

# Daoism and Feminism: Identity through Life Stories of Chinese Immigrant Women

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Teaching gender equity in multicultural teacher education classes in the United States of America for the past decade, I have encountered unexpected strong resistance. The few male students were usually the loudest. They argued “Those feminists are more equal than us now. What else do they want?” The majority of the female students concurred with their male counterparts and claimed they had never been discriminated against in America, nobody forced them to be teachers, and it was the male teachers who were discriminated against in the teaching profession. Both sides often agreed that feminists should go to China to save the Chinese girls from infanticide, orphanage, and foot binding. They were strongly aware of my ethnic and gender identity as they perceived.

The curriculum meanings in these questions are at least three folded. First, the male students considered feminist, however they defined it, as the Other, and resented the feminist interpretation of the reality. Second, the female students have taken for granted the positive results of our first-and second-wave feminist movements, and “falsified” their self-identities (Greene, 1978). Thirdly, both have stereotyped Chinese women. These questions raised in my teacher education classes in the U.S context also reflect a nationally and internationally conservative trend moving away from feminist identities observed by Oleson (2005). Such a pendulum swing, Oleson pointed out, has “substantial potential to shape women’s and men’s lives” (p. 235). What makes a feminist? Does a feminist cause benefit the second sex at the expense of the first? Can Chinese women be feminists? If so, how would they look like? How would they live their lives? What would their lives mean in an international context and at the current historical moment?

These questions took me on a journey of a narrative inquiry about the feminist identity of five Chinese-Canadian women, including myself, through our cross-cultural life experiences. “Since feminist theory is grounded in women’s lives and aims to analyze the role and meaning of gender in those lives and in society, women’s personal narratives are essential primary documents for feminist research” (Personal Narrative Group, 1989, 4). Narrative inquiry is “the study of how humans make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future.” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, 24) It is “stories lived and told” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, 20). In the past two decades,



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narrative inquiry has been developed into a powerful methodology for cross-cultural women immigrant studies through lives of teachers and students (Conle, 1993; Conle, et al, 2000; Conle, et al, 2007; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2001a, 2001b; Elbaz-Luwisch et al, 2004; Elbaz-Luwisch & Pritzker, 2002; Li, 2009, 2007, 2006, 2005, 2002; Li, Conle, & Elbaz-Luwisch, 2009).

Narrative inquiry research consists of two phases: Composing field texts and composing research text (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Field text composition relies on life experiences and entails a variety of ways to collect the resources, such as autobiographical and biographical writing, journaling, interviews, letters, conversation, family stories, and so on. Research text composition is considered as a process to analyze and interpret field text through various ways, such as looking for metaphor, narrative tension and thread, experimenting with form, and exploring voice, signature, and audience. The narrative field texts in this study were prepared through autobiographical writing, journaling, interview, life story sharing, field observation between 1993-1997 in Canada with five Chinese-Canadian women, including myself. For the current inquiry, I revisited the field texts, and inquired about our cross-cultural gendered experiences. As a life historian, I will present such gender identity through women's life stories. As a Chinese woman writing about Chinese women, I will construct the inquiry in a Daoist<sup>2</sup> frame of Feminism.

### The Daoist Frame of Feminism

Daoism is considered by most scholars in the field as the indigenous organized religion of China. It includes its philosophical foundations, health practices, social political visions, rituals, priestly hierarchies, protective talismans and exorcistic spells, spiritual medications and ecstatic soul travels to the stars, and so on. Beginning with the works of Laozi and Zhuangzi around 400-600 B.C.E., Daoism went through several stages of organization and development and is still evolving in China today.

Historically, Daoism is largely considered as a “religion of people” in contrast to Confucianism, which has been adopted by many rulers of the China to be the state religion. During Mao's era, Daoism was considered as a religion of withdrawal and self-defeat, contrary to Mao's philosophy of class struggle to eliminate different political and ideological differences. Daoism was thus eradicated from official narrative. My inquiry about Daoism began in the late 1980's in Canada through studies of life experiences of Chinese immigrant women. The void of Daoism in China's official narrative during Mao's era did not reflect common people's life experiences at the time. Instead, Daoist thinking and ways of living played a pivotal role in the lives of survivors of the horrendous social vicissitudes and natural catastrophes (Li, 1991, 1998, 2002).

The study of Daoism so far, Kohn (2004) explicates, can be described as having been approached from four major angles: 1) philosophy—the study of the ancient texts *Daode jing* and *Zhuangzi* and their commentaries as well as the analysis of later Daoist texts from the viewpoint of philosophy or comparative mysticism; 2) history and literature; 3) ritual, and 4) practices and techniques. I study Daoism philosophically as in Kohn's first category. Thus Daoism in this article refers to the indigenous Chinese religion as a whole and my focus of study is on its philosophical foundations of *Daode jing*.

*Daode jing*, which is believed to be written by Laozi between 4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C., is considered as the foundational classic of Daoism taken broadly to include all forms of Daoist thought and practice. Inasmuch as Daoism forms a pillar of Chinese culture, the influence of the



*Daode jing* is pervasive. The sheer number of commentaries devoted to the classic—some 700, according to one count, of which about 350 are extant (W.T.Chan, 1963,77)—is itself a telling indication of its enduring popularity and hermeneutical openness (Chan, 2004, p. 1). Outside of China, *Daode jing* is the most translated work in world literature, next to the Bible (Mair 1990, xi).

In Daoism, femininity is a concept, not a synonym of women or female. Nor is masculinity a synonym of men or male. Not one woman could or should be reduced to a pure concept of femininity; nor a man masculinity. *Daode jing*<sup>3</sup> challenges the patriarchalism prevalent in ancient Chinese society. It defied the dominating masculine outlook of strength, achievement, and power (as in Chapters 6, 10, 61), and ridiculed attempts to achieve such (as in Chapters 2, 3, 8, 12, 13, 19, 20). From this standpoint, many scholars considered possibilities of construe *Daode jing* as being sympathetic to the feminist cause in general, and sought to address and deal with the oppression and subjugation of women. However, to say that Daoism endorses femininity and abandons masculinity is to take it out of the context of the overall Daoist thinking. Lai (2000) analyzed this ancient text as resources for contemporary feminist thinking, and suggested that femininity and masculinity are non-reducible to each other and must remain distinct. More importantly, Lai cautioned us that 1) femininity and masculinity in *Daodejing* are not mutually exclusive, but interdependent concepts; 2) femininity and masculinity are not static but dynamic concepts. I concur with Lai in his interpretation of Laozi's<sup>4</sup> distinctive, interdependent, and dynamic concepts about femininity and masculinity, and shall construct the life stories of the five Chinese immigrant women accordingly.

### **Daoist Masculinity of Strength, Achievement, and Power**

We---the five Chinese immigrant women ---revealed distinctive masculine characteristics in our ways of living. Our strength, achievement, and power were most noticeable in the process of immigration. We came to Canada in the later 1980s and early 1990s for a variety of reasons. Four of us were the pioneers in the family to take responsibilities as well as the risk to come to a strange county for a better life. Linda was the fifth one, who arrived in Canada two months after her husband. She traveled with their daughter, and he brought his daughter from a previous marriage. The foursome traveled separately to avoid suspicion of not returning to China. However, waiting for her in Canada was more than her husband and stepdaughter, but her husband's mistress, who was pregnant with his child and living under the same roof as one family. Although she was not the pioneer to bring her entire family over to a new country, she was courageous to go through a divorce in a country where she could not speak neither of its two official languages, nor did she have a job or any financial means to support herself. She did not even have a bank account under her own name.

Our educational backgrounds varied, four of us had received college education and professional training in China. I was a university professor, Jenning a fashion designer, Yiping an engineer, and Dr. Liu a pediatrician. Linda was again the only one who was a high school graduate during the Cultural Revolution, which means her literacy was gained through reading Mao's works, and no math nor any other subject content competences. She succeeded in real estate development in 1980s when the Chinese government began to allow private business and property ownership. Along with her success in the real estate development, came money and power, no less than the rest of us had achieved in the society at the time. All five of us were



brought up in families where mothers worked outside of the house, and daughters were encouraged to be independent.

Independent women like the five Chinese women immigrants in my research were not the exception but the norm in China since 1949—the beginning of the People’s Republic of China when the Communist Party-led government came to power. Having committed unforgivable crimes to the Chinese people, the culture and humanity, Mao has done one thing, I believe, that could be viewed as progressive: outlawed the practice of polygamy, concubine, and prostitution and made it possible that most women joined the workforce outside of their home. No more house wives, stay-at-home wives or moms. Women became workers, peasants, office clerks, teachers, nurses, doctors, mathematicians, scientists, engineers, government officials, peasants, army officers, navy, Marine Corps and air force officers, professors, politicians, and the vice-chairman of the country (not a chairman or president yet).

Such nation-wide change empowered women economically and psychologically. Of course, culture does not change overnight. There was and still is inequality at work, and more of inequality at home outside of the public eye as we observed in our life experiences. Wife-abuse was and still is considered private matters. After the entire days’ work and having brought home the same or similar income, many women were/are pressured to fulfilled the Confucian traditional of Three Obeys: Obey father before she is married; husband during marriage; and adult son after husband dies. Taking care of her male family members’ daily needs, both physical and emotional, can be overwhelming, especially at the pre-modern technology time when housework was done more manually. Stay-at-home type of womanhood may be appealing for some, although not an option at the time. But with the income they contributed to the family, the expertise gained at work, and the social network established through work, Chinese women were much better off than not to have the economic independence.

Slowly, things changed, men learned, and culture evolved. By late 1980s when the five of us left China, more gender equality seemed to have achieved in the society on the whole. Men and women were fulfilling more and more of the stereotypically opposite gender roles.

None of us had our feet bound, nor did our mothers, because foot-binding was officially banned for the last time in 1911 when the Republic of China came to power. The first time foot-binding was officially outlawed was in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by the first emperor of the Qing dynasty (1616-1627 A.D.). The Emperor did not suddenly become a feminist or cared about women. As a conqueror, he simply did not care about the Chinese culture, which, like all cultures, has its share of oppression. Foot-binding was one of the extremes. It was practiced for about one thousand years starting from the last Emperor of Tang dynasty (904-907 A.D.). When the People’s Republic of China came to power in 1949, foot-binding had become history, and women with bound-feet were rarely seen, except in very remote rural areas.

Dr. Liu and Yiping were born before 1949, and their mothers grew up after foot-binding was officially banned for the last time in Chinese history. Jennings, Linda, and I were born after 1949, our mothers were not allowed to have their feet bound. Most of our grandmothers had started the painful process of foot-binding, but did not finish it. They had their feet bound to various degrees depending on the time and place of their childhood. The earlier in time and more isolated place, the more complete the foot-binding was. My grandmother, who was born around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had her feet bound for a few months and later unbound because foot-binding practice became less and less popular.

Growing up in the aforementioned historical times, all of the five of us Chinese immigrant women in this study enjoyed having “big feet,” and were repeatedly reminded by our



mothers and grandmothers of our good fortune. Along with the big feet came the big wide flat shoes, pants, sports, and competition. We were expected to “hold up half of the sky” as one of Mao’s slogan goes. At school, I participated and won competitions in 60 meter and later 100 meter sprints, table tennis, and mathematics, as well as singing and dancing contests. Jennings’s volleyball and basketball teams won champions at levels ranging from school, district, municipality to province. She auditioned to act main characters in various plays and won award for one of her performances at the municipal level. She excelled in meteorology study as well as fashion design. Both Yiping and Dr. Liu played softball and tennis on their school teams. Yiping excelled in engineer, specialized in railroad designing and building. Dr. Liu was good with medicine, specialized in pediatrics. They both sang in school choirs and Yiping also danced in her school’s Chinese folk dance club. In our minds, males had no superiority over females for school subjects or extra-curricula activities. We only heard about such division after we came to Canada.

Linda experienced “big feet” differently. Growing up in rural China as the eldest of six sisters, having big feet meant being able to help not only around the house, but also in the fields. At age four, she was already carrying her baby sister on her back, and picking up fallen wheat grains after her mother at harvest time. By seven, she climbed trees to collect firewood while one of her younger sister picked them up and gathered them together on the ground and the other one sitting beside the piles of firewood, watching. At 10, she carried buckets of water from the village well, dug out potatoes from the field, and stood up on a stool to cook for the family while keeping an eye on her three younger sisters. She went to school at 16 when the curriculum was Mao’s book and school hours reduced to half day. For the rest of the day, she worked side by side in the field with her parents and the rest of commune members, ploughing, hoeing, weeding, fertilizing, and harvesting. For that she made one-third of what her father and half of what her mother made to compensate the family. She had more physical mobility to work in the field by having big feet. Had there been no capitalization in China’s economic policy, she would have been married out to another peasant’s family and repeat all over again.

The national policy change to a more open economy provided her with opportunity for social mobility. The self-confidence she gained working with adults, the endurance she obtained from carrying her baby sister from age four, the determination acquired from climbing trees from seven, and multi-tasking ability through cooking and watching kids at 10, all came handy at her disposal. She went into real estate development, worked with men and women, and succeeded. For her, being a “big feet” female was no different from being a male in terms of limit. Well, until she came to Canada to find herself having to live under the same roof with her husband and his mistress, to find herself so powerless as an immigrant women without the language, a job, a bank account under her name, or a man on her side. That was when she learned a valuable life’s lesson: “We women need to help each other.”

### **The Daoist Femininity of Modest, Nurturing and Caring**

The highest good is like water,  
Benefiting the myriad creatures,  
Claiming the lowest position loathed by others.  
Therefore,  
It is near to the Dao.

—Chapter 8, *Daodejing*, Translated by Xin Li



The qualities of being modest, nurturing, and caring in the Daoist metaphor of water have been considered by many as feminine. As strong, high-achieving, and powerful as the five Chinese immigrant women in this study were, we were also modest, nurturing, and caring. We took the modest role of mothering, and dedicated to the most underpaid domestic work. We cooked, sewed, knitted, embroidered, washed, swept, shopped, listened, consoled, and cared. We raised children. Nurturing a fetus through our flesh and blood, we experienced unique pleasure and pain, and life's cycle. Raising children with our hands, hearts, and brains, we underwent vigor and exhaustion, comforts and aches, satisfaction and challenge, and unconditional devotion. We consider raising children as our ultimate femininity. We were always ready to nourish, no matter how gossamer, unsubstantial, and ordinary as we were. The Daoist water metaphor was with us, and was us. We did not kill nor desert infant daughters, because we were daughters ourselves, and we did not reject our femininity.

As a predominantly agrarian country, China has a long cultural tradition of marrying daughters out. Without social support, sons were the parents' best, in most cases, and only old-age pension. Daughters married out and became part of her husband's family and her in-law's pension. Therefore, when parents had only daughters, their old-age pension is threatened. In addition, most of China's dynasties had adopted Confucian thoughts to maintain its social order, which placed women at the very bottom of the hierarchy. Female infanticide occurred.

The practice of infanticide was largely forsaken in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s due to the ruthless government enforcement of law. The phenomenon of missing female infants showed a sharp upward trend in the 1980s, linked to the "one-child policy" introduced by the government in 1979 (three years after Mao's death) to control the spiraling population growth. The Chinese government has taken some energetic steps to combat the practice of female infanticide and sex-selective abortion of female fetuses. It has employed the Marriage Law and Women's Protection Law which both prohibit female infanticide. The Women's Protection Law also prohibits discrimination against women who give birth to female babies. The Maternal Health Care Law of 1994 strictly prohibits the use of technology to identify the gender of a fetus. However, although the government has outlawed the use of ultrasound machines, physicians continue to use them to determine the gender of fetuses, especially in rural areas .

In recent years, the Chinese government modified its one-child policy to allow people in the rural area to have a second child if their first is a daughter. It is also reported that the government is now considering further loosening up the policy because of its booming economy and the pressure to improve its human rights record from the international community. China's ruthless one-child policy has benefited both China and the world economically and environmentally at the expense of lives of females.

The five Chinese immigrant women in this article were all born before the one-child policy became in effect. So we all have siblings. All but one is from the urban areas, where our parents receive pension from the state. And most importantly, we are all against female infanticide. Linda is the only one from the rural area. After she was married, she learned that her husband had hidden from her a daughter from his first marriage and left the child with the grandmother. Immediately, Linda adopted the stepdaughter and brought her home from the aging grandmother's hands, and raised her. There are many people like Linda in China. They would rather risk their old-age pension than killing a female child. We did not reject femininity.



The goodness of the valley never dies;  
That is the mystery of femininity.  
The entry to the mysterious femininity  
Is the root of Heaven and Earth;  
It appears insubstantial,  
But forever inexhaustible.

—*Daodejing*, Chapter 6, translated by Xin Li

### **Interdependent and Dynamics between Masculinity and Femininity**

“Know masculinity,  
Maintain femininity,  
And be a valley for all under Heaven.  
By being a Valley for all under Heaven,  
Eternal integrity will never desert you.

—*Daodejing*, Chapter 28, Translated by Xin Li

Knowing how to be strong and competitive, we maintained our caring, nurturing, and modest femininity. Such distinctive and inclusive understanding of femininity and masculinity provided us with resilience. We survived and lived through extreme social vicissitudes; and we bounced back and grew stronger through major interruptions imposed on our lives in man’s life cycle (Gilligan, 1979/1994).

Doctor Liu’s life was interrupted several times before, during, and after the Chinese Cultural Revolution. In Mao’s Anti-Rightist Campaign<sup>5</sup> in the late 1950s she was forced to divorce her husband, who was accused of Rightist thoughts and speeches. As the ex-wife of a Rightist, she was sent by the government to work in a remote mountain area in order to have the influence of her husband cleansed. Embracing her lowest social position—the opposite of the powerful, she volunteered her expertise as a doctor. Under the basic medical conditions there, she learned to solve problems not only for children, but also for adults; not only in Western medicine, but also in Chinese medicine. With the passing of Mao came the end of the Cultural Revolution. Dr. Liu’s medical practice was officially restored. because of her unofficial involvement in medicine on the reform camp, she bounced back quickly and easily. Soon her medical expertise surpassed many of her colleagues and she was promoted to be the director of the pediatric department.

Yiping took an early retirement from her engineer position in a Railroad Research Institute. Born in Indonesia, she came back to China in the late 1950s. As a hot-blooded teenager full of socialist ideals, she was coming to make her contributions to her motherland. Despite her culture shock and the Big Famine era in the early 1960s when millions died of starvation, she did not give up her faith. She was among the first to leave her Railroad Research Institute and newborn son for camps set up deep in the mountains on the railroad construction sites. “Research should serve the practice of railroad construction; researchers should understand the real life of construction workers.” She took this call from the government sincerely and practiced it enthusiastically. She was deeply disturbed at the sight of lives in the communes around the railroad construction area. Her faith was challenged and her naiveté was questioned. Identifying with the most deprived people in society, she visited commune members, helped them clean up water, take care of children, and collect firewood. She was unexpectedly and ironically honored



as “Model of Re-education Receiver” for her willingness and outstanding efforts in accepting re-education from the commune members.

Linda grew up in the country of northern China. To ask how many sisters she has embarrassed her, “Quite a few” she said. Her parents did not send her to school until the Cultural Revolution, when she was 16. To answer the call from Mao “It is right to rebel,” Red Guards entered school and taught themselves with Mao’s book. She was one of them. High school was the first school she went to and the last school she graduated from in China. Mao’s book was her text. With the high school certificate, she was assigned a job as a salesperson in a department store. But her schooling did not provide her with enough skills to balance her everyday sale’s records. Out of desperation, she grabbed a beginning grade math textbook, and taught herself addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. With patience and perseverance, she won several awards for her work at the department store. Her experience as a submissive and obedient female member of a family of the lowest status motivated her to succeed in a man’s world.

At age 19, Jenning spent two years in prison, because of her father’s accused involvement in Lin Biao’s conspiracy to overturn Mao’s regime. Life hit its bottom. Physical confinement and psychological torture tested her hope for life. She survived, and her come back was strong and triumphant. She successfully maneuvered through the Chinese bureaucratic system, cleared off her parents’ and her own names, and established an award-winning interior design business.

I witnessed my home ransacked when I was 13. Before my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, I was sent to a reform camp in a remote countryside. Living conditions were below basics—no electricity, tap water, or modern sewage, nor enough food or warm clothes. People died of starvation. Besides these physical challenges, confusion about the seemingly irrational interruptions in life drove me to the edge of insanity. Being friends with the local women commune members provided me with a perspective of women’s position different from what I had experienced at home. Identifying with them helped me appreciate what I had: ability to read. I picked up some old high school textbooks to read when schools were closed and knowledge repudiated. A few years later when schools reopened, I found myself passing national university entrance exam with ease, and walking on a campus of higher education without formal high schools education.

Our femininity of embracing low social status inherited or imposed on us, identifying with the most deprived people in society, and living and learning through social injustice interacted with our masculinity of independence, competitiveness, and self-assertiveness. Our perseverance in adversity saved us all during the times when the past had been cut off and the future had been wiped out of our curriculum and when we were deprived of our autonomy to choose. The resilience we gained through adversity was the most important source of our self-confidence to explore an immigrant’s life. Our reasons varied. Our mottoes were the same: Since we survived the Cultural Revolution, what else can we not?

The five Chinese immigrant women met in Canada in a bilingual adult English as a Second Language class. I was their instructor. In our teacher-student, and researcher-participant relationships, we cared for each other, and let each other care for ourselves.

Dr. Liu looked worried. Sitting in the classroom with her husband beside, she did not seem to be really focused. One day when her husband was absent, she revealed her worry—her husband was a control freak and she was in fear that he would kill her. “I put a kitchen knife under my pillow at night just in case,” she told me. I was petrified, and suggested that she had the police emergency number handy and a few important English words ready. I also promised that I would phone her sometime in the evenings to provide moral support, and perhaps to



interrupt her husband's abusive behavior. I kept my promise and helped her find a job so that she could move out, away from her abusive husband.

Yiping, an engineer in China specialized in railway construction, could only find work as restaurant helper in Canada. But she was always in high spirit, and extremely driven in learning English. One day, she asked me to teach her "Bad English words." I was puzzled and wanted her to explain. At work, it turned out, she had experienced racism and she wanted to protest it in English. I gave her a list of anti-racist vocabulary and connected her with the local restaurant workers' association and human rights organization.

Linda could not focus in class, either. Staring at me, she would repeat the question I just asked of her "Do you have any questions?" One day after class, she walked out with me and apologized for her absent-mindedness in class. She then explained her family situation to me and asked if I could help her find a good divorce lawyer who would know how to work with international cases. I did. Not only that, I accompanied her to her lawyer's office many times, as an interpreter and moral support; I went with her to see her daughter's principal and looked after her daughter while Linda was traveling internationally to locate the money her husband had hidden from her.

Jenning asked me to help her with her banking, and I did. I later found out that she was going through a major health crisis and needed to have a surgery soon. I became her interpreter and a bouncing board for her to play with her knowledge about health in the Chinese medical understanding and the Western system. I was the first person she called after she woke up from the surgery.

As their teacher, I listened to them and cared for them beyond a teacher's professional responsibilities. As students, they reciprocated my care. Dr. Liu was better focused in my class, and her English progressed faster. She also offered her expertise and consulted me on my son's health. Yiping moved up to a higher level of English class soon, and became actively involved in the restaurant workers' organization.

Linda took my mother and son to her temple to protect us from evil. I was very touched although I did not believe in the religious institute she belonged to. She came to stay with my mother to keep her company and help watch my son when I was away for conferences. And we became family friends.

Jenning and I have experienced a higher level of reciprocity in our relationship. We are from two different, and at times in the contemporary Chinese history, warring social groups. One example of such difference was that she was a Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution ransacking people's home, whereas I witnessed my own home ransacked by Red Guards. Despite of that we became friends. We listened to each other while suspending our own judgment; we shared our stories with confidence, trust, and authenticity. We also lived through our early years of immigration as each other's moral and practical support. We co-founded a Chinese immigrant organization.

In our teacher-student and researcher-participant relations, we were independent and interdependent at the same time; competitive and caring at the time, critical and nurturing at the same time. We became friends and we still are. We established an interdependent bond, without which, as Heilbrun (1979, 98) believes, we as women who had moved out of the home would have entered the limbo world of the 'honorary male.' Without our bonding as women we would have gone through a more severe identity crisis in our cross-cultural immigration experiences. In our "web of interlocution," to use Taylor's (1989) term, the friendship was a crucial interlocking of our selves, as well as a milestone in the development of our relationship.



Chodorow (1978) once said that women need a “network” of female kin to develop their sense of self. As immigrant women, we were challenged with a re-creation of a sense of self by our new immigrants’ environment of radical changes in culture, gender, economy, class, and power. We needed to seek, more urgently, the salvation of a female bond that nurtures a realization and recognition of our strengths. Our friendship was our strength through which we re-created ourselves as strangers, who were no longer full members of any culture.

Life of new immigrants was no lack of adversity. I had to be a live-in nanny with below-the-legal wage to support my son, myself, and save for my tuition fees for graduate studies. Jenning worked in a donut shop for many years to pay her rent, support her son, and her own education. Linda worked as a cleaning woman in hotels and a janitor in schools. Yiping was a kitchen helper and Dr. Liu a live-in nanny and had to endure an abusive husband. We all had to take women’s jobs with low social status. Relying on our femininity in supporting each other, we all bounced back. Dr. Liu was pleased with her success in bringing her daughter over. Yiping was satisfied with her son’s graduate degree in an English speaking country. Linda brought up her daughter to be a caring and independent woman. Jenning became an ESL teacher—a profession I had when I met her, and just recently her son obtained a master’s degree in fine arts from New York. And I am now a professor and my child was also college-educated. Our resilience acquired in adversity in China was challenged and enhanced through our experience of immigration. We took women’s position, fought and won in man’s battles.

Nothing under Heaven is softer and weaker than water,  
yet, nothing is harder or stronger than water  
to overcome the strong and hard  
because of its persistence.

—*Daodejing*, Chapter 78, Translated by Xin Li

### **Dimorphism and Polymorphism**

What makes a feminist? Does a feminist cause benefit the second sex at the expense of the first? Can Chinese women be feminists? If so, how would they look like? How would they live their lives? What would their lives mean in an international context and at the current historical moment? These are questions I asked at the beginning of this narrative inquiry. Following the Daoist frame of feminism, I examined life experiences of five Chinese immigrant women. What I have found from the study does not answer these questions directly. Instead, it provoked rethinking of feminism and feminist identity from the indigenous Chinese Daoist worldview.

When all under heaven know beauty as beauty,  
already there is ugliness;  
When everyone knows goodness,  
this accounts for badness.  
Being and nonbeing give birth to each other,  
Difficult and easy complete each other,  
Long and short form each other,  
High and low fulfill each other,  
Tone and voice harmonize with each other,



Front and back follow each other—  
It is ever thus.

—*Daodejing*, Chapter Two, Translated by Xin Li

*Daodejing*, as cited above, presents a dialectic and interdependent epistemology. To view the world as such, we reconstruct a post-modern feminist identity that is a constant and dynamic interplay between masculinity and femininity appropriate to specific social cultural contexts in our ever increasingly internationalized world. As we recalled in the lives of us five ordinary Chinese immigrant women, we were strong and weak, competitive and nurturing and caring, powerful and vulnerable, independent and interdependent, ... the concepts usually assigned separately to males and females as their expected characteristics. At times and places in our lives, our gender roles were flowing between the pairs of opposites. Considering our understanding about the world as these pairs of concepts about a primordial landscape, as in the Daoist worldview, liberates us from being alienated by our own concepts, and encourages us to create new concepts better reflective of and more suitable for our ever-changing and complicating realities. I, therefore, propose a new set of opposites: dimorphism and polymorphism.

Dimorphism in biology refers to the two forms of individuals within the same animal species—male and female. Borrowing this term for gender difference in a humanly and socially constructed environment, we get the opposite concepts of masculinity and femininity. Within this dimorphic frame of thinking, we easily fall into the either-or trap, forgetting the dynamic interaction between the two ends of extreme. Worse, we tend to normalize the extremes, strive to live a life of such abnormality, and judge others accordingly.

Polymorphism in biology refers to multiple different forms, stages, or types in individual organisms of the same species—queen, worker, and drone in bees, for instance. Borrowing this term for gender difference in a humanly and socially constructed environment, we acknowledge multiple forms of behaviors that range between and beyond the concepts of masculinity and femininity. Within this polymorphic frame of thinking, we recognize differences and normalize diversity.

To think about gender differences in the frame of dimorphism-polymorphism dynamic, we allow ourselves to position dimorphism as a simplistic, out-of-date, and unrealistic concept, and polymorphism its opposite. The inquiry would be no longer between femininity and masculinity, which we already know as problematic in capturing the totality of our gender identity, but are compelled to use the vocabulary for the distinction between the two. Our research agenda would be no longer between feminism and chauvinism. We would ask ourselves questions that include others—Others who are stereotyped by the femininity-masculinity normality, and marginalized by feminism-chauvinism debate. We would push our research agenda towards a post-modern paradigm—a Daoist dynamic between dimorphism and polymorphism. This new vocabulary for thinking and new map of territory would offer more individuals hope to be of their own choices and making, and help swing the pendulum of conservatism to a progressivism that embraces diversity and unity all at once in shaping lives of people.

Relating to the pedagogical questions I asked at the beginning of this article, the Daoist dynamic between dimorphism and polymorphism would include male students on a feminist journey to learn about themselves and other female students. Female students would be given an



opportunity to study their own gender experience in the cultural and historical contexts, therefore sort out their falsified gender identities. In this frame of post-modern Daoist feminist concepts, both the male and female students would obtain a more complex and realistic view about Chinese women, and hopefully about others, who are easy targets of stereotype in the modern Western Dualistic paradigm.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Daoism is also translated as Taoism. In this article, Daoism is used to keep up with the most current translation, except in references published in early dates.

<sup>3</sup> Also translated as *Tao Te Ching*, or *The Scripture of the Way*. It refers to 道德经 in Chinese. To keep up with the most current translation of it in the field, *Daode jing* will be used in this article, except in references published in early dates.

<sup>4</sup> Also translated as Lao Tzu. It refers to 老子 in Chinese, the proclaimed author of *Daode jing*. To keep up with the most current translation of it in the field, Laozi will be used in this article, except in references published in early dates.

<sup>5</sup> The anti-Rightist campaign in 1957 was targeted at two groups of people. They were intellectuals and cadres who had criticized Mao's socialism in 1956's campaign of freer criticism under the slogan of "Let a hundred flowers bloom together, let the hundred schools of thought contend." After repeated invitation from the government, many intellectuals and cadres expressed their dissatisfaction toward Mao's socialism in 1956 as their practice of loyal remonstrance to the government. As a consequence, in 1957's anti-Rightist campaign, they were harshly attacked, obliged to recant publicly and condemn one another. The erstwhile critics, including writers, artists, and professors, were subjected to a big campaign for "downward transfer." It moved a great number of teachers, students, and city cadres and functionaries into countryside and remote areas like Tibet, Xinjiang, and Gansu. It was not unlike the exile Stalin had put on many political dissidents in Siberia. Dr. Liu's husband was one of the exiles.

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