

# IN THE EVENT OF WOMEN

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## TANI BARLOW

**IN THE EVENT OF WOMEN**



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WOMEN**

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**TANI BARLOW**

**DUKE**

**UNIVERSITY  
PRESS**

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*To Ruri*

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“Advertising Ephemera and the Angel of History,” *positions: asia critique* 20, no. 1 (Winter 2012).

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“‘What Is a Poem?’: The Event of Women and the Modern Girl as Problems in Global or World History,” in *Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World: System, Scale, Culture*, edited by David Palumbo-Liu, Bruce Robbins, and Nirvana Tanoukhi (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

## Introduction to the Event

On April 10, 1967, the Red Guard Jinggangshan Regiment at Qinghua University staged a series of struggle sessions against Wang Guangmei (1921–2006), a high-ranking Communist Party member and Chinese premier Liu Shaoqi's wife. The trial sounded core themes in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (aka the Cultural Revolution), conventionally dated 1966 to 1976. In Wang's case, Jiang Qing (1914–1991), a leading member of the Gang of Four directing the Chinese Cultural Revolution, authorized a Red Guard undergraduate faction under chemical engineering student Kuai Dafu's (1945–) leadership to organize the trial against Wang.<sup>1</sup> In this book's final chapter, I describe and analyze the “line error,” or crime charged, that Wang was pursuing a Khrushchevian, revisionist, anti-Communist diplomacy. But at immediate stake is Wang's singular offense, the characteristics that made her more than just another high-ranking official who had “taken the capitalist road.”

According to the students' charge document, Wang had traveled to Indonesia on state business in 1963 and was photographed offering Sukarno a light for his cigarette. Also in the course of the trip, Wang had worn a hat made in Hong Kong, an allegedly provocative dress, a brooch, and a string of pearls that Jiang Qing, also ranked *nomenklatura* and Chairman Mao Zedong's wife, had ordered her *to not wear*.<sup>2</sup> At stake in the conflict, then, was whether Wang's performance of Chinese state femininity had been adequate: once her antagonists successfully criminalized this

behavior, they set off what became a far-reaching crisis over the political truth of Chinese women. In the lopsided struggle between an ascendant Jiang Qing and an embattled Wang, the question facing revolutionary youth in the Mao political movement was how to install a *true* truth of women. Kuai prevailed in 1967. Wang gave a series of self-criticisms and spent twelve years in prison.<sup>3</sup> Jiang Qing was sentenced to death in 1981 for her criminal behavior, including the persecution of Wang. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, significant cohorts of Chinese men and women convulsively repudiated the truth of women that Jiang Qing's group had sought to install politically. And eleven years into her commuted sentence Jiang hung herself.

Since an event is a politically inspired action to install a newly discovered truth, what is at stake in the political event of women? In the late seventeenth century, a cohort of friends in Holland and England concluded that life involved eggs. Egg theory dominated speculative European material philosophy for 150 years while at the same time no one knew for sure what eggs did. Ovists and spermists debated whether sperm were actually tiny little eggs and the ovum a mere culture or medium or, contrarily, whether sperm's vapors were stimulating latencies in eggs. Since no one (including Baruch Spinoza, active in this debate) knew how eggs created new individuals, egg discoveries were a nonevent. Mathematician Pierre Louis Maupertuis (1698–1759), entomologist Renè Antoine Ferchault de Reaumur (1683–1757), and precursor geneticist Gregor Mendel (1822–1884) each added building blocks; Matthias Jakob Schleiden (1804–1881) and Theodor Schwann (1810–1882) demonstrated that life existed at the cellular level; and, finally, Oscar Hertwig (1849–1922) became the first person to see an egg and a sperm create a zygote and to definitively show that the conceptus was alive. And still this did not constitute a political event.

The event of women is the political determination that in human social existence women are men's equivalent because physiological sexual reproduction is true. Rather than being always absent or latent or forgotten participants in historical events, political voluntarism has and continues to transform physiological truth about women into its own historical event: this is part of "in the event of women." Another is that even today the biology of reproduction, human or chicken, is not fully understood; investigations always find more data to adjust what can be considered truth.<sup>4</sup> But we know that out of the laboratory science of Darwin's time, which enfolded seventeenth- and eighteenth-century egg and sperm

theory and practical experiments in nineteenth-century industrial cattle breeding, the truth of sex surged into philosophical circles. Charles Darwin had correctly argued that huge numbers of life-forms reproduce by fusing bits of spermatoc material to egg material: activists made his insight politically potent. So-called social Darwinian sociologists and general philosophers acted on this truth. Even as we move toward extrauterine reproduction and the cyberneticization of humanity, altering nineteenth and twentieth-century understanding, the truth of women's contribution to human sexual reproduction cannot be rescinded or denied.

Significant implications follow. First, there is nothing Chinese or European about human physiology or for that matter the physiological truth that women are humans: political actions taken on the basis of eighteenth- to nineteenth-century reproductive science *are* historically singular and contingent, obviously. Second, events are not discoveries; they are prolonged efforts to demonstrate a truth, in this case that women are, just like men, procreative human beings, mammals with natural rights, and that women are different because in species life, organic vital elements originating in different organs, the testes and ovaries, are *sine qua non* for regenerative life. It turns out that Wang Guangmei and Jiang Qing's 1967 conflict over women's feminine performance is only one episode in a longer, unresolved political and historical event of women.<sup>5</sup>

## NATURAL AND SOCIAL FACTS

Establishing how women are the reproductive equivalent of men transformed truth. All over the educated world, women abruptly appeared at the center of national history. News about our mammal origins accompanied the commodity form, too, and tangible domestic commodities materialized the event of women under conditions of late nineteenth-century corporate imperialism. Branded soap and insecticide ads, rolled tobacco, neomedical elixirs, affordable automobiles, chemical and bean effluvia fertilizer, birth control and venereal disease potions, hormonal treatments, Kotex pads, chemical masculinity enhancers, romance-inducing body improvements, and so on all conveyed the new procreation story. So, while the truth of sexual reproduction is going to always be transitive, the event of women is a lavishly documentable, never fully completed political struggle to establish truth and social justice.

Historians often define woman in relation to man. They draw on measures like sexual difference, psychic difference, sex-coded labor, or role theory. For instance, a now-everyday argument explains individual variety in terms of “gender difference.” The gender debate has bravely struggled to fuse the natural science of physiological difference to the social science of behavior and in so doing to capture the differences among women, including disparities like ethnicity, racial coding, class, sexual orientation, and desire. Gender is also, historically speaking, a way of reconfiguring colonial discourses, what economic imperialism revealed about human diversity, and this includes the distinctions—women, men, and others—drawn everywhere differently. Understanding women not as latent participants in events but an event as such focuses us on women’s recent origin story and helps peel away gender theory’s wobbly efforts to reconcile the natural and the social.

Installing evolutionary truth demanded attention and flexibility. This is easier to see analogically: if you get an infection in your toe and you soak it, cauterize it, keep it clean, and invite a shaman to pray over it, your toe usually heals. You do not need to know the etiology of infectious agents. Since 1890 modernists have developed germ theory to explain what is going on in your toe. By the 1920s antibiotics often cured the infection without the shaman. We still use shamans, but science has altered our worldly understanding of why shamans are helpful. What happens when we examine how transitive and profoundly disturbing discoveries change thinking and living? How does medicine, your toe healing because you have eaten a known active agent, transform your perception of your body? We know not only that antibiotics have cured tuberculosis but also that there are now antibiotic-resistant forms of tuberculosis. But the scientific imprimatur, even when the science becomes outdated or is proven untrue, changes historical subjects and our perception of our humanity.

Imagine believing that according to the best and most scientific theories available in the whole world, women *naturally* choose to mate with the best available males, just like other mammals? That only culture or tradition stands in the way of natural female sexual desire and racial improvement? And what about the alleged truth that in their natural state women have created the male to aid in human species evolution? *In the Event of Women* reconstructs moments when these novel modern concepts of sexuality and difference rose to the status of a truth. But the book’s argument considers a realization about historical universals in a

place where truth claims are not usually sought. Knowledge, the indisputable truth of women in this case, concerns the world. In this book, that world is China. Arguments and evidence are located in Chinese modern treaty ports, and at the end of this book, these resolve in a paradoxism of Chinese revolutionary eventual struggle over the truth of women.

China is a place where people live and think and act. It need not always be a place where historians compare things because difference is not always the most urgent question. Nonetheless, a historian must conjecture what is singular about this world—not in relation to somewhere else, but, rather, asking, “What is singular about the event of women in China?” Singularities arise explicitly and implicitly throughout this book. First is the role that revolutionary politics has played in the historical struggle over women in China. Marxist philosophy and critical sociology not only played a distinctive role in struggles for power but prevailed after the People’s Republic of China became a sovereign state. In simple chronological terms, 1920 through 2020 is an entire century of violent bloody insurrections; the violence lasts a century and a half and is even more catastrophic if one begins with women soldiers in the mid-nineteenth-century Taiping Revolution, a civil war costing approximately forty million people their lives. There may be similarities to the Chinese case elsewhere in the world, but the role played by women in China’s revolutionary history is substantial.

A second singularity is likely the language revolution. Literate Chinese elites played a significant role in the event of women. Not only did a great late-dynastic language revolution upend conventional literary expression, but in the crushing effort to establish mass literature, a language revolution disrupted elite monopoly over high literacy. When the imperial examination system was abolished in 1905, modernist conceptual problems and scientific and social scientific theories flooded into mass circulation. Literati educated under the old system argued that hybridization of literary expression had to occur or too many “untranslatables” would thwart Chinese efforts to understand physical science. Particularly objective social sciences would remain out of reach because sophisticated Chinese writing always referred back to itself. This perception lies behind the well-known flow of nouns or neologisms into modern Chinese, particularly out of Japanese. In the process, generic forms, including those associated with conventional (i.e., nonmodernist) female writers and poets, got savaged and kicked aside.<sup>6</sup> As this book’s chapters on sociology and mimeses argue, the language revolution anchored a belief that written



texts in Chinese could represent reality, the real, of social life but only after the Chinese language adjusted the relation of written and spoken expressions. Scientific language reform and mobilization of the event of women into revolutionary goals are fundamental singularities characterizing Chinese conditions in the event of women.

National differences and singularities in everyday life aside, my approach to writing the event of women modifies what historians mean when using the term *context*. The prevailing method supposes people live inside a context. Texts, what people write or draw, fit into a context like puzzle pieces fit into a larger image. In this view, historians adjust for bias—a class bias or a national bias, for instance—but texts are read in order to illustrate real class relations or real empirical conditions. This book assumes, on the contrary, that people act under given conditions beyond which, in most circumstances, nothing else is thinkable. In mundane times, we establish a world where we can live and explain our existence. Every once in a while, however, a wager is thrown and a truth proposed that lies beyond these normative conditions. That is how an event is triggered. Those who see or appreciate the new truth will assert it and argue out its implications, even fight other people, to determine how the new truth will be established. *In the Event of Women* presumes that there is no privileged position where a text represents a context. Conditions are conditions. They remain inert. To explain how new things enter the world (the child in Europe, the event of a global proletariat, a steam engine, a colonial bourgeoisie, extermination camps, the science of homosexuality, society as the sine qua non of human life, etc.), historians amass evidence and clarify conditions where these new truths became actable. When woman is an event, not a representation or a performance, there is no comparative axis, no other, but rather a voluntarist action to confirm a new truth. In the event of women, this new truth is that every woman possesses natural rights and an innate knowledge about sexual selection. When freed to express those inborn rights and to choose to procreate with the best available mate, women perfect life itself and the social processes that accompany evolution.<sup>7</sup>

From the mid-nineteenth through the early twenty-first century, theorists, consumers, and readers in China decided that they lived, *as all humans do*, in a society and not in a cosmos or an empire. Society became the platform where they hammered out all the implications this new knowledge brought with it. Ontologies (what is Being) and epistemologies (the ways we know things) got tested. All problems became social



problems. All behaviors became social roles. The claims natural sciences made about factual truth got hammered into theory and practice on the anvil of social science. Society gave access to what new intellectuals believed were previously unreachable yet universally incontestable truths underlying cultural differences. Social structures, social problems, social roles, social epistemology, and the various ontologies of social existence had the power to resituate educated Chinese people in New China, in the new world.

Why a string of pearls is worth fighting over and why, indeed, it has a role to play in a history written fifty-five years later are good questions. A social performance, a contest over what is real, unfolded on a social platform, on a planet accurately described in astrophysics, during the social evolutionary ascent of humanity, and in the larger struggle to figure out Chinese society's place in the universe. Blasting out of the river of time and explaining a struggle over the first lady's dress rests on far-flung conditions and human voluntarism, commitment, and someone's passionate willingness to act on women's social and natural truth. This book proposes that in the event of women, the female person—woman or women—became a pivot in modernist intellectual work. The shock of physiologically distinguished human sexual reality set off ingeniously creative theoretical projects. The book analyzes some of them. But it also argues that “women” is not a projection, an abstraction, a gender, a signifier, a flow, or a void. It is also not an effect of Western representation or cultural imperialism. Nor is it some great reveal or preexisting condition, since projecting physiologically defined women backward in time cannot explain female's or human's historical experience.

## THE EVENT IN THE EVENT OF WOMEN

Focusing history on events has advantages. It highlights the fact that people do things. Whether people are acting in response to an apprehension that Christ has risen or in relation to having established that human ovaries contribute an egg to procreation, historiography of events presupposes action, or volition. Moreover, theories of event are neither structuralist nor poststructuralist, because they rest on the assumption of historical presence rather than the vortex of representation. In Alain Badiou's philosophy, the vortex supports naming, nomination, but the worlds' presence means that human subjects are acting

inside their real conditions; they are not merely discursive subjects or subject to discourse. One need not embrace the ancient Greek theory that the universal is the real apprehended mathematically, or Badiou's idiosyncratic point that Paul Cohen's modern set theory explains how historical newness enters the world, to appreciate that history is material in the sense of leaving indelible marks. Events not only arise out of human acts but accrete. They even wait, as Walter Benjamin pointed out, for historians to wrench them up out of disremembered or buried materials.<sup>8</sup> Who acts, what temporality animates accretions, what the relation of politics is to history, are acutely difficult matters. In a post-Engelsian, post-Foucauldian historiography of the event, there is no teleology, no evidence of epistemic rupture or temporal termination, only subjective action, latent novelty, and discoveries that are universalizable.

Some theorists have argued that events should be understood using notions of emplotment or "discursive construction." According to Hayden White, literary narrative emplots or colors or emotionally characterizes the transmission of past events. Since we cannot write history without using narratives, history in its written form must consist of novelistic typologies of emplotment. Historian-philosopher Michel Foucault demonstrated why many historical things are in fact *nonevents* (prison reforms, for instance) because these nonevents do not change things (they actually extend the existing power of carceral disciplinary logic, for instance); modernity changes little except to provide even more punitive punishments such as the panopticon, surveillance society, and rationality. Like White, Foucault was relatively disinterested in *philosophizing* events, but unlike White he did not take the event for granted. *Eventalization* (a Foucauldian neologism) means the historian intervenes in a structuralist historical account to highlight or demonstrate a relative discontinuity, an "epistemic shift" or a rupture, in the otherwise expected. As Arianna Bove has noted, Foucault used Annales school historiography to anchor his own historico-philosophical concerns and to initiate ways of extracting singularities or in his language "eventalizing" topics like biopower, sexuality, and discipline. This gave him a way to claim that an epistemic shift had taken place even in the absence of structural change in the historical *longue durée*.<sup>9</sup>

Gilles Deleuze, Badiou's favorite antagonist, in contrast, held (contra Foucault) that events originate in speech or illocutionary acts. Rooted in the Greek Stoics' axiom of the power of propositions, as cited in Patton, Deleuze held that events "actualize particular events in the social

field”; this is why “politics frequently takes the form of struggle over the appropriate description of events.”<sup>10</sup> The notion that illocutionary acts are a foundation for historical truth is widespread. Deleuze’s distinction between the ideal (illocutionary) event and an actualized event is the problem here. Once the claim shifts from philosophical questions to historical truth, Deleuze’s idealist periodization of historical time is unhelpful and anyway not sustainable.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, given persistent low-key debates over historiography and historical method, it is not surprising that some China and India historians consider Foucauldian eventality to be a heuristic and argue, in one famous example, that modern Chinese historiography “dispersed” and denigrated the past and therefore denied the *real*. A good historian’s job, this argument went, is to rescue real, that is native, history from something called the nation and to redeem events, developing a more sympathetic reading rooted in a traditional or *indigenous* cultural context.<sup>12</sup>

Badiou’s key value to the event debate is political, and that is the primary reason I agonistically contest him, rather than engaging other theorists of the event. This study seeks to grasp how new things occur. In the event of women, the stakes are revolutionary: women’s recently discovered biogenetic, hormonal body appears historically as a newly realized social temporality. One implication is that modern women from the outset have been a set of commands to recognize and authorize a subject’s integral station and to evaluate her acts as different from yet (in the future) equal to those of men. Given these practical claims to modern standing, to be a co-modernist in a modern society, women categorically will be “victims of oppression” who “declare” and are “part of a tentative search for an autonomous politics of the oppressed.”<sup>13</sup> In sociological rationality, women’s natural rights will be violated *even as they are installed* since inherent rights are latent, not necessarily manifest: natural rights do not need to be manifest in order to exist. In this scheme newness arrives in the world because subjects laying claim, or *fidelity* in his philosophical language, to the new will, slightly adjusting Badiou’s position, open a way of writing history, acknowledging that women and men who share the belief that women are full natural or physiological subjects will continue presenting themselves.

Technically, an event, in Badiou’s philosophy, is something that happens within a set of possibilities, when a latency or so-called ultra-one is noticed; notation changes how that given set is understood. But events are not possible in the absence of a subject that recognizes and militates

(i.e., sets into motion a generic procedure) for that newly configured, formerly latent entity. When significant things are recognized, and the thing gets acted on, it is possible that actors rupture an older order on the bases of new truths. Woman appears, a native to a situation, and the event's adherents recognize woman's claims to personhood. While a subject, the biological female human is an element arising out of unfathomably complex historical conditions, once it is discerned or declared or noticed, declaration makes the subject an immanently discovered truth.<sup>14</sup> The conditions underlying the event of women in China as laid out in this book's chapters are precisely that set of possibilities, just as the figures stepping forward to iterate over and over the qualities and capacities of women demonstrate the truth of the initial assertion.

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There are, nonetheless, two hesitations about Badiou's philosophy of the event. The first is its ambiguous or even slippery relation to the world, to history not just of politics but of philosophical, artistic, affective, scientific thought and action. Many critics have remarked on this, but Alenka Zupančič said it best when she noted that in fact for Badiou, "there is [an implicit] fifth condition of philosophy" beyond art, mathematics, love, and politics, which is that philosophy has to pull itself away from the immediate grip of its own conditions, while nevertheless remaining under the effect of these conditions.<sup>15</sup> Zupančič is noting a useful paradox in Badiou, which is that to *be philosophical* (i.e., generic), philosophy must pull away from precisely the worldly conditions that it seeks to interpret, conditions that can be neither fully denied nor fully determined yet that announce philosophy's own arrival onto the scene. The other basic reservation concerns how Badiou restricts the relation of truth and worldly circumstance to what he calls *sequence*. This, as many critics note, impoverishes history and runs the risk that a great-man political history is reinstalled. In a sleight of hand, in other words, political sequence comes to substitute for history as such, which allows the Badiou scholar to engage in what historians would recognize to be history writing, while at the same time disavowing the relation of the political sequence to the conditions for thought that have played a role in revolutionary transformation. This definitively marks Badiou's distance from the Marxian tradition.<sup>16</sup>

*In the Event of Women* exploits these ambiguities in Badiou's philosophy of event.<sup>17</sup> It goes directly to what Zupančič calls the fifth condition

of philosophy in order to divulge a past space of thinking and political action and to extend that past space into our contemporary moment. Technically this involves weighing not philosophy but *thinking*, that is, local debates in Chinese treaty-port scholarly communities, side by side with the physical conditions where these communities worked and the economic and political processes restructuring the social field of life. Reconstructing a century-old world of conditions for thinking and the content of thinking is an unapologetically historical task. So is archiving and analyzing vernacular expression of advanced modernism in modernity's actual physical environment, the "grip" or restrictions of philosophy's conditions.

Juxtaposing materials opens to visibility spaces where people were thinking and engaging in political action. An archive of Chinese commercial advertising images dating from the late nineteenth through the first half of the twentieth century, for instance, illuminates contemporaneous theoretical work aimed at strategizing advertising methods and selling science in those decades; lays out histories of corporations that extended finance capital into Chinese emergent commodity markets, along with their commodity-distribution plans; raises to the horizon of history the output of creative intellectuals, literary figures, translators, critics, social science theorists, commentators, and scholars who established the *thereness* of society and its facticity and who eventually institutionalized a logos of sociology and the core rationality of the social sciences.

In a consequently frenzied world, translating and interpreting calques or neologisms accompanied sociology's advance into a physical environment that would overnight become saturated with social logics and motivated by what Tong Lam calls a new "passion for facts."<sup>18</sup> In addition to advertising arts, industry, statist social surveys, and the dynamic world of imaginative vernacular sociology, *In the Event of Women* also considers the tense relation of what Asia historians consider an important economic regime, that of international finance capital, to the logos of social theory.<sup>19</sup> New conditions for thinking and the modernist philosophies that thinkers developed revolved around changing economic regimes; political contradictions; logical impasses; theories of society, femininity, humanity, and sexuality; the struggle to evaluate how scientific truths worked in liberated social relationships; and, most centrally, the appearance of a revolutionary subject, women, in society.

This study is thus neither philosophy nor a helpful subsidiary effort to provide Badiou's philosophy with a "ground." Zupančič's assertion, coming as it does from Badiou's own camp of psychoanalytic philosophers,

suggests that Badiou's ahistorical theory of the event inhabits the double bind described in the following.<sup>20</sup> Zupančič declines Badiou's injunction against history in a way long familiar in Lacanian feminist positions, which, while psychoanalytic, parts ways from Badiou's and Lacan's austere, authoritarian politics and judgmental prescriptions against castrated subjects.<sup>21</sup> Demanding that the haughty Badiou "venture into the dense thickets of real history, into the social and historical determination of events," Daniel Bensaïd also relentlessly noted the contradictory or magical way that Badiou claims on the one hand that "there can be no transcendental truth, only truths in situation and in relation," while on the other hand adamantly refusing to consider that truths are in fact deduced from premises. "Detached from its historical conditions," Bensaïd wrote in apparent revulsion, the "pure diamond of truth, the event, just like the notion of the absolutely aleatory encounter in the late Althusser, is akin to a miracle. . . . [A] *politics without politics is akin to a negative theology*."<sup>22</sup> Bensaïd dislodged the event from Badiou's philosophical moorings in the name of history, as Zupančič had in a less manifest or gross fashion.

And yet Badiou remains a better theorist of event than disciplinary historians like Foucault or Joan Scott because Badiou insists that an event is never a piece of the banal flow of vegetative life. Unlike Foucault, who simply left sexual difference out of his theory of sexuality, Badiou cleanly admits into his schema the scandal of the impossibility of a psychoanalytic female subject. This separates him from Scott's psychodynamic fiction of a gender, in which she claims to recognize the female subject while at the same time disavowing it. The strength of the Badiou proposal, therefore, is that he restricts the notion to phenomena that are subjective, unprecedented, and broadly or irrevocably transformative. To the degree that philosophy can never fully extricate its mechanisms from the conditions that support their rationality, Badiou initiates a vision of event that can in fact accommodate the event of women, the revolutionary appearance of a female, libidinous, mammal, human subject on the historical horizon. A history of the event of women distinguishes *eventality* from *event* and, the most popular clichéd meme of all, the *epistemic event*. Finally, it may help establish what is possible "in the event of women" to reposition feminist critique historically, a sound strategic weapon with a cogent logos of its own.

Yan Fu, Kawakami Hajime, Shusui (Kotoku Denjiro), Qu Qiubai, Chen Han-seng, Li Da, Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, Nicolai Bukharin,



Vladimir Lenin, Rudolf Hilferding, Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Georg Simmel, Lester Frank Ward, and many other Chinese Enlightenment sources established definitive logics, authoritatively proclaiming that humans live in society and are social animals and that society is organized in developmental stages. In enclaves like Shanghai, they wrote about uneven social progress in capitalist development and about how to situate oneself in the world. Historically, then, how true are their “Chinese” theories; were these people right? Usually, confronted with such a question, historians respond that all ideas are divisible back into their contexts and that ideas make sense only contextually, which is to say that history cannot be true or untrue, because it is always a version of something alleged to be truer or even unknowably true. The cliché that truth is contextual does not resolve problems inherent in the question of whether Chinese social theory had truly diagnosed its own socio-economic conditions. Early twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals worked at the edge of the discernible. Further, the truths established a century ago are still considered true, for the most part.

In the tradition of Walter Benjamin, Henri Lefebvre, and Michel de Certeau, this study finds correlations everywhere. One of the means by which credence is established or by which people show in their activities and their protestations that society exists, that women are subjects, and so on is by situating and recognizing how everyday life is defined sociologically. The conditions of thought are found in what Johanna Drucker insists is the material communication of ideas in graphic form.<sup>23</sup> “The task of making knowledge visible,” she writes, “does not depend on an assumption that images represent things in the world. Graphics make and construct knowledge in a direct and primary way.”<sup>24</sup> When I understand commercial ephemera as “arguments made in graphical form” and take these graphical arguments to be an underused archive, advertisement images suddenly become surprisingly philosophically and sociologically useful.

So historical visibility in the form, for instance, of a toothpaste advertising image is not a metaphor or a representation; it is a graph of the real. Cartoon images like the light-bulb woman are meaningful because they are, among other factors, a *pictorial* version of ideas. A reason to write the history of the Chinese advertising industry is that ads transformed the landscape; inside new media and outside, in the street, on the trolley, on the building tops, cartoon and photo images of social life surrounded and reconfirmed the newness of the new society. Graphesis raises questions about precedent and about how meaning changes, since

graphic artists also draw on past and present to imagine the future, just as arguments based in literacy do. Coded into little commercial cartoons and large billboards, however much precedent is in play, are the same questions intellectual historians, militants, and engaged critics confronted: what is modern, how past is the past, what ghosts haunt colonial modernity that might undermine the revolutionary future, how is newness recognizable and what will it take to expand it, what guarantees the new?

Writing in the event of women peels away the gender dilemma and places women in the same modern historical framework as the proletariat, the White, the national. In the world of history, nothing is forever, but it is material, which is why the Chinese bourgeoisie or aspirational middle class struggled over the truth of women under specific conditions laid out here: imperialism, commercial capitalism, commodity culture, nationalism and anti-imperialism, natural rights claims, social science theory, and so on. In the historical event of women, the woman is a thing. That is why in the discussion of women's modern history, there is a beginning, an event, a history, and no going back. *In the Event of Women* predicates conditions of thought inextricable from thought's content, and willed actions taken in the moment of a perceived historical now. Conditions, thoughts, and actions are visible and open to discovery and analysis, no matter where on the globe historical action was taken. The question of the relation of the event of women to feminist struggles for justice remains open.

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There are six tightly linked chapters in this argument. Chapter 1, "Conditions of Thinking," lays out the economic upheaval that ushered in circumstances making an event of women thinkable. Chinese modern social theory starting in the mid-nineteenth century repeatedly and with increasing urgency declared that woman is a finite, localized organism, a something, a living categorical, a someone specific. Pretty much everyone agreed on the alleged fact that women's eugenic contribution accelerated when they bought and used new industrially made commodities. Therefore, the chapter focuses on Andersen, Meyer & Company (AMCO); Morishita Jintan; British American Tobacco Company (BAT); Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Company; and Brunner Mond and Co. also known, after 1926, as Imperial Chemical Industries or ICI. It introduces the



late nineteenth-century international firm, or limited liability company (LLC), and shows how the LLC's financialization of capital in Chinese treaty ports and its strategic, fantastic market-building strategies worked. As Wen-hsin Yeh pointed out years ago, becoming modern poses a historical problem.<sup>25</sup> One means of approaching the modernity question is to scrutinize industrially produced commodities, particularly branded ones. The conditions for desiring and acquiring industrially produced commodities are present in the financialized, large-scale, imperialist corporations, the technological revolution in printing, and the social science of advertising. All of these are visible in the lovely image of a Shanghai female advertising agent at the center of a large GE electric bulb (see figure 1.1). This image—a conventional, homely bit of ephemera—encodes corporate governance, “the firm,” banking and investment strategies, colonial law in Chinese treaty ports (established through a system of unequal treaties), legal and corporate institutions, economic theories, and efforts to control property rights over corporate, branded commodities and electricity itself. Like most of the book's chapters, this one generalizes from massive publication projects including newspapers, journals of opinion, and corporate histories.

Chapter 2, “Foundational Chinese Sociology,” analyzes how a leading sociological stream developed the truth of sexual difference in social life. Sociology founders Qu Qiubai and Li Da both took the truth of women to be a given. Major figures interpreting European philosophy and Bolshevik Marxism, these two sociologists fused modes of production, relations of production, and social evolution to the biology of human reproduction. Because they began from the assumption that social and biological evolution are inextricably entwined and that labor had to have evolved in a bodily or reproductive sense, they concurred that primitive society had been matriarchal. And in Li Da's case, that biological humanity originated in female form and only gradually, under conditions of natural selection, produced a male capable of inseminating a female partner. Recognizing that science and sexual sciences are truthful caused Qu Qiubai and his peers to reconsider how language itself communicates truth. Particularly Qu but also most May Fourth intellectuals and social scientists came to advocate a mimetic Chinese. Mimesis or representationalism is the epistemological problem lying at the bottom of arguments for vernacular language reform. The chapter opens vernacular language reform contextually in this regard: language had to support women's truth to be considered truthful accounting, a presentation of the real.

Chapter 3, “Vernacular Sociology,” refers to an incompatible mix of natural science, social science, and theories of literary mimesis that constituted Chinese cosmopolitan opinion. Physiological women’s prominent role in evolutionary theory has meant that natural and social science are difficult to disaggregate in modern thinking no matter where on the planet sociology and biology appear. Vernacular sociology fuses social evolution with commodity distribution. That is its first special characteristic. Chinese Marxist sociology proposes that procreation and labor power are tightly wound together, so that changes in evolutionary biology are intertwined with how labor power supports specific kinds of social relations like the primal horde, the matriarchy, feudal patriarchy, and so on. In vernacular sociological theory, the motor for change is usually instinct. In this set of beliefs, humans are animals, and animals have instincts, so social relations must be the effect of our instinctive needs and actions. The result is often eugenic history. A civilizational form of history, writing about the struggle of the fittest resolves in a triumphant announcement about eugenically superior stocks. Humanity can do this because, on the one hand, we are sexually differentiated, like all other mammals, and, on the other, we are wholly unlike other animals because as we evolve we change our habitat. Unlike bees or ants, we can humanly engineer prostheses to improve our social life.

Chapter 4, “The Social Life of Commercial Ephemera,” delineates Chinese commercial ephemera generically and links them to how a local ad industry sponsored modern knowledge. The knowledge embedded in ephemera is real. It remains true and has not yet been surpassed or debunked. We are evolutionary biological animals. Acknowledging that some theories are incontestably true helps clarify why history cannot just be discourse or a narrative representation of differing opinions. But it also helps explain why wrenching out old ephemera clarifies historical norms and weakens Badiou’s insupportable notion that decisive political sequences, rare and miraculous, are *historical*, while other given conditions for thinking philosophy (ephemera, waste, excrement, trivia, feminism) are historicist rubbish. It also collapses a gap separating historians and our modernist subjects. He-Yin Zhen, Qu Qiubai, Li Da, Yan Fu, Ariga Nagao, and Jiang Qing were not discursive subjects. Their declarative statements fortified truths that were and remain verifiable, that evolution explains human species-being, women are human, and so on. We continue to struggle with what our physiology means in

relation to our collectivities and solidarities, even in highly philosophical projects like Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Chapter 5, “Nakedness and Interiority,” shows psychodynamic theories marking out a modern interiority for new women. This chapter proposes that embedded, latent Freudian psychology and eugenic theory saturated mass culture and set the terms of a historical unconscious that was popularly expressed in commercial art and ad images. Vernacular sociology set a low bar and popularized instinct theory. Voiced explicitly in the speculative work of eugenic sociologist Pan Guangdan, developed over an ongoing struggle to distinguish art from pornographic advertising images, a consensus position arose that Chinese women were narcissistic. It is not completely clear why an oceanic tide of mirror-gazing girl icons swept Shanghai advertising campaigns in particular. But it certainly fortified arguments being made in contemporary social science circles about the ontological being of women. Freudian psychoanalysis emerged into Chinese translation around the same time that the European nude also made its public appearance. And while the advertising girl image is generic, its presence indicates anatomical and physiological models of female desire. Girl-centered commercial ephemera and theories of female centrality established the sticky, complex relation of advertising graphesis in commercial ephemera and vernacular sociology at elite and plebian levels.<sup>26</sup>

As chapters 2 and 4 suggest, the glamor of commodity advertising saturated the truth of women. Almost by default women became an “other other,” not just of bioman but in advertising other scenes of use value, attached to the commodity form itself.

Chapter 6, “Wang Guangmei’s *Qipao*,” lays out in hyperbolic detail the political conflict between Wang Guangmei and Jiang Qing mentioned earlier in this chapter. While this struggle was an explicit political battle pitting one vision of the truth of women against another, it was not a disagreement over the sexed body. Rather, the brutal conflict involved a hideous symptomatic conflict over what social reality an evolutionary female subject ought to live to be true to itself, or herself. Second, it proposes that a struggle session among Wang and Jiang and Red Guard factions in Beijing in 1967 can help explain why it is not possible to write modern Chinese history without recognizing the event of women.

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# Notes

## Introduction to the Event

- 1 Kuai Dafu (1945–) put Wang on trial with the cooperation of the Central Committee and the Beijing People's Liberation Army PLA Garrison, according to Tang Shaojie. See Tang Shaojie, *Yi ye zhi qiu*, 51–53.
- 2 J. Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, 242–43.
- 3 My use of the transcribed struggle against Wang draws inspiration from Russo, "Probable Defeat."
- 4 Coward et al., "Phospholipase C $\zeta$ ." The issue at stake is how, chemically speaking, sperm "induce" activity in eggs. The team finds that they do not yet know precisely how it happens, but they know this same inducement can be found in chickens.
- 5 Cobb, "Amazing 10 Years"; Briggs and Wessel, "In the Beginning . . ."; Hodge, *Human Genetics*; Hayden, *Evolutionary Rhetoric*. Wendy Hayden's work particularly reinforces my argument. When laboratory scientist Johannes Friedrich Miescher (1844–1895) isolated nucleic acid and showed it played a role in inheritance and, in the mid-twentieth century, this got the name of DNA, social evolutionist theory claimed its definitive truth.
- 6 Judge, *Republican Lens*.
- 7 See Barlow, "What Is a Poem?" for Ernesto Laclau's concept of context dependency and conditions of visibility.
- 8 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ch. 16, "Theses on the Philosophy of History."
- 9 Foucault, "Impossible Prison" (1980), in *Foucault Live*; White, *Metahistory*; Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*; Bove, *Critical Ontology*.
- 10 Patton, "World Seen from Within," 6.
- 11 Patton, "World Seen from Within."
- 12 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, but particularly China historian Prasenjit Duara's *Rescuing History from the Nation*. These historians disavow history that is credible and true.
- 13 Bensaïd, "Alain Badiou," 94–105.
- 14 Russo's scholarly impact is important here. See Day, "Interpreting the Cultural Revolution Politically," for an overview. Jacques Rancière and Fredrick Cooper have also raised the salience of the political event. See Rancière, *Althusser's Lesson* and *The Names of History*; and Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*.
- 15 Zupančič, "Fifth Condition."

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- 16 In Badiou's philosophy the political sequence is so rare that truths cannot be considered continuous, structural, or subterranean (as per the Annales school or Foucault or even Badiou's own in-house critic, Sylvain Lazarus) but are always in Badiou's system truth in a fitful, absolute, ontological disruption. Only those who make revolutions—logician Paul Cohen, poets William Shakespeare and Paul Celan, political theorist/actor Mao Zedong, philosopher of love Sigmund Freud—make *history*. Others exist under conditions neither of their own making nor in any zone of awareness that would merit the term *history* or *historical subject*. We vegetate or, in fealty, militate for already existing truth.
- 17 I do not evaluate Badiou's efforts to dispute charges of ahistoricism and philosophical authoritarianism. Between *The Century* (2005), essays written in the 1990s allegedly to produce a "history" of how the century thought itself, and in the 2009 volume *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II*, Badiou attempted to address the issues I am raising here. Two essays in *The Century* ("Sex in Crisis" and "Anabasis") can be usefully read for his continuing philosophical and historical weakness. In the first case, Badiou is forced to argue that the real of sex has no relation to historical physiology discoveries. See Myung Mi Kim's "Anna O Addendum" for a clever grasp of how Freud dealt with the "real of sex" by making the woman an addendum. In "Anabasis," Badiou again balks at the implications of his own analysis. In the same book, *The Century*, he speculates that historical modernism/modernity "is witness to a profound mutation of the question of the 'we,'" and still ends investigation denying any possibility of a we that includes women: "How are we to move from the fraternal 'we' of the epic to the disparate 'we' of togetherness, of the set, without ever giving up on the demand that there be a 'we'?"
97. I can think of many ways to resolve this rhetorical question. But as in most discussions of coming community, Badiou makes no effort to comprehend a "we" that includes eventual historical woman because the real of sex (Jacques Lacan) can never be the real of the social, the social sex, the woman, even the fantastic phallic woman. It appears that when he decided recently to reengage the dialectic, Badiou has taken the criticism more seriously. His formula of "democratic materialism" is forwarded in *Logics of Worlds* and in "Affirmative Dialectics: From Logic to Anthropology."
- 18 Lam, *Passion for Facts*. I regret that I am unable to integrate Arunabh Ghosh's 2020 monograph, *Making It Count*, into this discussion. See Ping Zhu, *Gender and Subjectivities*, for the "anamorphic feminine," meaning an inescapable feminine assumed as an element of modernity that Chinese intellectuals sought for China.
- 19 Timothy Brook and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi's *Opium Regimes: China, Britain, and Japan, 1839–1952* demonstrates the transformative impact of financial capital's tools and methods (bookkeeping, branding, franchising, distribution, commercialization, etc.) using commodified opium as its focus.
- 20 In her article "The Fifth Condition," Zupančič sketches out her view that to unravel the double bind Badiou should return to a psychoanalytic reconsideration of the politics of representation, or psychoanalytic semiotics. Zupančič would

no doubt find my argument hard to swallow. Unfortunately, there is no way to follow her further here without going completely off track, but Zupančič's rebuke is to return Badiou back to what is potentially a feminist position. Citing Badiou "La Scène du Deux," Zupančič reiterates Badiou's own Lacanian point that Two "would be counted for two in an immanent way . . . , where Two is neither fusion nor a sum; and where Two is thus in excess over that what constitutes it, without there being a Third [term] to join it." Zupančič, *Shortest Shadow*, 147. The impression Zupančič leaves is that were one to follow out her statement and Lacan's insight through Badiou, one would encounter a "pure disjunction," and this pure disjunction might be borrowed into the conceptualization of the woman subject. This would put Lacan in the midst of the Chinese theorization of sexual difference in the 1920s and 1930s, according to Howard Chiang in *After Eunuchs: Science, Medicine, and the Transformation of Sex in Modern China*.

- 21 Bensaïd, "Alain Badiou," 94–105
- 22 Bensaïd, "Alain Badiou," 101; my emphasis.
- 23 Drucker, "Graphesis," 19. "To conceptualize graphesis as visual epistemology," she argues, means pictorial graphs are a way of presenting meaning. There is a debate over how Drucker defined her term in a later major publication, *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production*. I use the 2011 paper because I like the term visual epistemology.
- 24 Drucker, *Graphesis*, 15–16: "Most information visualizations are acts of interpretation masquerading as presentation . . . arguments made in graphical form."
- 25 W. Yeh, *Becoming Chinese*.
- 26 Two major monographs on the technology transfer of biology and "the view of modern life," that is, a conjuncture of Kantianism and popular biopsychology, have established that elite and popular science or scientism tremendously affected how literate people understood their lives. These are Gad C. Issy's *The Philosophy of the View of Life in Modern Chinese Thought* and Laurence Schneider's *Biology and Revolution in Twentieth-Century China*. Both reworked Danny Wynn Ye Kwok's 1965 classic *Scientism in Chinese Thought, 1900–1950*. Scientism—in Kwok's words, "the attitude that science, in its function as an accurate natural discipline, as a total system of nature [was] capable of informing physical existence and of categorizing human life and society"—and science proper have captivated the historiography of China since the 1960s, just as they did Chinese cultural critics and science journalists in China during the 1920s and 1930s. Historians in the Modern Girl around the World Research Group have established the generic model of the "modern girl." See Modern Girl around the World Research Group, *Modern Girl around the World*.

## Chapter 1: Conditions of Thinking

- 1 "Although Andersen, Meyer, & Company Ltd. is an American corporation and the Board of Directors meets in New York, the administrative office of the Company is located in Shanghai." Ferguson, *Andersen, Meyer and Company*, 1. The CEO of