



The Theoretical Construction of Gender in Mainland China: Absorbing and Lessening Joan Scott's Conceptualization of Gender

Yan Yan^{1*}

¹ Ph.D. candidate, Institute of Historical Theory, The School of History and Culture, Northeast Normal University, Changchun, 130024, P. R. China.

¹ Visiting Ph.D. student, Sociology, Anthropology and Human Services, Faculty of Arts, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, 8041, New Zealand.

* Corresponding Author: yany892@nenu.edu.cn

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ABSTRACT

Understandings of gender in Mainland Chinese academia are largely influenced by American scholar Joan Scott's theorizations. As research into Scott's ideas deepens both theoretically and practically, tensions arise from particular incompatibilities between her ideas and the development of Chinese gender history scholarship. Thus, while Scott's work serves as a foundation for Chinese gender history, the trajectory of this field within China is significantly divergent. Within Marxist empirical historiography, theoretical constructions of gender seeking to address real-world issues more directly features distinctive methodological characteristics in efforts to highlight Chinese academia's will to forge theoretical innovations aligned with indigenous perspectives.

Keywords: China, Gender History, Theoretical Construction, Joan Scott

INTRODUCTION

In 1986 Joan Scott published her seminal article, "Gender is a useful category of historical analysis"¹; now considered a milestone in the theory of gender history. Her work not only garnered significant attention from Western scholars but has also been widely translated and referenced in Chinese feminist scholarship as providing a westernized foundation influencing the formation and development of Chinese gender history and theory. However, while Scott's work remains influential, some Chinese scholars argue that her specific conceptualization of gender does not wholly apply to Chinese contexts. Such scholars have thus attempted to localise Scott's scholarship to better situate and serve historical research rooted in indigenous history, thinking and traditions. Thus, Scott's conceptualization of gender having once held an important position in the study of Chinese gender history, appears to have gradually faded within academic scholarship in recent years.

This article aims to make sense of this lag in enthusiasm by mapping the development and theoretical construction of Chinese gender history by first exploring why and how Chinese scholars gradually accept, modify, and attempt to construct indigenised theory. Second, it is important to appreciate why Chinese gender history has diverged from Scott's theoretical ideas, by presenting some of the practical challenges as well as analyze those initial reasons for integrating her work in Chinese scholarship. Ultimately, the future of theoretical construction for Chinese gender history lay in expansive methodological exploration rather than solely theorized conceptualization highlights various contemporary attempts to indigenise Scott's ideas of gender, particularly by Chinese feminist-influenced² scholars. Such efforts reflect Chinese scholars' contemplation on the compatibility between non-Chinese theorisation and Chinese history, as well as the importance of developing Chinese scholarship specific to Chinese social practices and historical traditions to enable nuanced engagement in global intellectual dialogue.

PART 1. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND DIALOGUES

¹ Joan Wallach Scott, 'Gender: A useful category of historical analysis', *The American Historical Review*, 91:5(1986), pp.1053-1075.

² With the exception of a few scholars such as Li Yinhe and Li Xiaojiang, most scholars working on women's history and gender history in China do not explicitly claim to be feminist, rather scholars engaged in women's history or women's studies within the framework of social history have indeed been influenced by feminist ideas with the introduction of gender in the 1990s.

(1). Setting the Stage

Joan Scott's most significant contribution to gender history is her proposal that gender, in addition to being a category for subjective experience, is also useful for historical analysis. This emerged from ideas in the early 1980s from *Sex and Class in Women's History*³, which understood gender as "understand systematic ways in which sex differences have cut through society and culture and in the process have conferred inequality upon women."⁴ Subsequent research, especially the work of Bridenthal, Koonz and Stuard, highlights a shift towards gender from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s which aimed at not only towards more general visibility of women more generally, but also to "examine the socially constructed historically changing gender system that divides masculine from feminine roles."⁵ Building on previous theoretical foundations and her early research on social labour history Scott along with Louise Tilly in *Women, Work and Family*⁶ pioneered a focus on the relationship between women's gender roles and socio-economic structures in terms of the family. Here Scott offered that current theoretical frameworks of social history limits the development of feminism and suggests that women's history needs to distance itself from aspects of theoretical framework embedded within social history.⁷ Thus, she utilize post-structuralist theories and approaches, proposing a new epistemological and methodological orientation, which focus on language and text analysis to theorise gender conception, which is essential to understanding the impact of social relations on the production of historical knowledge.

Scott's core gender theoretical thoughts emerged from two interrelated and distinctive propositions, that first one being that "gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power."⁸ This proposition focuses on the issue of how women and men, as categories of identities, are constructed in terms of subjective and collective meanings. Her second proposition derives from the theorization of gender and argues that gender is a primary field through which power is articulated. Understanding the kernel of Scott's gender definition rests on the strong yet sometimes conflicting connection between both propositions in that differences related to sex are often cited as evidence of social relations and phenomena unrelated to sexuality which serve not only as testimony but also as legitimation.⁹ For Chinese scholars Scott's initial integration of gender into theoretical discussions is considered insightful and has significantly shaped the field of gender history.

Moreover, Scott's uptake of gender as being specific to social relations emphasizes the importance of language via deconstruction, textual analysis, and critique. Thus, her theorization of gender is understood in part as an applied application of post-structuralist theory within gendered understandings of historical processes. Epistemology and methodology with their foundations in post-structuralist theory shift research paradigms and propel different relative questions of gender in English-speaking countries, especially British and North American scholarship, while also influencing certain historical studies in non-English speaking nations and regions, such as parts of South America and China. Scott's appeal is far and wide: countries such as Germany, France, and regions in Latin America have all experienced a reconnaissance of indigenization in their understanding and practice of theorised gender originating from Scott.¹⁰

As gender scholarship has interpellated historical processes and ideas gained prominence worldwide since 1980s, China was in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution which had the unfortunate consequence of derailing Chinese academia from the rest of the world. Afterwards, benefiting from subsequent Chinese reform and opening-up policy in the late 1980s¹¹, Chinese academia seized the opportunity to reconnect with the world and as a result, Chinese scholars become interested in Western gender historiography which led to the establishment of the discipline of gender history in China.

(2). From Absorption to Adaptation

Between the mid-1980s and the 1990s, Chinese 'feminist' academia tended to focus on how Westernized concepts of gender were applicable and understandable to Chinese women and society. According to scholars Gao Xiaoxian and Li Xiaojang, the earliest exposure to the fundamental concepts of gender study occurred in 1986 during a seminar in which American demographer, specializing in women's studies Susan Greenhalgh, introduced a conceptual differentiation between "sex" and "gender".¹² As the seminar limited the number of participants and their identities, and neither its information nor learning

³ Judith L. Newton, Mary P. Ryan, and Judith R. Walkowitz, *Sex and Class in Women's History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983).

⁴ Ibid., p.1.

⁵ Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz, and Susan Stuard, *Becoming Visible: Women in European History 2nd edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p.1.

⁶ Louise A. Tilly, Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work and Family*. (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), p.1.

⁷ Scott primarily analysed the limitations of gender study, by using Marxist and patriarchal theories in social history, and she argued that social history focused on structural analyses and that gender became a reproduction of the economy, which neither reflected female subjectivity nor skipped out of the theoretical framework established from a male perspective. Joan W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, (Columbia University Press, 1988), p.22.

⁸ Scott, 'Gender: A useful category of historical analysis', p.1067.

⁹ Scott, 'Gender: A useful category of historical analysis', pp.1067-1069.

¹⁰ Relevant research references as follow: Claudia Oritz, 'Gender-eine unverzichtbare Kategorie der historischen Analyse: Zur Rezeption von Joan W. Scott Studien in Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz', in Joan W. Scott, Claudia Honegger, and Caroline Arni (eds) *Gender: Die Tücken einer Kategorie*, (Zürich, 2001), pp.95-116. Michelle Roit-Sarcey, 'The Difficulties of Gender in France: Reflections on a Concept', *Gender and History*, 11:3 (1999), pp.489-498. Sueann Caulfield, 'The History of Gender in Historiography of Latin America', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 81:3 (2001), pp.449-490. Heidi Tinsman, 'A Paradigm of Our Own: Joan Scott in Latin American History', *The American Historical Review*, 113: 5 (2008), pp. 1357-1374.

¹¹ 改革开放政策(reform-opening up policy), which was provided by Deng Xiaoping, aiming to transition China from a centrally planned economy to a more market-oriented economy, while also opening up the country to foreign investment and global trade. https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/202407/content_6963770.htm. accessed on 01-08-2024.

¹² From internal materials provided by Gao Xiaoxian for the conference "Women and Development", 1986 oil-printed lecture notes from the Institute of Population Studies, Xi'an Jiaotong University. Cited by Song, Shaopeng, Gao Xiaoxian, "“妇女/性别与发展”在中国:历史语境、组织实践、理论反思" ["Women /Gender and Development" in China: Historical Context, Organizational Practice and Theoretical Reflection], *山西师范大学报 (社会科学版)* [*Journal of Shanxi Normal University(Social Science Edition)*], 48:6(2021), p.80.

materials were made public, thus its impact on the development of gender study in China was relatively minor.

For many Chinese scholars, the introduction of gender to China occurred in July 1993 following a symposium held by Tianjin Normal University. Here scholars focused on studying gender, which included a close reading of Joan Scott's series of articles that redefined the concept of gender.¹³ Specifically focused on was Scott's elucidation of the significance of orienting gender as an analytical category and utilising it as a crucial manifestation of power relations. She offers "power as dispersed constellation of unequal relationships, discursively constituted in social field of force."¹⁴ Gender has been seemed as a persistent and recurrent way of enabling the signification of power, although power is built on gender but not always literary about gender in West. Nonetheless, conceptual language as a medium allows gender analysis to enter the realm of power-related fields and, in addition, agency offers diverse possibilities for defining and interpreting power relations. By exploring power dynamics dispersed across various domains, Scott argued that rewriting history becomes not only possible but necessary. Scholars such as Gail Hershtatter and Wang Zheng took Scott's provocation seriously and employed Chinese history as a case study of applying gender analysis to historical research, discovering that the concept of masculinity as a product of gender was accepted by Chinese academia in the late 20th century.¹⁵ The Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing since 1995 has accelerated the popularization of gender conception in Chinese academia. This conference has been considered a pivotal moment in gender scholarship in China. As Du Fangqing and Tong Xin outline the developmental stages of Chinese gender history, highlighting how this conference shifted gender studies from implicit to explicit, and from descriptive research to conceptual and theoretical construction.¹⁶

Based on Scott's conceptualization of gender, Chinese scholars collectively refer to the epistemological or methodological theories related to and derived from it as "(社会)性别理论 (gender theory)"¹⁷, fundamentally a feminist theory. Consequently, the concept of gender as a theoretical foundation is becoming increasingly accepted and stable among Chinese scholars, rather than remaining contentious.¹⁸ While Scott employed psychoanalytic theories to further complicate the concept of gender in the early 21st century,¹⁹ Chinese scholars have predominantly concentrated on how to indigenise the epistemologies and methodologies of gender.

The debate over whether to translate "gender" as "社会性别" or "性别" marks the beginning of the indigenization of theoretised gender in Chinese academia, highlighting the challenges in adapting Westernised connotations to the Chinese context,

In the 1993 Tianjin seminar, "gender" was first translated as "社会性别"(gender) to distinguish it from "性别"(sex)²¹ by Wang Zheng, a scholar residing in the United States. She argued that using "社会性别" to represent "gender" could avoid packaging the new concept in a language containing old-fashioned ideas. While the terms "社会"(social) and "性别"(gender) are commonly used separately in Chinese, the combination of "社会"(social) and "性别"(gender) has never existed before, which naturally prompted the question of what the term "社会性别" means. The absence of preconceived assumptions may facilitate the understanding of new concept. Additionally, the existing word "性别" is used to denote both "sex" and "gender", potentially limiting theoretical comprehension and causing conceptual confusion outside the Chinese context. Therefore, utilising existing vocabularies to describe and analyse gender renders the potential to reinforce the gendered effects of traditional culture rather than challenge them²⁰. Scholar Liu Bohong first adopted this perspective in her paper, which was advocated by Wang Zheng for using "社会性别" to convey the connotation of gender. In August 1995, *English-Chinese Lexicon of Women and Law* also translated "gender" as "社会性别" and "sex" as "性别".²¹

However, some Chinese scholars have contested translating gender as "社会性别" would excessively emphasize the social aspects of its construction, thereby obfuscating any consideration of biological sexual differences. For instance, Li Xiaojiang's perspective transformation exemplifies this shift. Initially, she agreed that "社会性别" accentuates gender refers to the socially and culturally constructed understandings of differences between men and women (as well as masculinity and femininity). Therefore, the declaration "women are constructed" could be understood as female relating to sex while women relate to gender²².

¹³ Scott, 'Gender: A useful category of historical analysis', pp.1053-1075; Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and The Politics of History*. Columbia University Press (1988). Jill K. Conway, Susan C. Bourque, Joan W. Scott, 'Introduction: The Concept of Gender', *Daedalus*, 116: 4 (1987), pp. xxi-xxx.

¹⁴ Scott, 'Gender: A useful category of historical analysis', pp.1067, 1069.

¹⁵ Gail Hershtatter, Wang Zheng, 'Chinese History: A Useful Category of Gender Analysis', *The American Historical Review*, 113:5 (2008), pp.1404-1421.

¹⁶ Du, FangQing, Wang Qun, '中国大陆妇女学: 知识的构建与传承——30 年回眸、反思与展望'[Women's Studies in Chinese Mainland: the Construct and Inheritance of Knowledge —Retrospect, Reflection and Prospect in 30 Years], *山东女子学院学报*[*Journal of Shandong Women's University*], 94:6(2010), pp.1-7. Tong Xin, '30 年中国女性/性别社会学研究'[30 Years of Chinese Women/Gender Sociology Research], *妇女研究论丛*[*Collection of Women's Studies*], 3(2008), pp.66-74.

¹⁷ Lin Xiaofang, '社会性别理论与中国妇女史研究'[The Gender Theory and the Study of Women History in China], *赣南师范学院学报*[*Journal of Gannan Teachers College*], 2 (2006), p.73.

¹⁸ Referring to gender as a theory can be found in most essays or works among Chinese scholars which published on prestigious historical academic journals, such as 史学理论研究[*Historiography Bimonthly*] which is focus on historiography and theories, 妇女研究论丛[*Journal of Chinese Women's Studies*] which is focus on women/gender history. <https://sxlyj.ajcass.com>. <https://www.fnjlc.com/CN/volumn/home.shtml>. accessed on 16-07-2024.

¹⁹ Joan Wallach Scott, 'Fantasy Echo: History and the Construction of Identity', *Critical Inquiry*, 27:2 (2001), p. 284-304.

²¹ In Chinese, the word "性别" is used to refer to both biological and social attributes related to sex, without emphasising one aspect over the other. Therefore, adding the word "社会" before "性别" can emphasise the social aspects of sex. Thus "社会性别" is a newly term coined to specifically refer to gender by scholar Wang Zheng.

²⁰ Wang, Zheng, '女性意识、社会性别意识辨析'[Differentiation between "female consciousness" and "gender consciousness"]. *妇女研究论丛*[*Journal of Chinese Women's Studies*], 1 (1997), p.20.

²¹ Sharon. K. Hom, Xin Chunying, *英汉妇女与法律词汇释义*[*English-Chinese lexicon of women and law*]. 中国对外翻译出版公司和联合国教育、科学及文化组织出版社(Beijing, Paris: China Translation Corporation, UNESCO), 1995).

²² Li Xiaojiang, *女性/性别的学术问题*[*Academia issues of Women/Gender*]. 山东人民出版社(Shangdong: [Shangdong People's Publishing House], 2005.

Later, she challenged the term “社会性别” from a linguistic perspective, arguing that translating “gender” as “社会性别” is not only redundant but also, by adding the word “社会”, accentuates the binary between biological and social dimensions represented by sex and gender.²³ Min Dongchao shares the view that translating “gender” as “社会性别” could negatively impact understanding by excessively emphasising the social aspects, thus overlooking the connection between gender and sex.²⁴ Li Xiaolin and Shi Aizhong argue that “社会性别” imposes a rigid division on “性别”, specifically referring to the aspect of sex separated from biological sex, thereby disconnecting sex from gender²⁵.

These scholars claim that “性别” can represent gender better within Chinese culture, because “性” encompasses both sex and gender, while “别” signifies the differentiation between these identities. Therefore, “性别” reconciles both differences and the relationships between sex and gender, reflecting two distinct yet not mutually exclusive concepts in the Chinese linguistic milieu that are capable of being symbiotic and expressed in tandem. These debates signify a transitional understanding of Western postmodern conceptualizations of “gender”, which shifts from a Western perspective to a Chinese perspective. Specifically, the focus moves from highlighting the differentiation between sex and gender to emphasising inseparability within Chinese culture.

PART 2. DIVERGENCE AND INDIGENIZATION

(1) The factors of divergence

Moreover, these debates underscore how understanding of gender differs between Chinese and Western discourse, rooted not only in linguistics but also in Chinese historiography traditions and political ideology.

Chinese empiricist historiography, shaped by Marxist materialism, adopts empirical research as its methodology. This historical paradigm remains a cornerstone for constructing localized Chinese historiography to present.²⁶ Although research on Chinese gender history often employs textual analysis, it primarily focuses on analyzing and extracting data from historical documents to summarise changes in gender roles and the impacts of policies on gender relations. Therefore, Chinese gender historiography tends to be descriptive. For instance, Wang Qingjia notes that a notable feature of Chinese gender historiography is its emphasis on supplementing and portraying ignored aspects of women's lives in ancient times and rediscovering marginalized female groups in modern and contemporary society through unearthed artefacts and historical records.²⁷ This approach, which uses material objects as evidence to portray women's lives, inherits traditions of Chinese empiricist historiography and applies them to gender history.

It diverges significantly from the deconstructivist methodology advocated by Scott. She primarily employs textual analysis, emphasising the importance of language as deconstructing traditional gender notions to expose hidden gender inequalities and underlying power dynamics within language, leaning more towards methods literary or theoretical critiques. The subject of gender history, therefore, could be abstracted and discursively constructed, rather than corporeal entities.²⁸ Particularly, Scott argues experience as a product of language and discourse, which can not be used as self-evidence of identity, thereby negating any deterministic relationship between experience and identity.²⁹ This view is inconsistent with the Chinese gender history, which regards experience as the foundation for collective identity recognition.

By deconstructing the concept of experience, Scott illustrates how to use gender as a critical analysis tool to challenge essentialism, however, due to Chinese political ideology, gender studies serves as an instrumental reference for the correction of national policies, rather than leveraging academic critique and research enhancement capabilities of gender. To be specific, “cultural confidence”³⁰, which is actively promoted under the guidance of the political ideology of Chinese socialism and has

²³ Li, 女性/性别的学术问题[Academia issues of Women/Gender], 2005, p.24.

²⁴ Min Dongchao, 'Gender(社会性别)在中国的旅行片段'[Travel of Gender in China], 妇女研究论丛[Journal of Chinese Women's Studies], 5(2003), pp.17-23.

²⁵ Li Xiaolin, Shi Aizhong, '对 Gender 译为“社会性别”的几点质疑'[Several Problem on Translating “Gender” into “Social Gender”], 中华女子学院学报[Journal of China Women's University], 19:5(2007), pp.20-25.

²⁶ The tradition of Chinese empiricism can be traced back to the "Records of the Grand Historian" by Sima Qian during the Han Dynasty. The combination of Marxist historiography, guided by materialism, with traditional Chinese empirical historiography emerged in the 1930s and gradually became the mainstream historical paradigm in China's academic circles. Chen Feng, '挑战与新生: 20 世纪 90 年代以来中国马克思主义史学的进路'[Challenges and Rebirth: The Approach of Chinese Marxist Historiography since the 1990s], 史学月刊[Journal of Historical Science], 5(2022), pp. 114-125. Chen Feng, '传统史学与中国马克思主义史学范式的构建'[The Construction of Traditional Historiography and Chinese Marxist Historiography Paradigm], 天津社会科学[Tianjin Social Sciences], 1(2022), pp. 132-142.

²⁷ Wang Qingjia, '性别史和情感史的交融: 情感有否性别差异的历史分析'[The Intersection of Gender and Emotions History: A Historiographical Analysis of Gendered Human Emotions], 史学集刊[Collected Papers of History Studies], 3(2022), pp.4-15.

²⁸ Distinctions can be made through research methods and themes, with the former, more inclined to use social history research methods such as demographics and physical analyses to reflect the living conditions of a specific group of women in a specific period of history, and the latter, more inclined to use post-structuralist textual or linguistic analyses to conceptually show how the image or role of women has been changing in the realm of perception.

²⁹ Joan W. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', Critical Inquiry, 17: 4 (1991), pp.782-787.

³⁰ Cultural Confidence, a term represents “文化自信” and is introduced by General Secretary Xi Jinping in 2014 as one of China's fundamental national policies. He said, “Cultural confidence is the full affirmation and active practice of a nation, a country, and a political party towards its own cultural values, as well as the firm belief in the vitality of its culture.” The concepts inherited from thousands of years of Chinese culture—including worldview, outlook on life, values, and aesthetics—have become core elements and basic cultural genes of the Chinese nation. They form the unique spiritual world of the Chinese people and are a distinctive marker that sets them apart from other nations. Thus, cultural confidence is foundational to building socialism with Chinese characteristics. http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-08/05/c_1119330939.html. <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0625/c40531-32456331.html>. Accessed 29 May 2024.

become an indispensable part of the Chinese socialist cultural system. It requires that Chinese gender studies are conducted within political socialist context, ensuring that research contributes to the overarching goals of social development and national rejuvenation envisioned by China's socialist ideology.

Thereby, there is a pronounced teleological inclination in gender studies. For instance, the Chinese government aimed to cultivate female cadres and established the China Women's College in the 1990s, the most prestigious Chinese journal, *Women's Studies Collection* affiliated with it. It cannot be overstated that the research topics discussed in the journal largely reflect the will of the state. Influential gender studies in China have been organised under the guidance of the All-China Women's Federation. The prioritization of research topics need to meet the requirements of the national agency, and these findings are utilised to promote and evaluate the efficacy of government policies.

For example, in the 1980s, with support from the Women's Federation, thematic collections and research concentrated on topics such as "Women and Population" and "Women's Social Psychology". In the 1990s, research topics shifted to address various women's issues arising from China's societal reform processes. Particularly, the issue of left-behind women³¹ resulting from the rural male labour migration in the 1990s due to economic reforms, and the discrimination against urban women in the labour market, leaded scholars to reconsider whether economic development has genuinely facilitated women's liberation and gender equality in the labour market. Thus, gender is a lens for measuring social equality and actively promoting gender equality

Chinese historiography tradition and political ideology prompt Chinese scholars to integrate the indigenization of theorized gender into the discourse. Aside from this impetus, there has a relatively paucity of comprehensive academic institutions³² and academic treatises³³ focusing on theoretical gender history. These factors have catalyzed an intensified focus on the theoretical exploration of gender history concurrently with the indigenization of gender concept.

(2) The Attempts of Theoretical Indigenization

From the outset, Du Fangqin claims that academic research on women and gender should undergo indigenization.³⁴ Thereafter, Gao Xiaoxian defines this stance as "a practical process wherein the indigenous context appropriates foreign theories"³⁵. In other words, the indigenization process, involves the integration, reevaluation, and contextualization of foreign theories across various demographics, including the economic, cultural, historical, and gender conditions of a given indigenous area.

Moreover, some scholars take indigenization as a vigilance of Western-centrism. Such as Lin Xiaoshan suggests indigenization reflects an important collective anxiety among Chinese scholars, aiming to challenge the presumption of China being understood as a "dependent country" that merely receives and adopts academic theories from "developed country".³⁶ Zheng Hangsheng argues that emphasizing indigenization serves as a means to extricate Chinese gender studies from the Western theoretical framework, thereby preventing them from being relegated to mere case studies within it.³⁷

Such representative explanations of indigenization indicate the complexity of interactions between foreign scholarship and local discourse. Chinese scholars present critical thinking regarding the acceptance and adaptation Westernised theoretical application alongside indigenous theoretical innovations. Earlier debates on translations of gender can be seen as the practice of indigenization at linguistic level, while the adaptation at theoretical level has been an important part of Chinese gender history since the 21st century.

Inspired by Scott's theoried gender, various attempts have been dedicated to exploring incorporating gender perspectives and methods into Chinese history and contribute to indigenization of theoretical innovation. For instance, Du Fangqin proposes the "Huaxia Gender System." (华夏社会性别制度)³⁸, which illustrates how gender has influenced the male-female order of Confucian society in China through discourse and cultural representation. Wang Zheng proposes that gendered norms inevitably

³¹ During the urbanization process brought about by China's economic reform and opening-up policies, there was a large-scale migration of rural laborers to cities, known as the "migrant worker wave." In this process, many men or one spouse from rural families (usually the husband) went to cities to work, leaving women behind to take care of the family in rural areas. These women are referred to as "left-behind women." They typically face the pressure of multiple roles, taking on responsibilities such as domestic chores, farming, child education, and elder care.

³² Currently, there are 11 prominent universities in China that offer 28 courses related to gender studies. These institutions include Peking University, China Women's College, Zhejiang Normal University, Sun Yat-sen University, Fudan University, Northeast Normal University, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Qufu Normal University, Yunnan University for Nationalities, Central China Normal University, and Nanjing Normal University's Jinling College for Women.

³³ According to Liu Wenming has conducted statistics on research papers and works related to women/gender studies in mainland China from 1990 to 2001, the data revealed during this period, there was a total of 605 articles and works, while those on foreign women amounted to 91, with only 26 focusing on historical and theoretical research. Liu Wenming, '新妇女史在中国大陆的兴起'[The Rising of "the New Women's History" in the Mainland of China] *史学理论研究* [Historiography Bimonthly], 1 (2003), pp.82-84.

³⁴ Du, Fangqing, '妇女与发展: 地位、健康与就业——西方视角' [Women and Development: Status, Health and Employment from Western Perspective]. *中国妇女与发展研讨会* [Chinese Women and Development Seminar], Tianjin Normal University, Tianjin, China, 1993, July 6-9.

³⁵ The first time Gao Xiaoxian proposed the definition of indigenization was at the seminar on 'Gender and Development in China: Review and Prospect', which was held in Xi'an in early August 2000. Song, Shaopeng, Gao Xiaoxian, "妇女/性别与发展"在中国: 历史语境、组织实践、理论反思 [Women /Gender and Development" in China: Historical Context, Organizational Practice and Theoretical Reflection], *山西师大学报 (社会科学版)* [Journal of Shanxi Normal University (Social Science Edition)], 48:6(2021), p.86.

³⁶ Lin Xiaoshan, '走向"理论自觉"与"方法自觉": 妇女/性别社会学在中国(1995-2010)' [Towards "Theoretical Consciousness" and "Methodological Consciousness": Women's/Gender Sociology in China (1995-2010)], *浙江学刊* [Zhejiang Academic Journal], 6(2011), pp.188-193.

³⁷ Zheng Hangsheng, '促进中国社会学的理论自觉——我们需要什么样的中国社会学' [Boosting "Theoretical Self-consciousness" of Chinese Sociology—What the Chinese Sociology We Need Should Be Like?], *江苏社会科学* [Jiangsu Social Science], 5(2009), pp.1-7.

³⁸ Du Fangqing, '华夏性别制度的形成及其特点' [Formation and characteristics of gender system in China]. *浙江学刊* [Zhejiang Academic Journal], 110:3 (1998), pp.47-52.

change over different historical periods by applying discourse analysis methodology.³⁹ Den Yan argues that replacing the Western “public/private” concept with “inner(内)/outer(外)” is more aligned with traditional culture, which expresses binary gender oppositions through a specific spatial relationships in ancient China.⁴⁰ Liu Wenming agrees with Den Yan's point and further calls for transcending the binary thinking of “inner/outer” given that in Chinese history the interaction, coexistence and distinctiveness of two genders should not be overlooked or obfuscated.⁴¹

While obvious developments have been made in the indigenization of theorised gender, the concept of indigenization has also faced critiques. Primarily, the conceptual usage of “indigenization” harbours semantic gaps, underscoring that the complexities of subjectivity and resources cannot be fully encompassed by a single word such as “化”(transformation). Secondly, concept of indigenization implies one-way transmission from the place of concept origin to recipient.⁴² Thirdly, the concept of indigenization connotes a universalism, as the word “化” stands for universality.

Wang Zheng observes this emphasising the need to focus on indigenous perspectives as integral to gender studies, and she suggests not making indigenous experiences “specialization”.⁴³ Accordingly, Song Shaopeng warns scholars should be aware of the dualism bred from the concept, between “universal” vs. “specific”, “particular” vs. “common”, as well as the artificial contradictions and ambivalences created by simply viewing indigenization as Chinese and globalization as Western.⁴⁴ Besides, she suggests that attention to indigenization is a research method based on the “historical inner perspective”,⁴⁵ revealing theoretical innovations based on the absorption and acceptance of foreign concepts and methods which have their foundations in inheritance and historiography tradition.

These endeavors in theoretical indigenization demonstrate that Chinese scholars have eschewed the reliance on Western discourses and theoretical frameworks to elucidate historical phenomena. Instead, they base their approach on the intricacies of Chinese experiences, judiciously incorporating alternative theories, and maintaining a critical awareness of potential dualistic thinking.

PART 3. THE THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN CHINA

(1) Epistemological dimension

As discussed, the theoretical construction of Chinese gender history needs to be ground on Chinese cultural, historical and political contexts. Consequently, although Chinese gender history has been influenced by Western post-structuralist feminist theories, it does not have the strong feminist political orientation of the West. Therefore, it cannot be merely regarded as a gender history based on Western feminist theories.⁴⁶ This necessitates a theoretical framework in China that diverges from its Western counterparts. Unlike Scott's view that gender critiques implicit power relations⁴⁷, the Chinese scholar aim to balance them.

As Gao Shiyu mentions that the perspective provided by gender allows us to avoid a feminism history which based on narrow feminist theories and ultimately build a gender-equal view of history and write a more complete history in which both sexes are subjects.⁴⁸ More specifically, Pan Guangdan proposes “Human-Centered Gender Studies”⁴⁹, while Li Xiaojiang

³⁹ Wang Zheng, '妇女学的全球化与本土化' [Globalization and Indigenization of Women's Studies], in Du Fangqing, Wang Zheng. (eds.), *社会性别 [Gender]*, 天津: 天津人民出版社 [Tianjin: Tianjin People's Publishing House], 2004.

⁴⁰ The concept of “inside” (内) and “outside” (外) rooted in Chinese culture, has parallels with the Western notion of “public” and “private” in representing binary gender, but they also have differences. The concept of “inside” and “outside” based on the architectural layout of traditional Chinese quadrangles, where the division of living spaces for men and women, reflecting gender distinctions and oppositions. In such quadrangles, certain areas were designated for women, symbolizing the “inside” realm, while others were reserved for men, representing the “outside” world. These concepts represented and shaped gender roles and expectations in ancient Chinese society, with men traditionally being associated with external activities like work and public life, while women have been associated with domestic responsibilities and maintaining the household. Deng, Yan, '试探“男/外·女/内”与“男/公·女/私”对应的源起——兼论梁启超和郭沫若的性别理论的影响' [An Investigation into the Origin of Corresponding “Men in Charge of External Business/Women Internal Business” to “Men for Public Affairs/Women Private Affairs”: An Additional Discussion of Influence of Liang Qichao's and Guo Moruo's Gender Theory]. *苏州科技学院学报(社会科学版)* [Journal of Suzhou University of Science and Technology (Social Science Edition)], 31:1(2014), pp. 85-108.

⁴¹ Liu, '新妇女史在中国大陆的兴起' [The Rising of “The New Women's History” in the Mainland of China], 2003, pp.79-87.

⁴² Du, Wang, '中国大陆妇女学: 知识的构建与传承——30 年回眸、反思与展望' [Women's Studies in Chinese Mainland: the Construct and Inheritance of Knowledge—Retrospect, Reflection and Prospect in 30 Years], pp.1-7.

⁴³ Wang Zheng, '浅议社会性别学在中国的发展' [The Development of Gender in China]. *社会学研究* [Sociology Study], 5(2001), pp.34-44. Wang, '妇女学的全球化与本土化' [Globalization and Indigenization of Women's Studies], 2004.

⁴⁴ Song, Gao, “‘妇女/性别与发展’在中国: 历史语境、组织实践、理论反思” [“Women /Gender and Development” in China: Historical Context, Organizational Practice and Theoretical Reflection], 2021, p.89.

⁴⁵ Song Shaopeng, '立足问题, 无关中西: 在历史的内在脉络中建构的学科——对中国“妇女 /性别研究”的思想史考察' [An Issue-Based Examination on Chinese Women's and Gender Studies as a Historically Constructed Academic Discipline: A Thoughts History's Perspective], *妇女研究论丛* [Journal of Chinese Women's Studies], 5(2018), p.38.

⁴⁶ Liu Jun, '论美国妇女史研究中的政治倾向' [On Political Tendency in the Study of American Women's History], *史学理论研究* [Historiography Bimonthly], 1 (1998); '妇女领域研究评述' [Review of Research in the Field of Women], *史学理论研究* [Historiography Bimonthly], 2 (1999).

⁴⁷ Scott, 'Gender: A useful category of historical analysis', p.1067.

⁴⁸ The feminism history that has been criticised is that it looks at things from a female perspective only, with the result that it reinforces the binary between men and women, replacing the gender bias of the male perspective with the gender bias of the female perspective. Gao Shiyu, '妇女史研究三议' [Three Proposals for the Study of Women's History], *妇女研究论丛* [Collection of Women's Studies], 3 (1997), p.15.

⁴⁹ Pan Guangdan, *人文史观* [Humanistic and Historical View], 群言出版社 [Qunyan Publisher], 2004.

introduces the concept of "Sexed Being"⁵⁰. Both conceptions are grounded in traditional Chinese philosophical culture, particularly "道"(Taoism). They aim to bridge the gap between sex and gender within the context of traditional Chinese culture by using biological differences between the sexes to create a balance of the social attributes of gender, rather than perpetuating a gendered hierarchy or power relationship.

The epistemological construction of Chinese gender history is based on postmodernist feminist theory and is firmly anchored in Chinese context. This approach yields an understanding of gender that diverges from both Western conceptions of gender and the traditional women's history that has been subsumed in social history. The resulting paradigm of gender history focuses on why sex and gender have maintained a stable consistency with Chinese society and culture over time, and it helps us understand gender from gender equality perspective. Consequently, it provides historical rooted cultural insights for contemplating contemporary gender issues.

(2) Methodological dimension

In terms of the research methodology of gender history, scholars such as Du Fangqin and Wang Zheng⁵¹ have explicitly propose that it is necessary to consider gender issues from a complexity and intersectionality of socio-cultural context, rather than merely from gender perspective.

Traditional Chinese society is constructed by various hierarchies, including gender hierarchies such as male superiority and female inferiority, as well as social hierarchies based on political, ethical, and economic divisions, such as "嫡庶尊卑"(the precedence of the first and the concubine), "长幼有序"(the order of the eldest and the youngest), and "贵贱之别"(the expensive and the inferiority of the cheap), but the gender hierarchy such as "男尊女卑"(male superiority and female inferiority) typically does not exist in isolation but intersects with other hierarchies. Based on this perspective, Gao Shiyu suggests that Chinese scholars researching gender history need to consider the relationship between gender and the other categories.⁵² This methodology emphasizes the importance of intersectionality, particularly with regard to other hierarchy and categories, and cautions against exaggerate the impact of gender.

Based on this recognition, some scholars propose and apply the interdisciplinary approach as a crucial research method for Chinese gender history. For example, Duan Tali uses folklore, sociological, and psychological methods to show the impact of ethnic integration on the status of women during the Tang Dynasty.⁵³ Hou Jie and Wang Qingjia combine gender history with body-history and emotion-history,⁵⁴ incorporating psychological and physical dimensions into gender. Wang Xiaojian seeks to explore the cultural factors that have historically influenced gender relations, and to understand the process of establishing a patriarchal society and its rules.⁵⁵

Given the diversity of Chinese ethnicities, regions, and cultures, Wang Zheng indicates that difference should also be considered as a category of analysis in Chinese gender history.⁵⁶ The utility of the category of difference is particularly salient in the study of gender history among China's ethnic minorities and local regions. Such as Yang Guocai suggests that regional artefacts and tangible materials have demonstrated that gender differences have regional and ethnic specificities.⁵⁷ Luo Suwen points out that gender provides a lens for analysing the relationship between groups and the dynamics and mechanisms of social change in modern China. She emphasizes the importance of examining the intrinsic links between the same group across different regions, and between different groups and social change within the same region.⁵⁸ Their researches use an interdisciplinary empirical method, and demonstrate that difference is an essential category for understanding the diversity of Chinese gender history.

⁵⁰ Li, 女性/性别的学术问题[Academia issues of Women/Gender], 2005. Liu Ning, Liu Xiaoli, '从妇女研究到社会性别研究--李小江教授访谈录'[From the Study of Women to Gender Research-An Interview with Professor Li Xiaojian], 晋阳学刊[Jinyang Academic Journal], 6(2007), pp. 3-14.

⁵¹ Du Fangqing, '中国社会性别的历史文化寻踪'[The Historical and Cultural Pursuit of Gender in China], 天津:天津社科院出版社[Tianjin: Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences Press], 1998, p.1. Wang Zheng, '女性的崛起: 当代美国的女权运动'[The Rise of Women: The Feminist Movement in Contemporary America], 当代中国出版社[Contemporary China Press], 1995, p.2.

⁵² Gao, '妇女史研究三议'[Three Proposals for the Study of Women's History], 1997, p.16.

⁵³ Duan Tali, '唐代妇女地位研究'[Study on the Status of Women in the Tang Dynasty], 北京:人民出版社[Beijing: People's Publishing House], pp.1-2.

⁵⁴ Research in the intersecting fields of gender history, body history and emotion history primarily reference the following articles. Hou Jie, Jiang Hailong, '身体史研究刍议[A Tentative Suggestion for the Research on Body History]', 文史哲[Journal of Literature History and Philosophy], 287:2(2005), pp.5-10. Shi Min, '中国现代女性身体史研究述评[A Review of Research on the Body History of Chinese Contemporary Women]', 史学月刊[Journal of Historical Science], 2(2017), pp.102-111. Wang, '性别史和情感史的交融: 情感有否性别差异的历史分析'[The Intersection of Gender and Emotions History: A Historiographical Analysis of Gendered Human Emotions], 2022, pp.4-15. Wang Qingjia, '当代史学的"情感转向": 第22届国际历史科学大会和情感史研究[The Emotional Turn in Contemporary Historiography]', 史学理论研究[Historiography Bimonthly], 4(2015), pp.127-130. Wang Qingjia, '拓展历史学的新领域: 情感史的兴盛及其三大特点[Exploring A New Horizon of History: The Rise of the History of Emotions and Its Three Major Characteristics]', 北京大学学报(哲学社会科学版)[Journal of Peking University(Philosophy and Social Sciences)], 56:4(2019), pp. 87-95.

⁵⁵ Wang Xiaojian, '中国古代性别结构的化学分析'[Literary and Cultural Analyses of Gender Structure in Ancient China], 北京:社会科学文献出版社[Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press], 2010, p.47.

⁵⁶ Wang, '浅议社会性别学在中国的发展'[The Development of Gender in China], 2001, pp.34-44.

⁵⁷ Yang Guocai, '云南高校女性学学科建设的本土化尝试'[The Nativizing Attempt in the Development of Women's Studies in Yunnan's Institution of Higher Learning]. 妇女研究论丛[Collection of Women's Studies], 57:1(2004), pp.32-34. Li Xiaojian, '文化、教育与性别——本土经验与学科建设'[Culture, Education and Gender: Indigenous experience and discipline building], 江苏: 江苏人民出版社[Jiangsu: Jiangsu People's Publishing House], 2002.

⁵⁸ Luo Suwen, '女性与近代中国社会'[Women and Modern Chinese Society], 上海:上海人民出版社[Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House], 1996, pp. 528-529.

CONCLUSION: SYNTHESIS AND FUTURE

The concept of gender theorised by American historian Joan Scott as the core of feminist theory, which Chinese scholars refer to "gender theory", has undergone a process of acceptance, indigenization and construction in Chinese academia. In this process, Scholars propose various assumptions based on incorporate the nuances of China's perceptions of gender, those are their conscious efforts to construct new theories based on Chinese contexts epistemologically and methodologically.

Chinese scholars are dedicated to minimizing the influence of Western feminist thought on the theoretical construction of gender history, and Scott's emphasis on linguistic analysis. Instead, they build upon Chinese empiricist historiography, using difference as a category of analysis and combining multidisciplinary research methods to diversify the theoretical construction of Chinses gender history. Ding Juan agrues that theoretical diversification of gender should be respected by acknowledging the contradictions and limitations within various assumptions, and by assimilating beneficial views to refine and develop themselves.⁵⁹ Consequently, gender based on problem-solving, becomes a tool that provides multiple methodologies, rendering Chinese gender history histography more neutral and objective.

⁵⁹ Ding Juan, Ma Yi, Huang Guixia, “社会主义初级阶段男女平等理论研讨会”观点综述[An Overview of The Theoretical Seminar on Gender Equality in The Primary Stage of Socialism], *妇女研究论丛*[Collection of Women's Studies], 57:1(2004), pp. 62-66.