

# Eroding sexism: A Yogācāra dialectics of gender

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*ABSTRACT:* In this article, I explore how we can expand the project of Buddhist feminism by drawing on Chinese Yogācāra philosophy. With a focus on the writings of Xuanzang (c. 602–664) and his disciple Kuiji (632–682), I investigate how the Yogācāra theory of consciousness can be read as a gendered account of non-duality. The term ‘Yogācāra dialectics’ is thus coined to describe this theory of non-duality that highlights fluidity and transformability. As I will argue, Chinese Yogācārins developed the dialectics of gender by means of which they were able to subtly erode sexism in premodern times.

*RÉSUMÉ :* Dans cet article, j’explore comment nous pouvons nous servir d’idées philosophiques provenant du Yogācāra chinois afin d’élargir le projet du féminisme bouddhiste. En me concentrant sur les écrits de Xuanzang (env. 602–664) et de son disciple Kuiji (632–682), j’examine comment la théorie de la conscience du Yogācāra peut être interprétée comme un récit genré de la non-dualité. Ainsi, le terme «dialectique du Yogācāra» serait employé afin de décrire cette théorie de la non-dualité qui souligne la fluidité et la transformabilité. Je soutiens que les Yogācārins chinois ont développé la dialectique du genre, et qu’ils ont ainsi pu éroder subtilement le sexisme à l’époque prémoderne.

**Keywords:** gender, body, Buddhist feminism, non-duality, Yogācāra, Xuanzang, Kuiji

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## 1 Introduction

Buddhist feminism is an ongoing project. Although the Buddhist canon preserves many resources against sex discrimination, exemplified by the consensus that all can become awake regardless of race or gender, it also contains texts that present females as inferior to their male counterparts. For example, women must change their female body into a male material form to realize enlightenment,<sup>1</sup> and women cannot be reborn as women in Buddha Amitābha's Pure Land.<sup>2</sup> If Buddhist feminism aims to fight against various forms of sexist oppression, it must tackle the tension between the positive consensus on gender equality and the simultaneous negative depictions of women within the tradition. In developing feminist philosophy from a Buddhist perspective, many scholars have discerned the limitations of a popular notion of non-duality that dissolves the existence of gender and explains gender away (Byrne, 2013; Gross, 2018). That is to say, when someone follows the popular understanding of non-duality to conceive of gender dichotomy as a mental construct, this person will come to the conclusion that there is no ultimate difference between men and women. Such a viewpoint can easily transform into another form of oppression because Buddhist women would no longer have in their hands a vocabulary to address everyday issues related to gender discrimination and sexual abuse. Overall, this popular understanding of non-duality becomes a double-edged sword that both frees women from and traps women in systems of oppression.

As an attempt to further the project of Buddhist feminism, this article undertakes a two-pronged approach: first, it dissolves the tension between the positive consensus on gender equality and the negative accounts against women; and second, it posits an alternative theory of non-duality that does not do away with gender and sexuality. To fulfill these two missions, I find it urgent to reopen and reread the canon.<sup>3</sup> According to forerunners of multicultural feminism, represented by Ann Pang-White, since each intellectual tradition has its own limitations, "it would be more meaningful to ask: Can we, and how do we, reread, re-imagine, and reconstruct canonical texts so as to find their new significance in the contemporary world?" (Pang-White, 2016, p. 1). Through rereading the canon, people in each cultural community can renew the understanding of canonical texts to ensure that their tradition as a living tradition can actively participate in and contribute to a multicultural society. Therefore, I do not venture to restore an *authentic* understanding of texts. That is to say, I will depart from the

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<sup>1</sup> For more discussion on the topic of changing a female body into a male material form in East Asian Mahāyāna, see Schuster (1981), Kajiyama (1982), Paul (1985), Faure (1999), Sunim (1999), Ohnuma (2001), Balkwill (2016).

<sup>2</sup> For a debate on this topic, see Dobbins (1995), Harrison (1998).

<sup>3</sup> Rita Gross is one of the pioneers who reread, or in her own terms, "revalorized," canonical scriptures (Gross, 1993, p. 3).

traditional way of approaching Buddhist scriptures philologically. Rather, my purpose is to find a language with a vocabulary that enables women to employ the philosophy of non-duality to address everyday issues and formulate their lived experiences.

Following in the footsteps of pioneers whose work continues to enrich and expand current feminist discourses through the rereading of Zen/Seon/Chan (Levering, 2015; Park, 2017), Pure Land (Dobbins, 1995; Yusa, 2019; Wu, 2020), and Tantric Buddhist texts (Klein, 1985; Sponberg, 1992; Young, 2004; Melnick, 2020), I shift my focus to the Yogācāra philosophy of consciousness-only, a tradition that has largely gone unnoticed by feminists.<sup>4</sup> Over the years, Yogācāra has contributed to philosophical discussions on the mind and knowledge, while its potential input to the theorization of gender and sexuality remains unexplored.<sup>5</sup> My paper fills this lacuna. Focusing on the writings composed by Chinese Yogācāra clerics, such as Xuanzang (玄奘 c. 602–664) and his disciple Kuiji (窥基 632–682), I investigate how the Yogācāra theory of consciousness-only can be read as a gendered account of the mind that entails an alternative theory of non-duality. The term ‘Yogācāra dialectics’ is thus coined to describe this theory of non-duality, highlighting fluidity and transformability without doing away with gender. In light of Yogācāra dialectics, gender is an embodied performance to be enacted moment by moment. There are, further, two ways of enacting gender: those in an ignorant mindset naturally act out gender as an immutable essence, whereas those who are awake embody gender fluidity. Since gender is constantly in the making, it can be transformed through rehabilitating the mind.

Consequently, a Yogācāra dialectic of gender does not promote changing female bodies into male material forms but rather problematizes commonsensical understandings of body and gender, eventually enabling a free movement between the conventional reality of gender differences and the ultimate truth of universal emptiness. As I will argue, Chinese Yogācārins in premodern times developed the dialectics of gender by means of which they were able to

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<sup>4</sup> Compared with other traditions, such as Zen or Pure Land, Yogācāra has been ignored by scholars partly because of the Yogācāra refusal of universal salvation and rejection of the ‘all having Buddha nature’ thesis. As pinpointed by feminist philosopher, Alison Jagger, our expanding knowledge of what defines humans as we really are furnishes us with more insights into human goods, including gender liberation (Jagger, 1983, p. 21). Although, at the surface level, Chinese Yogācārins seem to defy an egalitarian stance on human nature, deep down at the core, they propose a theory that affirms the potential of universal liberation without nullifying individual difference.

<sup>5</sup> For Yogācāra’s contribution to philosophical discussions on the mind and knowledge, see Lusthaus (2002), Waldron (2003), Jiang (2006), Flanagan (2011), Arnold (2012), Coseru (2012), Ganeri (2012), Gold (2014).

join forces with other clerics and lay intellectuals to *erode* subtly the sexist and condescending attitude toward femaleness embedded in the tradition.<sup>6</sup>

To unpack my argument, I will begin by examining the ambivalent stance toward gender presented to Yogācārins by their Abhidharma interlocutors — an ambivalence that serves as an example of the aforementioned tension within the Buddhist canon. Following this, I will explain how Yogācārins revisit the characterization of gender in their theory of consciousness-only. By shifting the focus to experience, Yogācārins put forward an enacted view of gender, subsequently problematizing the dichotomy between mind and body, between sex and gender, and between the self and the other. For Yogācārins, our bodily awareness furnishes us with an open possibility of either misperceiving gender as an immutable essence or realizing the non-duality of philosophical binaries, such as that of male and female. Since gender is formed in a collective setting through self-other differentiation, it cannot be transformed merely through self-effort. Indeed, recognition from others plays a crucial part in transforming gender awareness and transcending dualistic thinking. In the final section, I will centre on the dialectics of gender in Yogācāra terms. I will turn to Kuiji's deliberations on an enlightened woman named Śrīmālā to illustrate how ignorant sentient beings like us should recognize our limitations as well as others' potentiality; this forms a critique of and caution against typecasting things merely by how they appear to be.

## 2 Sex vs. gender: Ambivalence in Sarvāstivāda realism

Known for using the investigation of consciousness to argue for emptiness and compassion, Yogācāra clerics openly acknowledge their indebtedness to the Abhidharma philosophy of mind — although they do not endorse Abhidharma's metaphysical realism (Lin, 2007). The ways in which Yogācāra philosophy is inspired by, but further departs from, Abhidharma can be epitomized by the articulation of gender formation, which is an integral part of the Buddhist theory of death and rebirth — namely, of *saṃsāra*. Hereby, the discussion takes place under an overarching premise of what gender means for ignorant sentient beings entrapped in *saṃsāra*. As preserved in *Yogācārabhūmi* (Maitreya, 1924, T30.1579.282c):<sup>7</sup>

When the three conditions are present, one will enter the womb. In the phase of intermediate existence, this being perceives others of the same kind etc., and thereafter

<sup>6</sup> According to Stephanie Balkwill, directly or indirectly, women in medieval China became textual producers who posed critiques and challenges against sexism (Balkwill, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> To cite sources from the Buddhist canon, I provide the author's name followed by the abbreviated year of composition, volume number, sequence number, and page number in the *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經 (Takakusu et al., 1924-1932).

generates the desire to be reborn in a particular realm. At that point, this sentient being misconceives how parents engage in sexual behaviors and produce gametes. By misconception, it means that when seeing the sexual behaviors of parents, this sentient being not only comprehends these behaviors *per se* but also realizes its own potential of conducting similar actions. Sentient beings perceiving self-actions in this manner, their obsessions arise. Afterwards, if this sentient being wishes to become a woman, then she becomes obsessed with the gender of her father; [likewise] if this sentient being wishes to become a man, then he becomes obsessed with his mother's gender. And this tendency continues: for a woman, she desires to distance herself from anyone related to her mother's gender; for a man, he has the same mindset. Once a sentient being embraces this desire, s/he will only see man or woman, and as such, s/he comes to reside in a place [inside one of the six realms]. Gradually, this sentient being no longer perceives gender under the influence of parents but only sees defilements related to male or female sense organs. This is how this sentient being is trapped in this place.

In his commentary on *Yogācārabhūmi*, Kuiji demarcates the Yogācāra approach to *saṃsāra* from that proposed by the Sarvāstivādins (Kuiji, 1924a, T43.1829.11c). As a group within the Abhidharma tradition, Sarvāstivādins argue that sentient beings do not have a permanent self, but that non-sentient objects do have real existence. To defend their position, otherwise known as metaphysical realism, Sarvāstivādins turn to the formation of knowledge. They suggest that external objects are directly given to the mind and serve as the cause of knowledge (Vasubandhu, 1924, T29.1558.104b16). If that is the case, the stimuli *qua* external objects must have real existence (Vasubandhu, 1924, T29.1558.104b17). Such existence, however, is not ascribed to perceivers insofar as a perceiver is temporarily made up of five aggregates and will vanish once these aggregates dissemble. Affirming the mind-independent existence of non-sentient objects/dharmas, Sarvāstivādins continue to detail how causality sustains the function of dharmas. As such, there is no permanent self, but sentient beings can still die and be reborn because various dharmas act as links in a causal chain to give rise to death and rebirth.<sup>8</sup> It is a chain of 12 links that portrays how *ignorance* and *karma* in a previous life continue to shape *consciousness*, *name-forms*, as well as *sense sources* of a sentient being in this round of life, which then enable social *contact*, various types of *feelings*, *cravings*, and *attachments* that pre-determine the *existence* of this sentient being as well as its *birth* and *death* in the next round of life (Kuiji, 1924b,

<sup>8</sup> That is to say, these 12 links are: *ignorance* (*wuming* 無明), *karma* (*xing* 行), *consciousness* (*shi* 識), *name-forms* (*mingse* 名色), *sense sources* (*chu* 處), *contact* (*chu* 觸), *feelings* (*shou* 受), *cravings* (*ai* 愛), *attachments* (*qu* 取), *existence* (*you* 有), *birth* (*sheng* 生), and *death* (*si* 死).

T43.1830.519c-520a). Consecutively, these links, as italicized above, surface to underpin a sentient being's life throughout *samsāra*.

Reading from a Sarvāstivāda perspective, the aforementioned paragraph can be reinterpreted as a gendered account of Abhidharma realism. As recounted by Kuiji, in the intermediate existence between death and rebirth, previous *ignorance* and *karma* determine a subliminal type of *consciousness* that animates a desire for being reborn in a particular place (Kuiji, 1924a, T43.1829.11a). Facilitated by external conditions *qua* sexual desires and gametes of parents, this consciousness enters a womb as a zygote, and acquires its psychological and physical properties known as *name-forms* (Kuiji, 1924a, T43.1829.11c). At this point, the material form *qua* a corporeal body, though nascent, is fixed with sex as either a man or a woman.<sup>9</sup> When *name-forms* mature into a full-fledged sentient being with six *sense sources*, this sentient being is capable of social *contact* with others; and social interactions exacerbate a sentient being's inclination to internalize gender as part of an immutable self-identity, an inclination that nurtures *feelings* and *cravings* (Kuiji, 1924a, T43.1829.11c). These *cravings* propel this sentient being to have *attachments* to gender identity in this round of life, which further shapes the intermediate *existence* prior to the next round of *birth* and *death* (Kuiji, 1924a, T43.1829.11c). For sentient beings who are held captive in *samsāra*, they must make an effort to attain *nirvāṇa* as a break-through from causality.

Following this line of reasoning, metaphysical realism in Sarvāstivāda is not gender-neutral but rather gendered, from which we can derive a rather ambivalent view of womanhood.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand, sex is a marker of one of the five aggregates *qua* material form — as part of the *name-forms* — that has real existence in every round of life. By force of causality, those who inherit a greater quantity of *karmic* merits from a previous life are born with a male material form *qua* male body in contrast to those reborn as female. The realist view of sexuality secures the move to scapegoat women as the obstructors of *nirvāṇa*, insofar as the female material body is said to cause sensual desire and spiritual corruption. That is why *nirvāṇa* is deemed impossible for women in the Sarvāstivāda narrative (Katyāyāniputra, 1924, T27.1545.78a). On the other hand, given that categories, such as sex and gender, emerge from *ignorance* and therefore will be eradicated together with the realization of no-self, those who have attained *nirvāṇa* — otherwise known as the arahants — transcend conventional gender identity. A tension soon transpires in Sarvāstivādins'

<sup>9</sup> For further discussions on how women become inferior to men due to different forms of *karma* in early Buddhism, see Sponberg (1992), Appleton (2011), Langenberg (2017).

<sup>10</sup> Alan Sponberg captures this ambivalence as that between ascetic misogyny and soteriological inclusiveness (Sponberg, 1992, p. 11).

realism, since women are both included in and excluded from *nirvāṇa* due to their biologically given and metaphysically real sex.

To reconcile this tension, Sarvāstivādins contend that women should spare no effort to collect *karmic* merits as a way of securing a rebirth in the material form of a male body in the life ahead, as a preparatory step to attain awakening (Katyāyāniputra, 1924, T27.1545.130c). The Sarvāstivāda solution, with an emphasis on changing a female body to a male one, however, turns out not to problematize but rather to perpetuate gender biases. In this narrative, change is described in a hierarchical manner as a one-way street for women to move upwards in their spiritual journey. Upon doing so, Sarvāstivādins tend to consolidate misogynistic norms and reinforce male superiority.<sup>11</sup>

In their exchange with the Sarvāstivādins, Yogācārins do not envision *nirvāṇa* as the polar opposite of *samsāra*. Nor do they espouse the realist view that sex is biologically given, in contrast to mentally constructed gender (Kuiji, 1924a, T43.1829.12a). Rather, following Mahāyāna teaching, they shift the focus from causality to experience. In light of this turn toward the subject, Yogācārins detail how sex/gender cannot be treated in a dualist way insofar as sex/gender is enacted by sentient beings in virtue of consciousness. Instead of existing inherently, sex/gender is always in the making.<sup>12</sup> For sentient beings in dissimilar mindsets, the ways in which they participate in sex/gender performances likewise differ. If the following analysis is tenable, we can make a case for the Yogācāra doctrine of consciousness-only as a gendered, rather than gender-neutral, account of the mind.

### 3 Naturalization of perspective: A Yogācāra reappraisal of gender<sup>13</sup>

Yogācārins define consciousness (*vijñāna*) through its distinct capacity of knowing (*vijñapti*) an object (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.1a). Following Indian master Dharmapāla, Xuanzang unpacks the functionality of consciousness. When consciousness is in function, it gives rise to a perceiving act that is directed toward a phenomenon, and in this process, consciousness is always reflexively aware of its own functionality. In Yogācāra terms, Xuanzang speaks of this intentionality of consciousness as a “four-part (*sifen* 四分)” structure of

<sup>11</sup> It shall not be ignored that women in the Theravāda tradition have proposed their own ways of reopening the canon and reinterpreting the notion of changing female bodies into male material forms, which are sometimes different from the Mahāyāna deduction (Seeger, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Many parallels can be drawn between the Yogācāra view and Judith Butler’s depiction of performativity (Butler, 1990), although Yogācārins conceive of this process of performing as that which goes beyond one single round of life.

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion of Xuanzang’s analysis of the intentional structure of consciousness, as well as the account of eight types of consciousness, see Li (2016; 2017).

the “seeing part (*xiangfen* 相分)” *qua* the perceiving act, the “image part (*jianfen* 見分)” *qua* the perceived phenomenon, the underlying “self-awareness (*zizhengfen* 自證分),” and the “reflexive awareness of the self-awareness (*zhengzizhengfen* 證自證分)” (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.10b). Since there are different modes of knowing, there are likewise different types of consciousness. In the Yogācāra framework, eight types of consciousness constitute the mind of a sentient being (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.7b). The first five consciousnesses amount to our five senses that are discontinuous and manifold (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.37a). Their sense data will be processed by the sixth consciousness, which is capable of abstract thinking even when the first five consciousnesses are not functioning (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.26a). Nevertheless, the sixth consciousness can be interrupted in extreme situations, such as comatose states (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.38a). Therefore, the Yogācārin presupposes the existence of *manas* as the seventh consciousness, which entails a habitual sense of selfhood throughout time, as the support of the sixth consciousness (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.19b). *Manas* further relies on *ālaya*, the eighth consciousness, which sustains *samsāra* even during the intermediate state between death and rebirth (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.7c). Given that different types of consciousness do not passively receive external stimulations but actively serve as the conditions for the possibility of knowledge, the Yogācāra theory of mind is commonly known as that of “consciousness-only (*weishi* 唯識, *vijñaptimātra*)” (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.38c).

Positioned in this framework of consciousness-only, the aforementioned passage of *samsāra* from *Yogācārabhūmi* can be reinterpreted as a Yogācāra account of how ignorant sentient beings enact sex/gender in performances of perceiving and practising. Now that the realist view of sex has been refuted, Yogācārin do not demarcate sex from gender in accordance with the nature-versus-culture or biology-versus-psychology paradigm. Rather, they portray how, after being conditioned by life after life in *samsāra*, sentient beings have internalized ignorance as a natural way of living to such a degree that they are inevitably inclined to form essentialist views of sex/gender, further perpetuating the sex-gender dichotomy as well as heterosexism. Once sentient beings purify their minds from misperceptions, their consciousnesses evolve into the wisdom by which they transform into Bodhisattvas, who embrace different perspectives on their bodies. That being said, there remains another way of acting out gender, which I will unpack in the next section.

To illustrate how sentient beings are inclined to perpetuate previous views and actions, Yogācārin invoke the analogy of “seeds (*zhongzi* 種子)” (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.8a). Figuratively, innate tendencies are like seeds cultivated in the past, waiting to generate more thoughts and actions. For ignorant sentient beings, most seeds are polluted by ignorance. As such, what underpins the endless circle of death and rebirth is no longer causality but rather seeds stored in the eighth consciousness, *ālaya*. The salient feature of *ālaya* consists in its subtle and profound way of functioning. When it functions, *ālaya* undertakes the four-



part structure and its image part becomes three phenomena: the entire material cosmos (*qishijian* 器世間); the corporeal body (*yougenshen* 有根身); and various types of seeds (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.10a). In light of this depiction of *ālaya*, the material cosmos and corporeal body are not presented as metaphysically real or mind independent. Rather, the two appear as phenomena in sentient beings' experience due to the functionality of *ālaya*. The seeing part of *ālaya* amounts to a holistic act of perceiving that constitutes a sentient being's primordial bodily experience in every phase of *samsāra*. More importantly, far from being a self-determined essence, *ālaya* opens itself to other minds.<sup>14</sup> Describing other minds as the remote *ālambana* for one's own mind, Xuanzang alludes to how other minds, as integral parts of collective consciousness,<sup>15</sup> serve as a perceptual background for — and thereby complement the function of — one's own mind; or to put it in figurative terms, Xuanzang speaks of the way in which seeds are planted in one's mind directly by this sentient being and indirectly by others (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.39c). All sentient beings who are going through endless life cycles in *samsāra* share the same horizon with others in the cosmos. Xuanzang compares such self-other connectedness as the ways in which “when all the lamps are turned on, they illuminate each other as if they were a larger whole (如眾燈明, 各遍似一)” (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.10c). Each individual mind acts as an illuminating lamp that harmoniously shines with others to constitute a collective scene as a larger whole and, in this process of mutual reflecting, does not lose its irreducible individuality.

Drawing on the articulation of *ālaya*, Xuanzang's disciple, Kuiji, proposes a distinctive interpretation of ‘intermediate existence.’ He describes the intermediate state as that which is sustained by the “power of seeds (*zhongzili* 種子力)” in *ālaya* (Kuiji, 1924a, T43.1829.11c). As further unpacked by Kuiji, intermediate existence is not mind-independently real, nor directly caused by previous ignorant views and actions. Rather, intermediate existence characterizes the in-between state of the eighth *consciousness* of *ālaya*. Connecting two rounds of life, *ālaya* preserves innate tendencies *qua* seeds from the previous life and perpetuates possibilities for upcoming views and deeds at the dawn of rebirth (Kuiji, 1924a, T43.1829.12a). Although the Buddhist account of *samsāra* derives from a distinct cosmology, the functionality of *ālaya* together with its seeds reveals how the past does not vanish for sentient beings in any particular

<sup>14</sup> For the discussion of Xuanzang and his disciples' approach to other minds, see Li (2019).

<sup>15</sup> It shall be highlighted that by ‘collective consciousness,’ I do not mean a metaconsciousness that dissolves all the minds of individuals. Individuality is irreducible; however, it is also not closed off from others but interconnected with them. That is why collective consciousness entails a plurality of interrelated individual minds, which is illustrated by Xuanzang's lamp analogy.

cycle of life. Previous views and deeds remain in the shared memory of sentient beings in the form of shared seeds, further shaping one's way of living (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.9c). Sentient beings are always born and reborn in this shared memory to the point that, for anyone entrapped in *samsāra*, an ignorant mindset becomes a natural worldview in which to dwell.

Through the joint force of seeds in one's own mind and the assistance from other minds known as the upheaving condition (*zengshangyuan* 增上緣), the seventh consciousness, *manas*, arises (Kuiji, 1924b, T43.1830.366b). Yogācārins therefore turn to *manas* to explain the following moment described in *Yogācārabhūmi* as, "this being perceives others of the same kind etc., and thereafter generates the desire to be reborn in a particular realm" (Maitreya, 1924, T30.1579.282c). *Manas* exercises its intentional function through the four-part intentional structure, which is characterized by how this seventh consciousness is directed toward the seeing part of *ālaya* and misperceives it as an essence (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.22a). That is to say, while *ālaya* constitutes the bodily experience for sentient beings from the first-person perspective, sentient beings under the influence of *manas* who live through these experiences are prone to develop an immutable sense of the self. In virtue of *manas*, the self habitually stands in the centre of one's life story to make the story coherent and simultaneously push others to the outskirts (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.22a). Indeed, *manas* affirms self-identity, ascertains self-other differentiation, and further assigns specific *names* as the first half of *name-forms* to the zygote (Kuiji, 1924a, T43.1829.11c-12b). Subsequently, mental factors of misconception, conceit, and self-obsession dominate the minds of sentient beings.

Different from *manas* that targets the seeing part of *ālaya*, the first six consciousnesses are directed toward the image part of *ālaya* (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.26b). As sentient beings mature into embryos inside the womb, their sixth consciousness arises (Kuiji, 1924b, T43.1830.366b). In its capacity of systematization, the sixth consciousness soon objectifies the phenomena of material cosmos and corporeal body in one's experience. Under the influence of the sixth consciousness, sentient beings habitually perceive bodily experiences of their own material *forms* — the other half of *name-forms* — and *sense sources* from an objective, third-person perspective. By force of both the seventh and the sixth consciousnesses, sentient beings embrace a habitual awareness of sex/gender from both a subjective first-person perspective and an objective third-person one. This is how Yogācārins expound on the passage relayed in *Yogācārabhūmi* regarding how sentient beings enact their gender (Maitreya, 1924, T30.1579.282c):

Sentient beings perceiving self-actions in this manner, their obsessions arise. Afterwards, if this sentient being wishes to become a woman, then she becomes obsessed with the gender of her father; [likewise] if this sentient being wishes to become a man, then he becomes obsessed with his mother's gender.

Aware of their own desires to become men or women, sentient beings act out their sex/gender to solidify self-identity.

Such a habitual awareness serves as the ground for conceptualizing gender into a fixed identity to facilitate social interactions. That is how the sixth consciousness enables experiences of *contacts* (Kuiji, 1924a, T43.1829.11c). Dwelling in an egocentric worldview both habitually and conceptually, sentient beings are accustomed to enacting sex/gender in a distinct manner, in parallel with the portrait in *Yogācārabhūmi*: “And this tendency continues .... Once a sentient being embrace this desire, s/he will only see man or woman, and as such, s/he comes to reside in a place [inside one of the six realms]” (Maitreya, 1924, T30.1579.282c). Actions and perceptions thus reinforce one another. To satisfy self-obsession and self-conceit, sentient beings willingly enact their gender to demarcate themselves from closest family members until they “no longer perceive gender under the influence of parents but only see defilements related to male or female sense organs” (Maitreya, 1924, T30.1579.282c). In the wake of these *cravings* and *attachments*, sentient beings conduct various actions to satisfy their desires and wants, which in turn cultivate more polluted seeds in *ālaya*. Gradually, sentient beings are entrapped in *samsāra*, not because of various links of causality but due to the way in which they constitute their desires and wants in an ignorant mindset. Their *existence* as ignorant ones, their *death* and *birth*, as well as their sex/gender are far from being mind-independent reality. Indeed, they are enacted in a distinct way under this particular mindset.

Divorced from Sarvāstivāda realism, Xuanzang and Kuiji bring to light how ignorant sentient beings are attached to sex/gender in forming essentialist identities. The eighth consciousness of *ālaya* gives each sentient being a holistic experience of perceiving the material cosmos and corporeal body throughout time, which does not entail a self-other dichotomy or male-female differentiation. Nonetheless, *ālaya* stores seeds from the past that shape the mindset of sentient beings. *Manas* and the sixth consciousness collaborate to bring about habitual awareness of sex/gender. Further empowered by the sixth consciousness, this sentient being utilizes conceptual language to articulate gender identity. Envisaging sex/gender as an essential category, this sentient being performs actions to make eternal its gendered identity, planting more polluted seeds in *ālaya* as a result. If a sentient being is conditioned in this fashion one life after another, then ignorance not only underlies an incorrect perspective of knowing things but also undergirds a value system that makes an egoistic life meaningful. Once ignorance is naturalized as a way of living,<sup>16</sup> this sentient being loses out on other possibilities of enacting sex/gender, leaving its *ālaya* with only seeds of ignorance and letting itself become incarcerated in *samsāra*. Stemming from the process of naturalization, an apparent heterosexism transpires, which inflicts

<sup>16</sup> For more discussion on how a perspective is naturalized, see Al-Saji (2010).

mental defilement on all sentient beings alike. Further, because sentient beings share a horizon with others in *samsāra*, such a misperception of sex/gender becomes preserved in the shared memory, aggravating in turn the pollution of collective consciousness.

#### **4 From naturalization to transformation: A Yogācāra dialectics of gender**

In their dialogues with Sarvāstivādins, Yogācārins shift the focus to the embedded and embodied mind, which allows for a reformulation of sex/gender from an enacted perspective. Positioning this reformation in the framework of consciousness-only, Yogācārins championed by Xuanzang and his disciple Kuiji portray the way in which ignorant sentient beings are conditioned life after life to perpetuate an essentialist view of gender identity. In an ignorant mindset, sentient beings naturally equate femininity with women, masculinity with men, further reinforcing an apparent heterosexism as an integral part of collective memory. Since the essentialist view of sex/gender is produced by ignorance, there remains a possibility of correcting ignorance and enacting gender in a non-dualist manner. The transformation from ignorance to enlightenment/awakening yields an evolved standpoint of sex/gender, which goes beyond the male-female dichotomy and opens the door to gender fluidity. Embodying fluidity, a sentient being will come to enact gender as an actualized performance out of a plethora of other possibilities that are always ready for reforming, and from there, recognition follows. When enlightened sentient beings come to help ignorant ones, they enact gender as a critique of ignorance for the purpose of enlightening others. These ignorant ones, upon recognizing their own limitations, learn to caution against biases and stereotypes of gender and sexuality. This is how Bodhisattvas and ignorant ones collaborate to purify collective consciousness. As such, in their formulation of non-duality, Chinese Yogācārins like Xuanzang and Kuiji do not explain categories away but rather envision categories from a different perspective, as fluid and transformative. I refer to this view of non-duality as the Yogācāra dialectic of sex/gender, which consists of two correlated aspects: the doctrine of three-natures, and the account of collective consciousness.

In Yogācāra philosophy, the doctrine of three-natures describes different mindsets, further outlining how ignorance can be purified into enlightenment. The ignorant mindset is characterized by the “imagined nature (*bianjisuozhixing* 遍計所執性, *parikalpitasvabhāva*),” which shows how ignorant sentient beings are inclined to misconceive phenomena as immutable essential entities and become attached to them (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.46a). The salient feature of an awakened mind is the “absolute nature (*yuanchengshixing* 圓成實性, *pariṇiṣpannasvabhāva*),” which demonstrates how the awakened ones come to see things as they actually are and realize the non-dualist wisdom of emptiness (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.46c). What makes it possible for a sentient being to transform one’s mindset consists in the “dependent nature (*yitaqixing* 依他起

性, *paratantrasvabhāva*),” which captures how consciousness serves as the condition for the possibility of various phenomena in our experience (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.46a). Or, in Xuanzang’s own terms, the dependent nature connects the “pure state (*jingfen* 淨分)” with the “polluted state (*ranfen* 染分)” of the mind (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.46b). All together, these three natures accentuate an open possibility furnished by the functionality of consciousness between misperceiving things as essential entities and seeing things as they actually are. That is why Kuiji’s disciple, Huizhao, encapsulates the said viewpoint in the following maxim: “From the cessation of ignorance, there arises the principle of immaculateness. Such is the immaculate non-duality, which is why we say ignorance is awakening (由斷無明, 故得理清淨。清淨不二, 故說無明, 名為菩提)” (Huizhao, 1924, T45.1863.439b). That is to say, from an open possibility furnished by the functionality of consciousness, we can derive a principle of non-duality: ignorance can transform into and therefore become interrelated with awakening.

Positioning the view of sex/gender in this framework, we can infer that when sentient beings are ignorant, they perceive sex and gender as intrinsic categories, further juxtaposing sex and gender, mind and body, man and woman, and masculinity and femininity as mutually exclusive. Upon realizing the dependent nature, sentient beings come to problematize dualistic thinking by rejecting the exclusiveness of these categories. They see how these categories are enacted moment by moment, and are thus interfused with one another. Far from being essences, these categories are evoked as skillful means to challenge stereotypes, conventions, and existing power discourses. Accordingly, an appearance as an illusory existence becomes defined by and can transform into what it excludes. The negation of dualistic thinking marks the first step of removing ignorance. Eventually, sentient beings proceed from the conceptual to the habitual, reshaping their natural habit of living — that is, they rehabilitate themselves to purify their consciousness so as to become one with the non-dualist wisdom of emptiness. By then, their minds are characterized by the absolute nature.

If this reading is tenable, then the doctrine of three-natures provides the principle of transformation that reveals the fluidity of sex/gender. Compared with that in Sarvāstivāda, the Yogācāra expression of transformation does not yield a one-way change from female bodies into male material forms. Nor do these Yogācārinins sustain the superiority of masculinity. Rather, they refute any forms of dichotomous thinking that are intrinsic to heterosexism. That is to say, transformation yields an evolution of perspective that does not reduce sentient beings to their appearances. Sentient beings can always make an effort, by performing contemplative practices to correct misperceptions both at the conceptual and habitual levels. Once sentient beings manage to remove misperceptions and regulate egocentric actions, their consciousness gradually evolves into wisdom.

Subsequently, these awakened, sentient beings refashion their view of the body. They no longer confine their understanding to that of a corporeal, material

form. Rather, the body becomes defined by bodily experience, which constitutes an embodied space. Readers might find such a notion of the body to be quite counterintuitive, since it is commonplace to equate a body with a *corpus*. Indeed, the common understanding of the body indicates how individuals reduce their embodied space to material corporeality, which becomes a natural scope for individuals to position themselves in the world. Afterward, individuals begin from the micro *qua* their own scope and expand this vision to the macro *qua* cosmos. Yogācārins, however, reverse the paradigm. In their narrative, they start with the macro — that is, they envisage the entire cosmos as the “dharma body (*fashen* 法身, *dharmakāya*)” of the Buddha, where sentient and non-sentient beings co-inhabit and interact, and which cannot be characterized as male or female (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.57a). For each awake, individual sentient being, the embodied space is known as the enjoyment body, which further consists of two aspects: the “self-enjoyment body (*zishouyongshen* 自受用身, *svasambhogakāya*)” as the purified *ālaya* that reflects the entire cosmic history as it actually is for this enlightened being; and the “other-enjoyment body (*tashouyongshen* 他受用身, *parasambhogakāya*)” as the unpolluted *manas*, which constitutes a realm free from the mental defilements and benefits others (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.58a). As such, non-duality between the part and the whole transpires. An enjoyment body is an organic part of the whole dharma body, a part that moves within and penetrates the whole. It follows that the enjoyment body likewise goes beyond masculinity and femininity. When these awakened individuals make a resolution to return to *samsāra* to help others, they become Bodhisattvas who use their purified, first six consciousnesses to engender their “emanation body (*bianhuashen* 變化身, *nirmāṇakāya*)” (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.58c). Out of compassion, Bodhisattvas appear as sentient beings for the purpose of teaching and guiding less advanced individuals. By then, Bodhisattvas embody gender fluidity by enacting various types of emanation bodies, be it the body of a man or a woman — or even, the body of a withered tree or a blossoming flower. As such, the emanation body, as a disguise and a skillful means, is temporarily marked with an illusory gender, which serves as a critique of conventional stereotypes and biases. Indeed, through removing misperceptions and misdeeds, sentient beings purify their minds and correspondingly nullify the dualist way of enacting gender. Stemming from such rehabilitationalization, gender transforms into being fluid.

As we enquire into how transformation is feasible, we soon encounter an issue caused by the theory of seeds. As relayed in the seed metaphor, previous actions plant seeds in one’s mind, which mature into a wide range of viewpoints in virtue of consciousness. These viewpoints empower verbal and non-verbal actions, which in turn condition one’s mind by cultivating more seeds in *ālaya*. Following this line of reasoning, a sentient being is ignorant because of polluted seeds inside the mind, and these seeds will only generate more misperceptions and egoistic actions, which in turn plant additional polluted seeds *ad infinitum*. If this is the case, polluted seeds will never vanish from an ignorant mind.

Transformation from ignorance to awakening likewise becomes impossible. At this point, it seems that the Yogācārins designate gender fluidity as a principle but deny gender transformation as a matter of fact.

As to be seen shortly, what looks like a negation at the surface level is in fact a crucial step for Yogācārins to advance their dialectics and avoid the explaining-away of gender at its core. Here, we must position the discussion of gender transformation in the context of self-other correlation, a context that constitutes the second part of the Yogācāra dialectics of gender. In the exposition of eight types of consciousness, I elucidated how the mind of each sentient being is not closed within itself but rather open to other minds in the entire cosmos. Together, the mind of oneself and other minds mutually constitute a shared space of meaning. It is on this shared horizon that a sentient being retains an irreducible individuality and maintains an indispensable alterity. Thereon, a sentient being can communicate and interact with others in two distinct manners: other minds can either exacerbate one's corruption, or they can facilitate one's transformation (Kuiji, 1924c, T43.1834.1002c):

Through the “force of the upheaving condition (*zengshangli* 增上力),” if one stays close to good friends and listens to the righteous teaching, it is then determined that the continuously functioning mind of oneself will become righteous. If one stays close to evil friends and listens to wicked teaching, it is then determined that the continuously functioning mind of oneself will become wicked. As such, the minds of two can determine how friendship with good or evil friends unfolds, how the upheaving condition operates in terms of self-other interdependence, how talkers have either righteous or wicked intentions, and how the listeners can develop either righteous or wicked wisdom.

That is to say, other minds *qua* polar opposite types of influence can lead to the cultivation of either pure or polluted seeds in one's own mind. From the passage in *Yogācārabhūmi*, we are introduced to the first scenario where significant others, like one's parents, subtly reinforce one's ignorance and attachment. In interactions with similarly ignorant others, the sentient being desires to sustain an essentialist view of gender and stabilize gender identity.

Nonetheless, Bodhisattvas are also significant others for ignorant sentient beings. Upon achieving initial awakening, Bodhisattvas realize how alterity is indispensable for one's own mind. As such, if the ignorant ones do not purify their minds, parts of the collective consciousness will remain polluted, which makes full awakening impossible for the Bodhisattvas. Instead of leaving these ignorant ones behind, Bodhisattvas voluntarily come to their aid by revealing to them non-dualist views and actions. Gradually, in their interactions with Bodhisattvas, even ignorant sentient beings will witness the growth of unpolluted seeds in their own minds. As such, even though ignorant sentient beings cannot make an effort to purify ignorance from their minds at the current moment, they can temporarily rely on the help of Bodhisattvas until the day

these sentient beings have enough pure seeds in their minds to start the journey toward awakening. Just as sentient beings define gender identity in interactions with significant others *qua* parents in their lives, gender transformation is realized through the collaborative effort of these sentient beings themselves and their significant others *qua* the Bodhisattvas.

There are many ways for Bodhisattvas to cultivate pure seeds in the minds of ignorant ones. In the previous discussion on the conception of body, I detailed how the emanation body is embraced by the Bodhisattvas as a skillful means to help and guide ignorant ones. Since Bodhisattvas are no longer confined to misperceptions, their rebirth in *samsāra* is not a product of ignorance but rather a voluntary choice. As Xuanzang indicates, these Bodhisattvas are driven by the power of compassion to manifest their emanation bodies (Xuanzang, 1924, T31.1585.45a). Under the disguise of their emanation bodies, Bodhisattvas strive to expose the stereotypes of ignorant sentient beings, showing them why it is important to recognize one's own limitations and the potentialities of others.

One of these Bodhisattvas is Śrīmālā, who features in the *Śrīmālā Sūtra*. In his commentary on this *sūtra*, Kuiji conceives of Śrīmālā as a “true woman (*zhennü* 真女)” and a “true follower (*zhenzi* 真子)” of the Buddha for the purpose of underscoring how Śrīmālā is a Bodhisattva who embodies gender fluidity (Kuiji, 1924d, X19.352.899b):

Earlier, the text refers to Śrīmālā as Lady Śrīmālā; it is obvious that she is a woman. Then, why does Queen Mallikā repeat here by saying that Śrīmālā is her daughter? Well, there are two reasons. First, as mentioned earlier, Queen Mallikā has another daughter. Second, usually being a woman is attributed to those in *samsāra*. Now that we are talking about woman beyond the conventional understanding, we use the term “true woman,” which shall be highlighted. The *sūtra* continues to describe how smart and wise Śrīmālā is. This is the fourth part of this section that exalts the virtues [of Śrīmālā] which further consists of two types. The first type, which is described in the *sūtra* as “wise and smart, a person of sharp root, quick to learn and grasp knowledge at ease,” entails the virtue of generating wisdom. The second type, which is depicted in the *sūtra* as “when seeing the Buddha, she will immediately comprehend the teaching without any doubt in mind,” suggests the capacity of perfecting oneself with the help of others. These two virtues can also be seen as the virtue of a commoner and that of a sage, or as the virtue of a polluted mind and that of an immaculate mind.

At the surface level, Śrīmālā is introduced as a queen of a kingdom as well as a daughter of two pious Buddhists: King Prasenañjit and Queen Mallikā. Nonetheless, Śrīmālā's identity becomes nuanced when she appears as the protagonist of the *Śrīmālā Sūtra*. Against this backdrop, Kuiji foregrounds how Śrīmālā is an awakened Bodhisattva who chose to be reborn in a kingdom and took on social roles as skillful means. Here, Kuiji is not arguing that all



Bodhisattvas are women, nor that all women are Bodhisattvas. Were either the case, Kuiji's approach would mirror ascetic misogyny by maintaining the male-female distinction and simply reversing traditional concepts of gender superiority. To the contrary, he goes beyond the dualist spectrum to detail that Śrīmālā is a true woman partly because she embodies gender fluidity as a critique of conventional ignorant views, but also partly because she epitomizes the ways in which transformation is a collaborative effort. A transformation through self-effort is not enough — it also requires recognition and participation from others. Or, in Kuiji's terms, transformation comes as a result of the virtue of generating wisdom on one's own and the capacity of perfecting oneself with the help of others.

In understanding the first aspect of being a "true woman," it is helpful to revisit the identity of Śrīmālā. She is born as a daughter to her human parents, not as a result of polluted seeds in *ālaya* but rather due to compassion for other sentient beings. In Kuiji's own terms, "Śrīmālā Mahāsattva, manifested as a woman, intends to teach and transform people in the kingdom (勝鬘大士, 隱迹女人, 欲化此國之人)" (Kuiji, 1924d, X19.352.900a). The way in which Śrīmālā's rebirth is yielded by compassion is in line with the discussion of the wondrous rebirth of Bodhisattvas in Yogācāra literature. As a Bodhisattva, Śrīmālā divorces herself from essentialist views of sex/gender, willingly entering *samsāra* and embracing womanhood for the purpose of guiding sentient beings along the right path. Now that Śrīmālā enacts a female form for altruistic purposes, this Bodhisattva's gender does not derive from an egoistic mindset. Nor does Śrīmālā go to the other extreme by reducing gender to nothingness. In conducting altruistic deeds, Śrīmālā manifests as a woman in front of other ignorant ones so as to reveal to them the embodiment of gender fluidity. Such an embodiment does not explain gender away but rather serves as a critique of conventional sexism, in an allusion to emptiness. This is the first sense of characterizing Śrīmālā as a "true woman."

Moreover, as related in Śrīmālā's story, it is through self-other collaboration that one can fully embrace gender fluidity. Such a collaboration is epitomized first by Śrīmālā's encounter with Śākyamuni Buddha and then by the interaction with people inside the kingdom. Kuiji accentuates Śrīmālā's capacity of self-perfecting with the help of others for the purpose of highlighting the importance of recognition and participation from others. Kuiji particularly highlights how Śākyamuni Buddha, whose dharma body amounts to the entire cosmos, appears in the emanation body for Śrīmālā (Kuiji, 1924d, X19.352.900b-901c). In Kuiji's words, "when seeing the Buddha, she immediately comprehends the teaching without any doubt in mind (由逢佛故, 必速解法)" (Kuiji, 1924d, X19.352.899b). That is to say, although Śrīmālā embodies the virtue of wisdom, this Bodhisattva has not fully realized nor become one with this wisdom. It is only during her encounter with a significant other *qua* Śākyamuni Buddha that Śrīmālā comes to recognize her own limitations and potentiality. As such, Śākyamuni Buddha appears as one of the significant others to accelerate

the purification of remaining polluted seeds in the mind of Śrīmālā (Kuiji, 1924d, X19.352.902a). Thereafter, just as Śrīmālā achieves enlightenment with the help of Śākyamuni Buddha, she aspires to engage in altruistic actions, in the hope of guiding others along the right path. Enacting gender altruistically, she becomes one with gender fluidity as a true follower of the Buddha, who appreciates the illusory existence of gender as a skillful means to confront the stereotypes of ignorant sentient beings and communicate with them about their potentiality cloaked under appearances (Kuiji, 1924d, X19.352.923b). In turn, these ignorant ones come to recognize not only their own limitations — especially that dichotomous thinking, together with related gender biases and heterosexism, become their naturalized way of living in *samsāra* — but also the potentiality of themselves and their significant others to embrace non-duality, which marks the first step for them to transform from being ignorant into being awake.

## 5 Conclusion

Our analysis suggests how Śrīmālā, though a woman, is also a Bodhisattva and a Buddha in-the-making. Following the Yogācāra dialectics of gender, we can come to terms with the conclusion that one is one and can also be many. That is not to say that all Bodhisattvas must be women. Rather, stories like that of Śrīmālā show how appearance is grounded in a plethora of other possibilities in such a way that Bodhisattvas can manifest as everything for the ones they intend to help. A blossoming tree, a flying bird, and of course a woman, they are all possible manifested emanation bodies of Bodhisattvas. Such a manifestation allows Bodhisattvas to criticize and problematize various types of ignorant views, including sexism.

The recognition of one's own limitations and others' potentiality alludes to how the transformation of gender awareness is a collaborative effort. Then, for ignorant individuals, it becomes a call for caution and self-critique that taking things at face value risks deviating from being a true Buddhist follower. Instead of explaining gender away, we can make a case against sexist discrimination in terms of the Yogācāra dialectics of gender. This is how Chinese Yogācārins resolve the ambivalent stance toward women in early Buddhism as well as in the Buddhist canon. Throughout history, Buddhist followers have made an effort to reopen the canon and reinterpret the teaching, which makes Buddhism a living tradition. With their dialectics of gender, Yogācārins in China joined the cause to erode sexism, becoming a source of inspiration for us to expand the discourse of both Yogācāra philosophy and feminist theories today.

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