Applicant: Lin Li

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Katheryn Davis Fellows for Peace Application Essay

I am a Ph.D. student majoring in East Asian history and minoring in Gender and Women’s Studies. Born in a rural village and raised in a small town in Mainland China, I have witnessed and experienced injustice against women in daily life, which sparked my interest in gender issues at a young age. Since entering college, I have been taking courses on gender and have also participated in feminist groups. Specifically, I am devoted to spreading the consciousness of feminist thought and achieving gender justice through the press. As the associate editor for Reflexion Magazine in Taiwan, I helped organize a special issue titled “Feminism and Liberalism in Contemporary China” in May 2013.

Although recent years have witnessed the vigorous development of Chinese feminism, in my experience, I have noticed that Chinese feminists seldom pay attention to their peers in other East Asian countries, not to mention feminists from other parts of the world. However, as Virginia Woolf forcefully argued, “as a woman I have no country”. The elimination of sexism is a group project in which transgressing national boundaries is necessary. Furthermore, given the geographical, historical, and cultural proximity among East Asian countries, feminists should think about their projects not
only in relation to their own countries, but also in the context of a larger East Asian community. Despite political and economic prominence, East Asia remains one of the least gender progressive areas in the world. Facing severe gender inequality throughout this region, my central concern is how feminists from different parts of East Asia could work collaboratively towards the achievement of gender equality and human rights. This leads to my decision to research the emergence and development of feminist discourses and movements in modern East Asia, focusing on Japan and China.

Sino-Japanese relations during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were marked by continuous warfare and extreme sexual violence against women. Relations are further worsened by the recent rise of the right wing in both countries. Resorting to nationalistic rhetoric, politicians in both countries have been portraying each other as enemies. Their emphasis on external threats to the national interest pushes internal social problems that affect individual citizens, such as gender inequality, to the side. However, if we move our attention from male politicians and intellectuals to feminist scholars and activists, we will realize that Chinese and Japanese people share many of the struggles. Since Chinese and Japanese women have both suffered from systematic sexual exploitation resulting from the wars, focusing on their shared experience and viewpoints can help us transcend their apparent national divides while highlighting their commonalties across borders. Instead of buying into this nationalistic discourse, Chinese and Japanese feminists should work jointly against the same target: the violation of human rights based on gender. Thus, Chinese and Japanese feminist movements are the basis upon which reconciliation and
peace between these two countries can be achieved.

In order to forge connections between Chinese and Japanese people, I am
determined to continue studying Japanese. A solid grasp of Japanese is vital in fostering
intercultural dialogue and establishing common ground upon which East Asian feminists
can work together. With a firm command of Japanese, I will be able to build connections
with Japanese feminist scholars and activists and introduce their thoughts to Chinese
peers, and vice versa. Thus, acquiring a good command of Japanese allows me to mediate
between Japanese and Chinese feminists.

Moreover, my concerns for gender equality and the benefits of my research are not
limited to East Asia. As a female graduate student who grew up in East Asia and studies
in the United States, my English research on East Asian feminism can build a bridge
between East Asia and the English-speaking world. By introducing East Asian feminism
to Anglophone feminists, I can contribute to the growth of international feminist
community and the intercultural conversation over gender issues, crossing national and
racial boundaries.

Women’s rights are a central component of human rights, and the achievement of
gender justice is an integral part of the realization of peaceful human relations. As one of
the most influential philanthropists, Mrs. Davis was a longtime promoter of women's
rights. My motives behind language study share many similarities with her aspirations:
instead of considering the acquisition of language as a mere augmentation of personal
skills, I understand it as a way to promote intercultural communication and collaboration.

Language should not be understood as the end, but a means to foster peaceful relationships between communities. If I can receive this fellowship to continue my language study, I will be able to further Mrs. Davis’ legacies and contribute to the elimination of gender injustice and the realization of peace within and without East Asia.