



## **Theorizing Care: A Humanities Online Reading Course**

### **Session Two, led by Prof. CHOW Yiu Fai**

on 09 March 2023 via zoom

#### Session Annotation

The discussion ends with the Chinese words for precarity, 摇摇欲坠 (Yao Yao Yu Zhui), which literally means ‘about to fall.’

##### Comment 1:

There is something playful about the words yao yao (almost) that balances with yu zhui (to fall). It is poetic. The precarity carries a kind of playfulness to it. And it's not about being the victim. But it's a new form of making do.

##### Comment 2:

I'm overjoyed to read this chapter as a single mother with 3 children. People made the same generational mistakes. And to think of the US. as a big melting pot, there are a lot of ethnic and religious differences in the pressure on marriage. They call the leftover woman in Japan the “Christmas cake”, which is a woman over 25. It means the cake is stale. That's their version of the pressure to marry.

##### Comment 3:

And the context that we're referring to is something that is really lacking in other places where there has been this process of delegation to welfare, state structures, union structures, and so on and so forth. And so there's a kind of a hollowing out of human capacity to do exactly the sorts of things that this book describes.

##### Comment 4:

The idea that precarity is a male-centric and western-centric concept resonates with me. I just like to know in what particular sense you or you're making that claim about precarity. And the other thing that I would love to hear a little bit more about it is the whole shift that you're advocating from kind of a politics of precarity to an ethics of care, which you do through the lens of this very particular group of women.

It seems like that argument has a more general purchase. So, if it is the case that what these particular women need, and to some extent, are developing is an ethics of care. My context of precarity is in the UK: 13 years of Tory ruling, in a politics of austerity, the strikes are going on for very good reasons and support. So the second question is to what extent to which your argument potentially has ramifications, not just for China and not just for single women, but more generally.



The response from Prof. Chow:

The interviewees treasure the opportunity to be able to do the interview. They kind of take it as allowing me to exaggerate a bit as a kind of therapeutic session. In many parts of the world, activism or strikes are not possible to engage in that kind of politics in China. But the sadness comes from the question: How far is it possible? And how far is its full impact? And then, we have to carry on in the sense that we have to find other ways. And that is more specific to our times. And our times, particularly in the Chinese context, Hong Kong is included in this case. So we take care of ourselves and we have to recognize what we are doing, and what we can too.

They don't join the hetero-normative game itself. We have to give them the credit again to tell them they are not alone. We don't know how these people would turn out to be. This is what I wrote in the final chapter of this book. The single women in the study never talked about being single. Being together in the performance was therapeutic enough.

Comment 5:

The Chinese situation is similar to India. It is not good if you are not a man and you are not married at a certain age. But a big part of the consideration for marriage is physical protection. You will get unsavory male attention if you are single.

The response from Prof. Chow:

Physical insecurity does not play out in the Chinese context. But maybe the violence is hidden. The study is also limited to Shanghai. I am not sure about the situation in rural areas.

Comment 7:

This question actually just makes me reflect on my academic research on single women. I feel like when we put women, single women, and creative workers together, you are actually adjusting addressing a very complicated intersection where they were not allowed to take care of themselves because of their being women and because of their career choice.

The question is who is allowed to take care of one's self? Women and creatives. There is a double precarity here. A woman is seen as one who cannot take care of herself. Creative people are also considered another class that is seen as incapable of taking care of themselves. Certain people are not allowed to take care of themselves.

Comment 8:

I want to get back to your point about the lack of activism among these women. On P. 19, you write, "they do not protest because they do not experience the myriad of ways to meander through precarity as being servile, at least not only as servile." At first, I saw this as a class issue. But later, I began to think it



may have more to do with them being in the creative sector. They do not experience servility. My question is what is the force of the creative zone that “protected” one from experiencing servility?

Comment 9:

I observed that single women in China have an abortion as an option when they get pregnant. In the Philippines, women in the same situation would be pressured to marry. Though they can still make the choice to stay single and become single mothers, which in China is not allowed since they refuse to register children of unmarried women. Although the policy of non-registration is changing right now, because of the current decline in population.

My question is with the current high unemployment among youth in China, will this affect the independence of young people’s choices? Because the tendency is if you can really find a job, you go back to your parents and your parents actually support you, and then you lose your freedom. So this is a kind of economic problem, but it may have ramifications for people who want to stay single.

The response from Prof. Chow:

I really do not know. But for security, some may just marry.

Comment 11:

I like your resistance to this universalizing. I think in a couple of points that you're talking about this very partial way of viewing things. You want to resist this very, perhaps very masculine way of normally looking at things. You don't really have criteria in terms of what creatives are, as long as they believe they're working on this. And you don't really have particular criteria because single and what you just said is such a contextual field.

The response from Prof. Chow:

I have a resistance to universalizing the research. This is an urban, first-tier city. Creative work. Precarity is particular. In terms of method, I consider the method promiscuous, if you like. I use different methodologies and incorporate creative methods.

I’m more interested in what I call ‘additional precarity’— ethnic minority, etc.

Comments 12:

When you talk about precariousness as a way of dealing with life, I immediately think about failing. This kind of energy that they really genuinely have failed their parents, fail the whole society, failed Chinese culture. Even so, how could these single women find solace through creative, engaging, and creative labor? When I increasingly engage in interviews with ethnic minority interviewees, somehow the algorithms of the internet somehow provide some kind of elusive security.



Comments 13:

It's good to think about the writers Guild of America, which has high numbers of women participants. It's been studied extensively by sociologists. What's interesting about their survival is this is an occupation with low technology.

Comment 16:

There is poetic quality in your book. And this creativity, says also about our inner resources and resilience — in the final analysis, that's what gets you by.