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Josephine Ho, A Gallant Woman

by Melody LU Chia Wen

"The power of resistance not only derives from solemn and fervent anger, it can also come from self-contented pleasure. The power of subversion not only derives from rigid self-righteousness, or from the standpoint of orthodoxy, self-assumed truth; it can also be discovered in the humble weakness of those marginal voices who manage to secretly luxuriate in the midst of the suppressive structures.

Josephine C.J. Ho¹



Josephine Ho

Josephine is probably one of the most radical and controversial figures in Taiwan in the past decade, be it in academia, within women's movements, in the mainstream and progressive media, or even among leftists. Ever since her return to Taiwan after the lift of martial law, this 'gallant woman' has been bombarding the highly repressive society with the discourse of desire, advocacy for sexual emancipation, sexual pleasure, anti-homophobia and for all sorts of 'aberrant' sexual practices. Furthermore, she has been involved in sexuality education at primary and secondary school level. She has been searching for the marginalised groups at the corners of the society, activating their subjectivity, while subverting the repressive structure in a creative and explosive way.

Josephine did not involve herself directly in the social movement in Taiwan as a youth - which was then under martial law and the social movement did not exist visibly, except for some dissident voices. She was in touch with some radical groups in the Protestant church, who exposed her to the justice issues and the people's movement. She was deeply touched by the stance that Jesus has taken to be with the marginalised and the poor. However, later when she went to US for postgraduate study and had chance to learn theology, she started to question the institutional church that often ignored secular issues affecting people's lives while working hand in hand with the mainstream ideologies. One summer Josephine started to read Marx's *Das Capital* (which was forbidden in Taiwan then) and was struck by his analysis about social justice and social structure. Since then she 'jumped into' the leftist thinking and took initiatives to join the study group of leftist overseas students. It was in the same period of time she took some courses on Freud's psycho-analysis. She then integrated the theories of Marxist materialism and Freudian psycho constructionism. Ever since these two had formed the foundation of her

analysis tools. Her interests in feminism started with one of the course taken in doctorate study. She took deep interest in them, but somehow she was not satisfied with the lectures of her professor, a well-known feminist in the West. She found some of the feminist theories problematic because they only deal with gender relations without taking into account class analysis and other social factors.

The year of 1987 saw drastic changes in all areas in Taiwan society with the lifting of martial law. Josephine, then preparing to start writing her doctoral thesis, saw the tremendous possibilities and space opened in bringing about social changes, so she decided to return to Taiwan. She accepted the teaching offer from the National Central University in Taoyuan and turned down the offer from an established, well-resourced university in Taipei, with the reason that a comparatively younger academic institution might give more space and freedom. She also intentionally made this choice in order to keep some distance from the Capital Taipei, the centre of politics and power struggles.

Apart from teaching and writing her thesis, Josephine joined her leftist friends to publish a progressive quarterly magazine *Isle Margin*, while writing articles and critics for mainstream newspapers. In this period she had not yet directed her whole attention in sexuality and gender issues, instead her articles were cultural analysis and social critics from materialistic perspectives towards a wide range of issues.

It was also a time when the publishing industry in Taiwan was busy digging up controversial topics that were prohibited in the public arena during the martial law era. Many mainstream commercial companies took interest in the issues of gender, women, homosexuality, sexology and sexuality, and started to translate foreign classics, such as Kinsey's books on sexology² and Hite's Report as well as to invite local scholars to conduct researches on these topics. In 1993, Josephine was invited by one publisher to conduct a workshop to

study Taiwanese women's sexual lives and experiences. The research made her realise that the sexuality of Taiwanese women, regardless of class differentiation, was suppressed by multiple power structures. Thus she started to devote to the politics of desire and the campaign for sexual emancipation.

Feminist Sexual Emancipation. Recalling her initial involvement in the sexual emancipation campaign and in the publication of the book *The Gallant Women - Feminist Sexual Emancipation*, Josephine smiled and said that, contrary to common impression, she had never 'conspired' nor expected to cause such strong and controversial reactions by what she said and did.

In March 1994, a newly formed association of feminist intellectuals organised a seminar on gender issues to commemorate Women's Day. The topic of the talks included diverse themes such as Law, Popular songs, Women Workers, etc. Josephine was one of the eight speakers who were invited. Based on the experiences of the sexuality workshop in 1993, she chose the topic of female sexuality because she felt that this was the most neglected dimension in the feminist discourse in Taiwan. In this short talk she urged women to break the 'virgin complex' and to defend for their sexual rights. To summarise, first of all, woman should maintain a healthy body so that she can enjoy the sexual pleasure as well as defend herself from unwanted sex or harassment. Secondly, woman should take initiatives to collect more information about her own sexuality and desire so that she is in control of their own body and desire, not to be a passive victim or object. Thirdly, woman should develop their bargaining power in sex and improve the quality of sex. Lastly, woman should affirm her own sexual experiences and demand safe sex. Her provocative talk immediately drew attention from the media and was heavily attacked by moral defenders.

WRITER'S NOTE

I am a Taiwanese woman who grew up and lived in Taiwan for 24 years before I finished my undergraduate study. Similar to Josephine, I started my involvement with the Christian student movement and was deeply influenced by the Liberation Theology, even though it has never been appreciated by the Institutional Church in Taiwan. My introduction to feminisms started when I went to work for the Asian regional coordination of the Catholic

Student Movement. I came to realize that the women's suppression was there in my family and in my growing environment, and I start to question the gender discrimination in what I see, what I hear and what I experience in daily life. Later I was able to take up the course on Women and Development.

Being away from Taiwan for these years, I did not have the privilege to directly involve in the women's movement that has grown redundantly in the past few years. Therefore I call myself a concerned 'half-

In May 1994 she joined an 'Anti-Harassment Rally', the first activity initiated by the women movements collective. During the rally she felt that the demonstration was lacking spirit, that of a group of victims stating the stories of the victimised but failing to generate the power of anger, and to communicate clearly the rationale of anti-sexual harassment. To set the mood right she started to brainstorm on some powerful and catchy slogans with her leftist friends from the *Isle Margin*. After some time when most of the women movement leaders and organisers of the march had taken the turns to deliver their statements, they thought of inviting Josephine to make a speech. She pointed out that the sexual harassment was a product of a poor, distorted sexual culture. In this culture male sexual desires were expressed aggressively and women often hesitated to fight against it openly due to the stigmatisation attached to them. To resist sexual harassment effectively, she suggested, we should construct a more open free sexual culture, and only when women started to enjoy the pleasure of sex were they empowered to say no to the unwanted ones. At the end of the speech she suddenly had an urge to shout something out loud to cheer the demonstrators up, and a slogan came to her mind: "We want orgasm, No more sexual harassment! If you keep harassing me, we will cut your penis off!"

The following day the media highlighted this provocative slogan that changed the narratives of the whole rally from the passive victimisation to a proactive claim on women's subjectivity and control over their own body. Josephine began to be regarded as 'the' advocate



Melody LU

in-half-outsider' as far as the movement is concerned. Before this interview I have never met Josephine. My understanding toward her is based on her writings (and other's writing critics to her) as well as media's representation, which I believe to a large extent is distorted. On the one hand, I am glad to have the privilege to interview her through ARENA's project. The two-hour intensive interview with Josephine is, to me personally, very inspiring and exciting. It really filled me with zeal, that I felt like get up and do something right after the

interview. On the other hand, I am aware that with such limited time of interview what I have written down here perhaps is not really about Josephine, but should be "what I heard from Josephine": I try to put emphasis on the process of her involvement, the choices she made and how does all these related to the national context, rather than her discourse and thoughts, which can be read in her books and papers.

of liberating women's sexual desire. From the reactions of the media, publishing industry and the public, Josephine observed that there were energies and interests emerged and converged on sexuality issues, however it was still absent in the agenda of women's movements and social movements. She felt that it is important to tackle the more conventional issues, such as enhancing women's political and economic status and rights, and organising women workers to resist capitalist oppression, as many other women's groups had long been fighting for. However, before the energies and resources converged on the sexuality were appropriated and absorbed by the commercial and capitalist interests, it is also important to intervene, bring in feminist perspectives and transform it for the cause of social change. Therefore, she intentionally pushed through with the publication of the book, *The Gallant Woman: Feminism and Sexual Emancipation*, before the Chinese version of Kinsey's books on sexuality were published.

The Gallant Woman points out that no matter how hard women strive to gain equality in political and economic sphere, there is always a prevalent sexual culture that is repressive to both men and women, but more privileging to men while often bringing stigmatisation and shame to women. Josephine argues that if women only think of the ways to reduce the shame and stigma this culture brought, they would never be able to break it. Instead women should liberate their sexual desires and experience various kinds of 'indecent' erotic practices and imagination in order to challenge the sexual control. Only when women are free to express their erotic power and sexual desire, can there be sexual equality, and then enhance the gender equality. Therefore sexual emancipation should be an integral part of women's emancipation.

However, Josephine further explained, 'sexual liberation' is not enough to challenge the sexual repression imposed by the patriarchal systems as well as to change the male-dominant-women-subordinate power relations if women only enjoy their sexual freedom secretly in private domain. So she uses the term 'feminist sexual emancipation' to point out two resisting standpoints: one is from a feminist standpoint to resist the gender inequality imposed by patriarchy. The other is from the standpoint of sexual emancipation to resist all forms of sexual repression, that is exercised more strictly on women than on men.

Ning³ points out that Josephine consciously chooses sexual emancipation as an entry point to build alliance with the women's movements out of a strategic consideration. Apart from her personal and academic interests in the issue of sexuality, it is also because 'she thinks that 'sexual emancipation' is in

an extremely marginal position and always in resistance of all kinds of new and old suppressive power structures. Therefore a women's movement, or even the whole resistant social movement that is engaged in sexual emancipation discourse would not be easily co-opted by the mainstream powers such as national machinery or capitalism." [pp. 330-]

Criticisms and Attacks from Alliance.
Before the publication of *The Gallant Woman* Josephine was in a supportive and cooperative relationship with various women's movements in Taiwan.

However, when this book provoked the controversial and heated debates both in mainstream and alternative media and opened the space for sexuality issues, it also caused anxiety among women's and leftist social movements. Some of them even declared that "women's emancipation is not sexual emancipation". Ever since, the women's movement has been split into different perspectives on women's sexual autonomy, with groups often holding opposite stances towards issues such as anti-pornography, the rights of sex workers and surrogate motherhood.

Her leftist comrades too have diverse reactions toward her discourse. Some are rather supportive and affirming to the new 'battlefield' her discourse has created; some keep distance with her; and some of them are antagonised. One of the criticisms from the leftists is that sexual liberation is the privilege of middle-class, economic-independent women. Emphasising and identifying it as the cause of the movement would betray the interests of working class women. The more common criticism is that sexual liberation is a western-implemented, individualist ideology, not fitting to local reality. Some others even accused Josephine of being coopted by the mainstream commercial power.

Josephine took in most of the critics positively and welcomed whatever ideas would contribute to the intellectual debates and dialogue on movement strategies. She thinks it natural to have differences in theoretical approaches and practices among the various groups in the women's and leftist movements. These differences derive from their social positions, alliance with political power, interests and resources, perspective shaped by their life experiences, reflection toward stigmatisation, and enemies identified. By recognising these different realities and respecting each other's priority, there would be no conflict and the difference should not jeopardise their alliance. However, the reality is, Josephine herself had experienced the hostility among these groups. She was very frustrated with some groups who after being mainstreamed tend to suppress the marginal groups.

Talking about her being detached from the women's and leftist movements, Josephine did not regard herself as a 'feminist activist' nor an 'orthodox leftist'. She could not stand those in the movement who are self-righteous, intolerant, those who suppress differences, and those who reject new alternatives before they (new voices) have a chance to develop and learn from the mistakes. She said, "Those who accuse sexual emancipation as the privilege of the middle class women did not understand the sexual desire and sex life of the so-called proletarian women - they have been practicing the ideology of 'the gallant woman' long ago without reading books. They have been suffering from all forms of repression and stigmatisation... What we should do is to eliminate the repressive and stigmatising structures, instead of further suppressing their practices! If you said that middle class women have more economic advantages to develop their sexual autonomy at this moment, yes it is true in a sense, then we should work harder to improve the economic and living conditions of working class women and build for them a supportive network, so that they can be well equipped to go ahead and enjoy autonomy and pleasure. Why do they point the fingers at the middle class women and make them feel shameful about their sexual liberation? Should we all, every woman, wait for the 'big revolution' and total change together in pain and sufferings? When will the final victory come? Shouldn't we make use of the new energies converged on the issues of sexuality and push for the change right now?" She could not understand, nor accept this kind of pseudo-equality.

From Gallant Woman to Heterogeneity of Sexual Practices. *The Gallant Woman* mainly deals with sexual emancipation in the framework of heterosexuality. Josephine was aware that this book excludes the homosexuals and other sexual minorities. However, for strategic purpose she opted to focus on sexual emancipation in the heterosexual framework in this book. She has observed that the homosexuals and other 'aberrant' sexual minorities had already been organising themselves to gain recognition and change of repressive culture. She thinks that a real sexual emancipation should encourage and welcome a variety of sexual practices and cultures on an equal basis, while resisting a homogeneous,

standardised sexual model. The women's movement also should work hand in hand with them.

The founding of the Centre for the Study of Sexuality was clearly based on this principle, focusing on three aspects: Gender, Sexuality and Differences⁴. This

"... resistant social movement that is engaged in sexual emancipation discourse would not be easily coopted by the mainstream powers ..."

Centre organised the first International Conference on Sexuality Education, Sexology, Gender Studies and LesBiGay Studies in Taiwan, which initiated the dialogue between international and local researchers, academics and activists, on the issues of sexuality, gender and body. In a few years time sexuality has been mainstreamed as an important research field in Taiwan.

Talking about the working relations in the movement/organization, Josephine shared that the members of the Centre for the Study of Sexuality really practice the principle of respecting each other's difference and equal participation. When I asked her whether men find awkward in the organisation as they often felt in some feminist movements, she laughingly said that this has never been a problem. The construction and deconstruction of gender identity has been at the core of the discussion among them. Some of the most active and creative student members are gay men. During the few hours when I was there (the centre is actually just a small room, functioning as the library, resource centre as well as a social space for all members), I observed that the students and teachers drop by time to time, and chat with each other freely without hierarchical orders. Apart from an impressive collection of academic literatures related to gender and sexuality, there are also plenty of comics and erotic, romantic novels that one cannot find in other library. It is really a place that will provoke and stimulate imagination, creativity and dialogues.

Planting the Seeds of Sexuality Education. At the end of 1996, the murder of a feminist leader Peng shocked the whole island and people were again reminded that every woman is exposed to sexual violence. After a few months another young girl Bai, a famous entertainer's daughter, was kidnapped, raped and killed. These two cases made public question the accountability of the government. In respond to public outcry and the demand of women's movements, the government promised to take measures to prevent violence against women and to put in resources to implement the sexuality education at primary and secondary school level. (According to Josephine, the government are forced to do so in order to prove its legitimacy.) After advocating for the sexual emancipation for a few years, Josephine found that many adult women were often frustrated and had to pay a lot of prices to be gallant. Why not starting from gender education so that the younger generation will not have to suffer the same? Therefore, she and the members of the Centre for the Study of Sexuality decided to work with local government to organise sexuality education workshop for school teachers and publish *Sexuality Education Newsletter*.

Josephine feels very proud that with a limited of human and financial resources the Centre was able to write and edit a whole set of textbooks on the sexuality education. These books are an attempt to use creative and popular cultural forms, such as comics, that will attract

“... real sexual emancipation should encourage and welcome a variety of sexual practices and cultures on an equal basis...”

young people, to illustrate the gender relations and sexual repression from a Marxist perspective. I was so surprised that this progressive attempt would be appreciated and accepted by the government

authority or the mainstream, conventional educationists. She said that the local government's⁵ invitation of editing the textbook is just a gesture of openness and tolerance. The Committee of Gender Education that represents the mainstream, conservative ideology still held the ultimate power of censorship. To resist the control and censorship, what the Centre did was to make it explicit in the contract that they (the Centre) have rights to publish the uncensored version by themselves, or to adjust the layout in a way that the progressive, original ideas are more visible and highlighted than the 'political correct' messages (those added by the Government Committee).

Discourse Activist Standing between Theory and Living Experiences. Talking about her standpoint an activist, Josephine regarded herself as a 'discourse activist', simply because this is what she is good at and trained for. By discourse activist she means using discourse to open the space for alternatives, to legitimise the diverse experiences of desires and sex that are often regarded as aberrant, so that the sex workers and sexual minorities can be acknowledged and appreciated. She has no fixed convictions or motto. She simply felt the need to provoke controversy as a subversive force, and to voice out for the marginalised and oppressed. She never thought that what she did is more important than any one else. She urges every one to support and stand beside the sexually marginalised people, to encourage them to come out to speak for themselves. We need not put up limits, or worry too much they would bring destruction to the existing movements, or whether they need protection mechanisms, etc., all these just reveal our own discrimination and stereotype. Only when they organise themselves and develop their subjectivity they are able to have bargaining power and challenge the hegemonic structures.

Josephine mentioned that her discourse of sexual emancipation is derived from Marxist-Freudian tradition and is deeply influenced by the scholar from this tradition, such as Wilhelm Reich. Apart from this her discourse also draws inspiration from social-

constructionism, theories of cultural analysis, as well as the theories and thoughts of various schools of feminism. However, she confesses, what influences her most is the experiences and life stories of the 'ordinary' women she encountered, like the 'case studies' in the sexuality workshop, her relatives and friends, and women she met in various occasions. She contently said that perhaps it is her stigma as the gallant woman made her approachable for many women who shared the same stigmatisation. When she was invited for speech around the country, it happened very often that after the talk some women audience would jump up to the stage and start sharing their life stories to her.

Before the publication of *The Gallant Woman*, she presented the draft to her mother and mother-in-law. After reading, her mother told her that if she had known all this a few decades ago she would have lived a much happier life. Then her mother-in-law said that someone should have written and published this book long ago. Their support affirmed Josephine's determination to publish the book and carry on her sexual revolution.

Thus she has been careful in keeping a dialectical balance between the theory and reality - avoid summarising women's living experience by grand theories, while not missing the wider scope and vision that the theories can offer.

What is the next step of this gallant woman Josephine? I guess she will continue to voice out from the margin, calling all the gallant women, men, gay, lesbians, and many other sexual minorities to resist and subvert multiple layers of hegemony, and looking for the creative ways and means to fight the battles. I said, "how I wish I could join you!" Josephine replied, "Come and have fun!"

Endnotes

- 1 From Josephine Ho, "Preface - Feminist Sexual Emancipation", in Josephine Ho ed. *Contestations Over Female Sexuality: Dissenting Essays on 'The Gallant Woman'*. Meta Media International Co., Ltd., 1997, pp.11-30. Originally in Chinese and translated by Melody Lu.
- 2 Kinsey, Alfred's *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948); *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953) were regarded as the "classics" of sexology.
- 3 Ning, Ying-Bin, "Politics of Sexual Emancipation", in Ho, Josephine, ed. *Gendered Nation(s): Sexuality, Capital and Culture*. Meta Media international Co., Ltd., 1994, pp.39-49. Originally in Chinese and translated by Melody Lu.
- 4 The Center for the Study of Sexuality is a research center in the National Central University (under the Department of English). The Chinese Name of the Center is "Shin-Bieh" Center; "Shin" can refer to sex or sexuality, "Bieh" means differences, while putting two words together, "Shin-Bieh" means Gender.
- 5 The head of the Taoyuan County is the prominent, pioneering leader in the Taiwanese women's movement - LU Shiu-Lien. Her view toward sexuality is obviously different from Josephine's.