

1 *The Vagina Monologues* and Feminism(s) in China

‘The body is the scene.’ This is a quotation from a feminist activist involved in the ‘Nude Bodies for Anti-domestic Violence’ petition in 2012 (Wang, 2019: 155),¹ – a performative intervention in which activists used their naked bodies and red paint to stage a spectacle on Weibo (a major Chinese social media platform) advocating for anti-domestic violence legislation. The notion of the ‘body’ as the ‘scene’ of activism gestures to embodiment and performativity as core to the practice of feminism. Through performative practices, contemporary feminists ask: what does it mean to be a female subject? What can be made of the subject matter of Chinese feminism? How can Chinese feminism be embodied and enacted?

These three fundamental questions, which, as I shall shortly explain, began to emerge in the early twentieth century, continue to resonate a century later. Inspired by the idea that ‘the body is the scene’, this Element explores these enduring questions by focusing on the theatre-making practices of contemporary Chinese feminists. More specifically, by analysing three Chinese adaptations of *The Vagina Monologues* (1996) – *Yin Dao Du Bai* (*The Vagina Monologues*, 2003), *Yin Dao Zhi Dao* (*Vagina’s Way*, 2013), and *Dao Yin* (*Saying Vagina*, 2021) – it examines how, since the early twenty-first century, feminists have been repositioning themselves and reclaiming their subjectivity. These adaptations of North American playwright and activist Eve Ensler’s radical-feminist play have both contributed to – and mirrored – the continuities of and radical ruptures in contemporary Chinese feminist movements. To set the contemporary feminist scene for these adaptations it is helpful to briefly trace the lineage of Chinese feminism.

1.1 Chinese Feminism from Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* to Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues*

In the 1920s, Nora, the heroine of Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879), became a powerful symbol of Chinese women’s emancipation. As the play was introduced to China, its themes of individual freedom and female liberation resonated deeply, shaping feminist discourse at that time. In 1923, Chinese modernist literary pioneer Lu Xun delivered the public speech ‘What Happens after Nora Walks Out’, igniting fervent discussions amid a burgeoning feminist movement, core to which was women’s emancipation. As Lu Xun argued, true liberation required more than simply leaving the household; it necessitated

¹ This quote comes from feminist activist Datu’s Weibo post responding to misogynistic comments on radical-feminist art against domestic violence, which features female nudity. Datu writes: ‘The body is the scene, why [are you] so scared and over reacting [sic]?’ (cited in Di Wang, 2019, 155).

women's access to the public sphere, secured through economic rights and broader social transformation (Hu, 2023: 290). However, advocacy for women's emancipation from the family, Confucian traditions, and feudal codes of conduct – though directly addressing women's rights – was ultimately a secondary project within the larger pursuit of modernity. The movement for the 'new women (*xin nvxing*)' was largely driven by elite male intellectuals who prioritized the creation of a modern republic over gender equality. As theatre scholar Liyang Xia notes, 'Ibsen and his play *A Doll's House* have long held an important position in China's mainstream discourse on the nation's modernization process. In this discourse, the "new youth" – by and large male Ibsenites – take the foreground in Chinese women's emancipation movement' (2021: 218–219). Furthermore, Chinese feminism was promiscuously entangled with anti-colonialism, modernity, modernization, and nationalism. Emerging as a by-product of male political and cultural elites' response to colonialism and imperialism, modern Chinese feminism framed 'intimate bonding between women and state', refracting women's shared struggles against colonial oppression and aspirations for national liberation and modernization (Hu, 2020: 106).

Going into the 1930s, Maoist socialist feminism shaped feminist discourse in China by introducing 'class' as a key category, transforming Chinese women into socialist revolutionary subjects (*fūnv*, meaning women) and loosening feminism's historical entanglement with colonial modernity (Barlow, 2004: 8, 38). However, this model adhered to a rigid, top-down approach to women's liberation, marked by inconsistency and vacillation due to the inherently patriarchal nature of hierarchical systems (Wang, 2005: 519–520). The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) is emblematic of this feminist strand. Established in April 1949, and initially named the All-China Women's Democratic Federation, the ACWF was created as an umbrella organization for existing women's groups across the country, endorsed by the top leaders of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) (521). Through its efforts, the ACWF has sought to transform women into 'statist subjects . . . as a coherent part of the patriarchal state', advancing *funü gongzuo* (women-work) in alignment with the Party's central objectives. Since its inception, the ACWF has persistently addressed women's issues such as equal rights and welfare, mobilizing women to move beyond domestic households and participate actively in 'social production', 'civil administration', and 'public security' – integral components of China's modernization efforts (523, 529). Despite maintaining a certain degree of autonomy, the Federation remains largely aligned with the state's objectives. This alignment includes the state's disciplinary regulations relating to women's roles, viewing reproduction through marriage as a biopolitical tool for achieving

state goals. This tension is epitomized by its endorsement of traditional gender roles, exemplified by the labelling of unmarried women aged above twenty-seven as ‘leftover women’ in 2007 (Fincher, 2014: 14; Liu, Huang, and Ma, 2015: 12). Moreover, its approach to feminist issues such as anti-domestic violence is often limited by the need to preserve the family institution, thereby ensuring that the modern Chinese family remains intact: ‘the ACWF had earlier addressed the issue and had intervened to resolve conflicts within the family for many years, thus entering the private sphere of people’s lives. However, the issue had not been considered a public and politically interesting matter’ (Milwertz, 2003: 649).

It was only with the advent of China’s transformation into a market economy and its turn towards a burgeoning neo-liberal ethos in the late 1970s that state-defined feminism gradually began to unravel as bottom-up feminist movements emerged, redirecting focus from class struggle to women’s autonomy and self-organization. Facing ‘a capital accumulation crisis in the 1970s and the 1980s’, the party-state implemented neo-liberal reforms aimed at ‘reinvent[ing]and liberat[ing] the market from the state’ and ‘re-integrat[ing] China into the capitalist world economy in order to speed up capital accumulation’ (So and Chu, 2012: 170). This approach, often termed *state neo-liberalism*, differs from the neo-liberalism practised in more advanced capitalist economies. It represents a paradoxical fusion: on the one hand are market-oriented policies such as ‘decollectivisation’, ‘marketisation policy’, ‘fiscal decentralization and the weakening of the central state’, and ‘an open-door policy toward foreign investments’; on the other hand is continued strong state regulation, including tax mechanisms and ‘redistribution’ (170). By the late 1990s, as this state neo-liberal model reached maturity, a new ‘fusion’ had occurred: ‘the emerging state-capitalist relationship’ characterized by the interweaving of ‘the political capital of the cadres, the economic capital of the capitalists, and the social and network capital embedded in the local society’ (175).

The economic transition was also accompanied by a relatively relaxed yet equally paradoxical political climate, one oscillating between the will of the party-state and the expanding economic freedom. The transformation into a market economy, combined with a pervasive neo-liberal ethos marked by rising individualism and privatization within public culture, created the conditions for more autonomous feminist practices to emerge. The 1980s and 1990s saw the rise and growth of the non-governmental organization (NGO) path of Chinese feminism (Milwertz and Bu, 2007: 144). This movement peaked during the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing, which marked significant ‘feminist conceptual, organizational, and social

transformations in China' (Wang and Zhang, 2010: 40). In the wake of the FWCW, Chinese feminists engaged in a myriad of socio-cultural initiatives:

They initiated programs to address a wide range of issues, such as domestic violence, gender and development, feminist curricular transformation in higher education, legal aid for women, rural women's political participation, sex-ratio imbalances, vocational training for rural women and unemployed urban women, and cultural productions that challenged sexist sexual norms, such as staging a Chinese version of *The Vagina Monologues*. (Wang, 2017: 169)

Where Ibsen's Nora 'characterized' Chinese feminism in the 1920s, *The Vagina Monologues* (*TVM*) appear in Chinese diasporic feminist scholar Wang Zheng's list of initiatives as a seminal exemplification of theatre operating as a site of counter-cultural, feminist resistance. That Wang specifies a 'Chinese version' of the play highlights the political and cultural potential of *localized* productions in the practice of Chinese feminism.

Over the past twenty years, *TVM* is the only Western women's play to achieve a significant and long-lasting impact in China, where it continues to remain relevant in and beyond the theatre. It is uniquely entangled with the evolution of Chinese feminism. In contrast to the influence of Ibsen's Nora, which was largely confined to a modernist discourse, *TVM* has been actively engaged by feminists and staged for specific feminist purposes. Both as a feminist play and as a catalyst for global grassroots campaigns, *TVM* is deeply interwoven with the history as well as the historiography of Chinese feminism, particularly given its wide-ranging social impact. Its methodology and socially engaged form, based on interviews and semi-verbatim theatre, make it especially adaptable to local contexts. The fact that each production of *TVM* studied in this Element has emerged at a crucial turning point in Chinese feminist politics, theory, and activism suggests that these productions are themselves valuable entry points into the historiography of Chinese feminism – something that cannot be said of any other contemporary women's theatre in China. Hence, my exclusive focus on *TVM*.

1.2 Young Feminist Activists

What the emergence of *TVM* in China also marks is the way in which feminists began to foreground their bodies as the primary medium of feminist expression. Such embodied practices are direct, extralinguistic, and unmediated, presenting a powerful contrast to the historically linguistic pathways – such as 'new women' and *fūnv* – through which feminist identities had previously been constructed. Hence, although contemporary Chinese feminism carries the legacy of using theatre – such as the female heroine Nora – to contest gender norms, it significantly departs from earlier approaches predominantly

shaped by male intellectual discourses on modernity. Instead, it emphasizes female and feminist autonomy, centring feminist subjects proposed and practised by women. In brief, this shift signifies a new era in Chinese feminism, where the corporeal presence of activists speaks volumes in a non-logocentric manner.

Post-1995 feminists have rejected the notion of a ‘state patriarch’ or ‘socialist patriarch’ as the ‘champion’ of women’s liberation (Wang, 2005: 519–520). In the twenty-first century, particularly in the early 2010s, a new wave of grassroots feminists – referred to as ‘Young Feminist Activists (YFAs)’ (Liu, Huang, and Ma, 2015: 15) – emerged. Among them, theatre makers and activists involved in *TVM* productions and V-Day activism (a transnational feminist campaign against violence towards women inspired by Ensler’s *TVM*) played a significant role. These activists sought to distance themselves from NGO feminism, turning away from what they termed ‘embedded feminism’, which they saw as remaining in a symbiotic relationship with the state (Li and Li, 2017: 4). Instead, they aligned themselves more closely with the global trend of youthful feminist activism, exemplified by movements such as Femen (Ukraine, 2008), Pussy Riot (Russia, 2011), and the Guerrilla Girls (US, 1985) (Rosenberg, 2016: 219–227). As Tiina Rosenberg observes, transnational feminist protest cultures have ‘taken advantage of anarchist suspicions against capital and state’ (223), and are ‘radically individualistic’ (224). The year 2012 saw several prominent feminist performances take place in both digital public spaces and the streets, including ‘Occupy Men’s Toilets’ (2012), ‘Toilet on Our Back’ (2012), and ‘Bloody Brides’ (2012), among others. These performances advocated for gender equality and the improvement of women’s rights and living conditions, each addressing a specific issue such as women’s access to public infrastructure, anti-domestic violence, rural women’s rights, LGBTQ rights, equal pay, and equal education for women. Although many of these YFAs operate independently, some have joined grassroots feminist networks, collaborating on these crucial issues. Unlike NGO feminism, these grassroots networks – such as Feminist Voices (*nüquan zhisheng*), BCome (see Section 3), and the Vagina Project (see Section 4) – exhibit greater flexibility in their organizing, as they remain unaffiliated with the state. They embody a rebellious spirit, are deeply interconnected with global movements, and possess a ‘strong, independent sense of citizen subjectivity’ (*qianglie de, duli de, gongmin zhutixing*).² For these activists, ‘feminism is a plain fact of daily life’ (Zheng, 2016: 38). Operating in a guerrilla-like fashion, they are pioneering new

² Comment by Ai Xiaoming, the convener and director of *Yin Dao Du Bai* (*The Vagina Monologues*, 2013). For more details, see Zhao, 2016.

avenues of resistance, employing theatre and performance as playful yet politically provocative tools to advance their feminist agenda in creatively expressive ways. ‘Disorderly aesthetics’ – ‘feminist nudity’ and ‘home-made terminology of resistance, including vulgar words, humorous obscenities and *double-entendres*’ – coined by Katrien Jacobs (2016: 822–823), for example, best characterizes Chinese performative feminism, particularly its political, affective, and performative dimensions. Beyond their non-state affiliation, YFAs often find their agendas at odds with state policies, particularly in their advocacy for LGBTQ rights. Although homosexuality was de-pathologized in China in 1989 (Wu, 2003: 128), LGBTQ individuals still lack legal and social recognition. The political risks of this divergence were made evident with the arrest of the ‘Feminist Five’ in 2015, leading YFAs to stage contemporary Chinese feminist performative acts.³ This incident exposes the fraught relationship between feminist advocacy and state approval, revealing the precarious nature of pursuing gender equality and women’s rights in a restrictive political environment.

Wang’s inclusion of the Chinese *TVM* in broader post-1995 feminist endeavours inspires me to consider the three productions presented in this Element as both mirroring and responding to the shifting feminist climate. Together, *Yin Dao Du Bai/The Vagina Monologues*, 2003 (Section 2), *Yin Dao Zhi Dao/Vagina’s Way*, 2013 (Section 3), and *Dao Yin/Saying Vagina*, 2021 (Section 4) span pivotal paradigm shifts in Chinese feminisms. Specifically, from 2003 to the early 2010s, the making of *TVM* was a process of exploring the subject position of an autonomous citizen, but from 2015 onwards feminist theatre making had to contend with gains being eroded by state neo-liberalism, an issue reflected in the production of *Dao Yin*. Each production is presented and analysed within this adapting feminist culture, with analysis encompassing script, performance, organization, spectatorship, and funding. All three case studies treat theatre and performative activism as embodied mediums, whose aesthetic potential and political efficacy offer a unique entry point into Chinese feminist aesthetics, female bodily experiences and imaginaries, feminist compromises, and hopes.

1.3 A Transnational Feminist Framework

At the same time, this Element positions these Chinese productions within a transnational feminist framework, particularly in relation to Ensler’s *TVM* and the global V-Day campaign. Since its premiere in October 1996 at the HERE Arts Center Off-Broadway, *TVM* has left an indelible mark on audiences

³ See Section 4 for more detailed discussions on the arrest of the ‘Feminist Five’.

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across the United States and beyond, gaining international recognition since the late 1990s (Gallo-Cruz and Tulinski, 2020: 208). Beyond its chronological alignment with Chinese activists' shift towards a more autonomous approach, a key question arises: why has *TVM*, a late 1990s American dramatic work, remained a relevant reference for contemporary Chinese feminists? As its impact grew, critical voices from across the political spectrum emerged, fuelling controversy and cementing the play as a provocative cultural 'touchstone' (207). As noted by Alyssa Reiser, criticism comes from a broad spectrum: 'Right-wing Christians and other religious fundamentalists; the Intersex Society of North America; Betty Dodson; political conservatives; college administrations; mainstream theatre critics; feminist scholars and activists; founders of the Boston Women's Health Collective; and women living in the Global South have all spoken out against the Monologues' (2006: 3). Ensler's *TVM* draws notable parallels with the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, positioning women's anatomy as a potent source of empowerment. This feminist wave foregrounded bodily autonomy and championed sexual freedom, frequently employing diverse artistic forms to elevate feminist consciousness. This chronological mismatch has drawn criticism from feminist scholars. Feminist sociologist Martha McCaughey argues that the play represents 'a reverse discourse' rather than 'a deconstructive one' as it frames women's bodies through a reductionist lens – one that risks objectifying them rather than empowering them as active agents (2013: 932). Elaine Aston notes that *TVM* features 'feminist sharing', a practice central to the advocacy style of 1970s feminism. She observes that while theatre was commonly used as 'a forum for sharing women's experience and knowledge' and was 'characteristic of much feminist theatre in the 1970s', it 'was far less common in the 1990s' (2003: 56–57). In a similarly incisive critique, Jill Dolan argues that '[*TVM*] seemed reminiscent of an earlier historical moment, of the consciousness-raising days, when we took that necessary first step of acknowledging ourselves as women and the personal nature of our politics. But after a decade of theorizing, practicing, and refining our politics, this reverential stance towards ourselves as women seems simplistic and conservative' (1998: 94).

The controversy surrounding the play and its chronological inappropriateness lies precisely in how female sexuality, particularly vaginal sexuality, should be positioned within feminism. The underlying body politics of *TVM* have often been criticized for their gender essentialism, as they equate vaginahood with womanhood. Susan E. Bell and Susan M. Reverby lament that Ensler 'undoes the very hard work of second-wave feminists who debunked the political, not just "pleasure", consequences of the myth of the vaginal orgasm' (2005: 434). Similarly, Aston contends that this approach to feminism 'risks an