterotopias hide behind the mirror, or in the cracks of social and psychological configurations. These places sprout on the margins of spheres of production, where those without power reside. André Ourednik explains that Foucault’s heterotopias are “cemeteries, brothels, prisons, boats, psychiatric hospitals... places inhabited by those who’ve either been excluded from society, or are no longer its members (being dead), or

further by those who choose to step outside, in order to engage in 'hidden' practices" (Ourednik 2012).

Heterotopias negate or deny normative social arrangements. They exist in darkness, ignored by those who rely on their existence but fail to acknowledge them. Ourednik calls heterotopia "modern territory's little secret, as foul as Guantanamo, as dark as Fritzel's cellar, as tense as the Korean DMZ, as old as Mount Athos, as well-guarded as the bank vaults of tax heavens." These sites appear as "what is left behind, or at best spared, by the integrating process of modernity. They are left-overs. Remnants. Residual spaces, where diverging realities survive, even grow perhaps, but mostly stall, like algae in a river shoal" (Ourednik 2012). His list might be continued with the impoverished black bodies floating in post-Katrina New Orleans, the textile workers burning in decrepit Bangladesh factories, or the Chinese peasants populating the fiction of Jia Pingwa.

Jia Pingwa writes in Chinese script about his native Shaanxi province. Born in 1952, Jia grew up in the village of Dihua in Danfeng county of Shangzhou prefecture in southern Shaanxi, his impoverished extended family working the land. His family split into several households, and Jia ascribes his poor health to the starvation and malnutrition of his early years. During the Cultural Revolution, Jia's father was labeled a counter-revolutionary and lost all income. His mother, whom no one ever addressed by name, raised four children in her husband's absence and taught them the meaning of endurance. Critics ascribe the bond between Jia and his native place, and his self-identification as a peasant writer, to the resolution of his parents, and the hardship and suffering of his childhood and youth (Wang 2006, 29-34).

Jia devotes his literary production to the Shaanxi peasants far from centers of power, information and educational opportunities, who, like himself, began life in a Foucauldian heterotopia, where hunger, invisibility, violence and hard work determine rural lives. He differs from contemporary Chinese *literati* by retaining close ties to his native place, isolating himself from foreign influence and retaining his regional dialect. Despite his local fame and prolific output, few of his works have been translated into English. The English-language edition of his novel *Turbulence* (1988) won him the American Pegasus Prize and his status in Chinese literary circles. His novel *The Abandoned Capital* (1993), about displaced peasants

and dysfunctional intellectuals, sold six million copies within six months and caused a major scandal due to the explicit sexuality of its characters. The Chinese government banned the book from 1994, following debates about its cultural configurations of China and its response to modernity. Set in a thinly veiled Xi'an, *The Abandoned Capital* is currently being translated into English by local Northwest University faculty members.

The scandal ended the first part of Jia's career, which had begun in the early 1980s with a series of stories set in his native Shangzhou region. These ten novellas, published in 1985, draw on local folklore and myth in making visible the lives of villagers in a "residual" location untouched by modernity, far removed from provincial urbanity or Southeastern affluence. "The Country Wife" or "Darky" explores the lives of rural Shaanxi men and women on the lowest rung of social ladders in the People's Republic of China.

In modern Chinese fiction, peasants function as "reservoirs" of "backwardness," the left-overs of Chinese industrialization and modernization. Yi-tsi Feuerwerker explains this phenomenon with the dichotomy between the scholar-gentry class and the people, objectified and reduced by intellectuals to the "Other" in the modern Chinese imaginary (Feuerwerker 1998, 11). But Jia collapses this dichotomy by writing from within a peasant self, where the bifurcation between peasant and writer represents a crisis of allegiance, or of identity. In the postscript to his novel *Earth Gate* (1996), which records the destruction of a village community, Jia defends rural folk against urban ridicule: "People from the countryside have to work hard so that they have limited outside experience and they look rough and unrefined. After being in the city for more than twenty years, I'm still often laughed at by city folk" (Wang 2006, 147-48). Jia aligns himself with the peasants of "The Country Wife," and he protests the injustice they meet in contemporary Chinese society, where an urban registration card leads to opportunity, even affluence. In his fictional return to the countryside, he tries to recuperate the loss of valuable Chinese cultural traditions, which he locates in peasant ancestry and folklore. He promotes traditional culture and a sense of the past, which modern Chinese literature, and society, cannot do without. The men and women in the novella are imprisoned in Foucault's heterotopia, but they disrupt the center from its ideological and regional margin. They inhabit "the native place," an ideological

site essential to the Chinese nation and the narratives on which it relies. Darky, the title figure, does not speak much, but her life erupts from the bottom of national hierarchies and may destroy, or save, the nation. This project is also Jia's own. In rebuilding modern Chinese literature from its roots, he hopes to give China back to itself, after a violent century of cultural loss and destruction.

Social arrangements in China have undergone tumultuous changes since the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912, but notions of gender and sexuality in contemporary China go back to the imperial past. The link between loyalty to the government and loyalty to the family remains strong. The Qing government promoted Confucianism as the predominant ideological structure, according to which a woman's fidelity to her husband and his kin was inextricably tied to her pledge of allegiance to the government. The maxim of producing a son to continue the family line bound her to familial and reproductive roles, and the Qing rule sought ruthlessly to anchor male subjects in family arrangements suited to socialize males into obedient subjects. During the Maoist period (1949-76), women were called to be "just like men" and their domestic roles attacked, but Susan Mann contends in *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Chinese History* that urban and rural women carried double burdens of work and reproductive/familial roles just the same (Mann 2011, 188). Besides, over the twentieth century, opportunities for female employment did not accelerate at a Western pace, since industrialization outside urban centers such as Shanghai did not take off until the post-Maoist era. The Chinese Communist Party has left the family system intact, and women have been urged to withdraw from the workforce to return to traditional domesticity. The household registration system (*hukou*) assigns each Chinese individual to a household unit, and independent single womanhood remains rare, and ostracized, as Leta Hong Fisher argues in *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (2014). In 2005 only 0.2 % of women aged sixty-five and older had never been married, the percentage of never-married men in the same age group only slightly higher at 2.9 % (Feng and Xiao, qtd. in Mann 2011, 188). New ideas about sexuality and marriage may point towards individual choice and self-determination, but the pull of parents, in-laws, community and state ensures the preservation of traditional roles for rural and urban women in China.

Gender dominates Darky's life and determines the structure of Jia's story. His title is gender-marked, and the opening of "The Country Wife" makes shockingly clear that Jia's protagonist lives at the bottom of Chinese society:

Darky was older than her husband. She did all the work at home. She fed the pigs, rounded up the sheep and went to Black Cliffs to cut and collect firewood. When evening came, her small husband would pester her. He was a short, monkey-like man, but well read. He would use all the tricks he had learned from books to fuck her. It made Darky angry. She came to hate him. At night she was tempted to bump him down from her. [Pingwa 1985, 89]

Flat on her back, her husband crying out names of other women and her father-in-law scolding her from the other-wing room, Darky has only one way to go: up. Her husband and his father grow rich from graft, but even in the family's new house, Darky does all the cooking, cleaning, feeding, field work and sweeping. Her husband now complains of her gluttony and her looks: "He called her 'Black Soy Bean,' for she developed a darker face with her slender body" (Pingwa 1985, 96). Jia's sympathy ensures that Darky now seizes the power of the peasant. When her husband threatens her with a knife, she throws him on the kang, the brick bed where he has violated and humiliated her, "as if it were a manure basket." Her words indicate a new arrangement: "I'm showing you my strength" (Pingwa 1985, 96). Though Darky gets a divorce only because her husband finds a lover with a "foxy" face even Darky admires (Pingwa 1985, 102), her submissiveness has disappeared. Jia sets his peasant woman on a new path.

Newly returned to the village and settled in a cowshed used by the production team, Darky dismisses financial support from her ex-husband, a bed in her parents' home, and her brother's laments. She cultivates her assigned field and becomes a jack-of-all-trades farm worker. She develops a feminist consciousness: "Previously she had thought that without a man, a woman was like a vine that had no big tree to lean on, or a kite without a string. Now it seemed that a woman was also human and could live vigorously" (Pingwa 1985, 105). In a traditional Chinese village, however, community

pressure enters both Darky's mind and her home. As the autumn rain falls, her vigor withers and her mood turns gloomy. Isolated in the outskirts of the village, her hands idle, she finds her present life "wretched and miserable" (Pingwa 1985, 197), with no relief from sorrow, loneliness and anxiety. She fears ghosts and intruders. Ten days later, a matchmaker arrives, and only the choice between Lai Shun and Mu Dan as future husbands suggests a trace of Darky's self-determination and feminist independence.

Both men and women inhabit a Foucauldian heterotopia in the Shaanxi countryside, with limited choices and survival paramount. Mu Du offers 350 RMB and Lai Shun only 300, so Darky goes to the highest bidder, though Mu Du himself works hard for few rewards: "He went to the fields and dug the ground hard, stripped to the waist, with sweat twisting like earthworms down his dusty back. Or he would carry Chinese alpine rush or charcoal on his shoulder pole deep into the mountains. He would trudge the saw-toothed, rugged mountain ridges, black all over, eyeballs wide. . . ." (Pingwa 1985, 114). Soon he disappears into the coal mines of Tong Guan, an underground world echoing Chinese mining disasters and workers buried alive. This mine epitomizes the residual lives and spaces of heterotopia, where the costs of globalization and industrialization appear with overworked bodies and needless deaths. Mu Du returns looking like "a ghost or a devil, as the rough pores of his face were inlaid with coal dust that could not be cleaned by water" (Pingwa 1985, 125). His nightly conversations with Darky reveal the horrors underground, with pits caving in and a rock falling on his workmate, crushing him to death: "the blood burst out from his head like spurting water" (Pingwa 1985, 126). The lives of Darky, the darkened Mu Dan and the crushed worker merge in Jia's story—the work, their coarse bodies, skin color and water imagery establishing their bond. Also Mu Dan's hunchbacked father suggests twisted Chinese work and gender arrangements. In the moonlit night, "the hunchbacked dad helped her in the fields. At his great age, he became so worn out that he coughed blood and had to lie down" (Pingwa 1985, 118). As Darky's responsibility, he adds to her load.

Only the kindness of Lai Shun, who discreetly begins courting Darky in Mu Du's absence, offers relief from her work and worries. Lai Shun's behavior inspires an authorial comment indicating a residual traditionalism:

A woman is blessed with a tender sense of pity and she is pleased by fondness and adoration from men, whose understanding actions or considerate words often win her gratitude. If men, on the contrary, act aggressively, like rascals, that woman's gratitude will soon vanish. But clever men pretend to be wronged and humiliated. Then a woman's tenderness will become as deep as the sea that overflows everywhere. (Pingwa 1985, 124)

Jia's narrative intervention originates in classic *yin* and *yang* discourses about sexual difference, which delegates to men activity, vigor and strength and, to women, complementary traits such as passivity, weakness and receptivity (Mann 2011, 192). This biological binary blocks an emerging feminist narrative with generalizations and gender stereotypes. In the Chinese countryside, and in Xian, a woman equals nature, as the overflowing sea and her tenderness become aligned. Only in her erotic wetness, the fluids flowing through and in her body, might Darky resemble the heroine of feminist fictions. This aspect of Jia's writings became so controversial that his career and reputation plummeted. Too far along the road to individuality and autonomy, his heroine threatens Chinese harmony and nation-building.

Darky's sexuality intensifies as she rises socially. She becomes a restaurant owner, her ample breasts attracting many evening customers. She discovers with the frail Lai Shun forbidden pleasures, as when "naturally and unconsciously, Lai Shun took Darky's hands, licked them with his soft tongue and bit them gently with his teeth" (Pingwa 1985, 132-33). Meanwhile, her strong husband works like an ox and, oblivious to Darky's yearnings, falls asleep at night on the kang. Jia here engages in a gender bending project, in that Darky prefers the feminized Lai Shun to her strong and active husband, while she herself takes on masculine traits, both in her business and in her love life. Darky and Lai Shun elope and thereby increase not only their own but also their author's difficulties: they have nowhere to go in the Chinese countryside or in Chinese moral and political landscapes. In a hamlet deep in the mountains, villagers find a naked couple in an abandoned shed, bound with rope. They gawk at the unfortunates, untie them, tip a pail of cold water over the two from head to toe, and let them loose. Jia does not name the

couple, but the man helps and supports his companion and tells her to run, or the chilly air will sink into her bones. With a sweet-tempered “green man”, who echoes the masculine ideal of the Women’s Liberation Movement, Jia sends his female protagonist off into the night, since Darky’s new identity and destiny have yet to be invented: “Raising her head, the woman was encouraged to run, although she did not know how long was the road ahead or what waited at its end, bitterness or sweetness, sorrow or happiness” (Pingwa 1985, 142). Like a feminist heroine in the fiction of Erica Jong or Mary French, who in the final pages might move into a woman’s commune, buy a vibrator, or walk the beach alone, Jia’s country woman wins an uneasy freedom, and plenty of uncertainty. Unlike her feminist sisters in the West, however, she still needs her man, the inoffensive Lai Shun taking the lead. In a society where unmarried women quickly become “faded flowers”, a Chinese woman alone cannot yet be imagined (Mann 2011, 195). Ultimately, Jia Pingwa gives his country wife a story, not a destiny of her own. But she survives, no mean feat in Foucault’s heterotopia.

Other Chinese (Americans) writers have also begun exploring left-behind or silenced spaces in China, though they can be introduced only briefly here. Ha Jin, who chose exile in the US after the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, situates his writings in China, in the US, or in the global topographies they inhabit. In *Nanjing Requiem* (2011), he zooms in on the place of terror where the Japanese Central Expeditionary Forces in 1937 committed the atrocities the novel recounts. Jin snatches the body of an American missionary, Minnie Vautrin, to tell his story, which, like the college itself, becomes a safety zone, where Jin investigates hybrid constellations of gender and culture. In *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (2006), Yiyun Li asks herself in relation to the executions and horrors of the Cultural Revolution: “What Has That to Do with Me”? She explores in this final essay the links between herself and the brave, incarcerated women who were mutilated and executed while she as a bored five-year-old kindergartener watched. She realizes that only her writings can establish the link between herself and the men and women who spoke out and rebelled in the past. Especially the women in prisons, on the scaffold, in battle, or the mythic heroines of Chinese folk tales help her reinvent a place for herself in Chinese and in American cultures, as in other works devoted

to Chinese heterotopias, such as *The Vagrants* (2009), and, most recently, *Kinder than Solitude* (2014).

Yiyun Li joins the projects of Jia Pingwa and Ha Jin in breaking the silence about global horrors and giving its victims and survivors if not their own voice, then at least the visibility they deserve. The work of Chinese and Chinese American writers supplements and enhances, rather than replaces, the explorations of Barbara Ehrenreich and others into global migration, exploitation, and modern slavery. With journalists, sociologists and writers reaching from East to West and back to investigate global gender, those caught up in Foucauldian *heterotopoi*, whether in rural obscurity, historical silence, isolated prisons or Shenzhen factories, may now appear on Western radars. As Ehrenreich writes, the essential first step involves bringing “the world’s most invisible women into the light” (Ehrenreich 2014, 13). Jia Pingwa, Ha Jin and Yiyun Li also focus on female protagonists, but the men with whom they live and work enter their stories and help them survive. The literary and cultural encounters between East and West, between feminists and activists in both locations, may ultimately promote equality and visibility to the men and women struggling in a globalized world.

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## Notes

- 1 See, for example, Brook Larmer, "The Price of Marriage in China," *New York Times* (March 8, 2013), [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/10/business/in-a-changing-china-new-matchmaking-markets.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/10/business/in-a-changing-china-new-matchmaking-markets.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) and Leta Hong Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (London: Zed Books, 2014).