學術討論

WHAT CAN FEMINIST THEORY DO FOR THE STUDY OF CHINESE HISTORY?

A BRIEF REVIEW OF SCHOLARSHIP IN THE U.S.

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Defamiliarizing the familiar

In the United States, feminist studies developed over the past two decades have presented new challenges and new opportunities to historians of Chinese women. One such challenge is the prospect of defamiliarizing familiar materials, dislodging them from conventional frameworks and turning them to new uses as texts. These familiar texts include biographies of exemplary women contained in official histories (*lieh-nü chuan* 列女傳) and the epitaphs (*mu-chih-ming* 墓誌銘) or funeral odes (*chi-wen* 祭文) composed by men to honor women they loved or admired.

The reason why these familiar materials gain new historical meaning when subjected to feminist analysis is that feminist theory attempts explicitly to link structures of kinship, community, class, and state—structures where power is lodged—to the meaning or meanings of gender and sexuality at specific places and points in

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time. In particular, feminist theory argues that state-sponsored institutions—especially laws defining property relations, inheritance procedures, tax collection, corvée and military service, and criminal conduct—have a coherent historical relationship to the norms, ideologies, or values lodged in other social and cultural systems such as the family, religious organizations, and aesthetic or creative activities. These norms, ideologies, and values invariably include conceptions of what it means to be female or male, masculine or feminine (Ross and Rapp 1981).

Feminist theory has special promise, therefore, for historians of China. We have reams of material about temporal change in China's imperial institutions and organizations, but we have tended to assume that "virtue" and other norms governing gender and sexuality are somehow timeless and transcendent, disembodied from other aspects of social and cultural change.

For China historians working in the U.S., the pathbreaking work exploring the relationship between gender and power in Chinese society has come from outside the discipline of history. The first was anthropologist Margery Wolf's classic *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan*, which was first published in 1972. Wolf's analysis of what she called the "uterine family" and the women's community in a Taiwan village permanently complicated and defamiliarized our male-centered view of the so-called "patriarchal" Chinese family system. The next major breakthrough was sociologist Judith Stacey's feminist analysis of the Chinese revolution (*Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China*), published in 1983. Stacey's analysis of Mao Tse-tung's "New Democracy" policy showed, for example, that from a feminist perspective New Democracy actually meant simply "a wife for every peasant."

Both Wolf and Stacey chose subjects about which U.S. historians of China had published widely accepted, well documented interpretations. But they turned those interpretations upside down, simply by reanalyzing them from a feminist perspective. In a word, they defamiliarized the familiar.

Familiar Chinese historical materials have continued to yield new insights when analyzed using gender as a category of analysis. One of the most striking areas of research has been female biography. Biographies of women fill the pages of every standard history, whether compiled by the central government or by a county magistrate. Already numerous studies of female biographies have demonstrated that, far from being timeless, they display both temporal and regional variation. T'ien Ju-k'ang's (1988) study of women's suicide, based on biographies from three parts of China, calls attention to the specific cultural and economic conditions that encouraged women in Fukien to commit suicide in extraordinary numbers. Mark Elvin (1984) has analyzed the role of the Ming and Ch'ing Chinese state in promoting the chaste widow cult as an example of state intrusion into a realm marked as " domestic " or " private " in Western societies. Ann Waltner (1981) and others (e.g. Mann 1987) have used female biography to examine changing attitudes toward women in late imperial times. A recent study by Katherine Carlitz (1991) has focused on readers and publishers of female biographies in Ming times.

Other new studies have dramatized shifts in Confucian values and attitudes affecting women and women's roles, once again by re-reading familiar materials. Joanna Handlin's (1975) research on Lü K'un revealed changes in late Ming attitudes toward women's education. K'ang-i Sun Chang's (1991) recent study of Ch'en Tzu-lung

and Liu Ju-shih shows how women came to serve as symbols of "love and loyalism" at a particular point in historical time, under the particular conditions of the late Ming collapse. Statecraft writings of the mid-Ch'ing period can be analyzed to show that promoting women's work was part of mid-Ch'ing programs to maintain a viable tax base while ensuring the continued prosperity and well-being of the farm population (Mann 1992).

Rediscovering neglected sources

Feminist theory not only produces startling new discoveries when applied to familiar sources. It also stimulates a quest for new or neglected sources. Studies of familiar works about women written by men have provoked interest in writings by women themselves. This in turn has inspired a search for lost or neglected women's writings, especially since the publication of Hu Wen-k'ai's (1985) survey of writings by women in Chinese history. In the U.S., a new field of literary studies is exploring changes in women's writings and identifying the differences between the male and the female voice in Chinese literary works.① Dorothy Ko (1994) has just completed a new history of women in late Ming and early Ch'ing times that is based almost exclusively on writings by women themselves. K'ang-i Sun Chang is compiling a mammoth three-volume set of translations of poetry by Chinese women.② In art history, interest in women painters

① See the special issue on women's culture in *Late Imperial China* 13.1 (June 1992), especially Robertson 1992. Pathbreaking articles include Widmer 1989, Waltner 1987, Waltner 1989.

② *An Anthology of Chinese Women Poets from Ancient Times to 1911* (to be published by Yale University Press).

and calligraphers is growing rapidly, together with related research on women's costume, fashion, hairstyles, and the representation of the female body in art.③ Charlotte Furth (1987, 1988) is completing a systematic study of medical practice and conceptions of the female body represented in medical texts. These new interests are increasingly evident in exhibits and conference papers.④

Still, as Patricia Ebrey commented at a recent academic meeting, gender as a category of analysis has yet to make a broad impact on historical studies of China, especially for earlier periods.⑤ In the China field in the United States, research placing women at the center has yet to realize its potential to reshape the historical record.

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③ See *Views from Jade Terrace*, a catalogue from an exhibition of the same name, which includes articles by Marsha Wagner, Ellen Johnston Laing, and others. See also Wagner 1990, Laing 1990a, Laing 1990b.

④ proceedings of the conference on Family Process and Political Process in Modern Chinese History, held in January 1992 at the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, Taipei, have already been published (Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, eds., 1992). The proceedings include important new studies of gender and family carefully situated in historical context. A conference on "Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State," attended by scholars from the U.S., Taiwan, and mainland China was held at Harvard University and Wellesley College, February 7-9, 1992; selected papers from that conference will be published in 1994 by Harvard University Press. At the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, held in March 1993 in Los Angeles, panels and papers focused on Chinese women attracted enormous attention. These included a panel chaired by Gail Hershatter titled "Thinking about Chinese Women and Feminism," in which three scholars from the mainland presented papers for discussion; a panel on "Male Anxiety and the Representation of the Female in Ming-Ch'ing Fiction," chaired by Robert E. Hegel; a panel titled "'Firsts' for Women in Han Times," at which Yü Ying-shih served as discussant; and a panel "Playing with Gender in Pre-Modern Chinese Drama," with Ann Waltner acting as discussant.

⑤ Patricia Ebrey, "Gendering Song History," paper presented at a panel titled "Song Studies: The State of the Field, Part I," annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Los Angeles, 28 March 1993.

Reconceptualizing the organization of Chinese society in historical time

The first wave of historical research on Chinese women in both the U.S. and in China was devoted to documenting and criticizing women's oppression by men. A major target of criticism was "patriarchy." Feminist scholarship on Chinese women by historians in the U.S., which exploded during the 1970s, followed leads established decades earlier by Chinese historians. Chinese historians in turn were influenced by China's own early feminist movement, especially by the May Fourth critique of Confucianism and the patriarchal family system. Ch'en Tung-yuan 陳東原 and others wrote the classic secondary works on which U.S. historians have relied to pursue their research on the place of women in Chinese history.

Recent feminist research on Chinese women's history in the U.S. has now moved in different, although related, directions. The aim is not to document women's oppression but rather to illuminate the connections between gender relations and other larger structures of power lodged in economic organizations, political structures, and so forth. For example, the first English-language historical study of prostitution in China, Sue Gronewold's *Beautiful Merchandise : Prostitution in China, 1860-1936*, focused on the Chinese patriarchal system and the ways in which it facilitated a traffic in women's bodies. But her evidence may be pushed beyond a critique of oppression and toward a new understanding of the broad systems and structures that organize gender relations in Chinese history.

To do this, scholars might start by asking the same questions that have been asked about the history of prostitution in the West : 1) how do the structural conditions expressing and articulating

certain conceptions of gender reproduce themselves? 2) how are they connected to larger structures of kinship, community, class, and state formation in history? 3) how do they change over time? Asking those questions enables us to identify two complementary, but discrete, structures of female sexuality in late imperial China. The first was a structure of marriage and reproduction; the second, a structure of prostitution and procurement.

These two structures of traffic in women, to borrow a phrase from Gayle Rubin (1975), were separate. The first built family systems and reproductive systems through the exchange of brides. The second replicated itself through a cycle in which young girls were sold or forced into prostitution, compelled by aging to abandon their profession for the role of procuress, obtained other girls to serve as prostitutes, and so forth. With those two structures in mind, we could then divide all Chinese families with daughters in late imperial times into two groups: those who married their daughters into the structures of sexual reproduction within the family; and those who sold their daughters into the structures providing sexual gratification outside the family.

Of course, the two structures were not entirely discrete. In times of political upheaval, respectable married women could be forced into prostitution. Among certain classes and certain ethnic or subethnic groups, prostitution by female family members (including wives and marriageable daughters) served as a legitimate means of supporting the family, or earning a dowry. Even respectable widows and divorcees, if impoverished, might turn to prostitution. By the same token, a prostitute or courtesan favored by a rich patron might be purchased to join his family as a concubine. In addition, some might argue that the line separating "sale" of daughters from "

marriage" of daughters was not entirely clear because of the customary brideprice required in many parts of the empire. Finally, we know that a very few women seceded entirely from both of these systems, either as spiritual adepts devoted to solitary meditation or as members of sisterhoods or convents. Ann Waltner's studies of T'an-yang-tzu 曇陽子(1987) explore this side of women's spirituality. Marjorie Topley (1975), Janice Stockard (1989), Maria Jaschok (1988), and others have studied the sisterhoods and delayed transfer marriage patterns unique to the Canton delta region.

For the sake of argument, however, suppose we treat these two structures as separate worlds, produced and reproduced in the everyday lives of women and their families. If we look to the systems that upheld, stabilized, and protected the binary structure of traffic in women in the late empire, we find three levels where crucial decisions were made, or policies implemented, to maintain them: the household, the community, and the state. At the household the most basic decisions began the process that determined which structure a woman would enter. Poor families were the first to sell or pawn their women, though not necessarily with the intention of sending a daughter into prostitution. Poor families also lacked the resources and the networks to verify the credentials that distinguished prospective buyers from bona fide marriage partners. At the household level, then, the dividing line between the two structures was the line separating those families who could protect their women from sale, and everybody else. This definition of "class" in late imperial Chinese society only becomes visible through the lense of feminist analysis.

A second critical decision-making level was the community. Morés in some communities may have sanctioned the participation of

member households in both structures of sexuality.⑥ However, it seems likely that most local communities echoed the formal state sanctions demeaning prostitutes, by excluding former and present prostitutes from the ranks of young women eligible for marriage into respectable families.

This calls our attention to the fact that the state—through laws and normative sanctions—upheld these separate but curiously equal realms of female sexuality through a combination of policies that affirmed the importance of women's sexual purity, prohibited the sale of women by their husbands, and at the same time required hereditary registration for prostitutes, who were legally classified as members of the *chien-min* 賤民, or demeaned peoples, and whose descendants were barred from upward mobility for three successive generations even if they left their profession.

Gronewold tantalizingly suggests that the state, above all, held the determining interest in perpetuating two separate worlds of female sexuality. Why? To uphold a family system that cloistered wives for purposes of reproduction and child socialization; and to provide access to women for the otherwise restless and potentially rebellious (sometimes single) males unable to find sexual gratification within the confines of the cloistering family system, which was organized to minimize strong emotional and affective bonds between spouses. In other words, the carefully defined separate and distinct worlds of marriage and prostitution provide one measure of the

⑥ See, for example, Wolf 1968, 1972, where she shows that under certain conditions, community mores sanctioned prostitution as a form of filial piety for the unmarried daughter supporting her parents. Eugene Cooper has also reported to me that prostitution was a common way for young women among the " boat people " households of Guangdong to earn money for their dowries. Personal communication, February 26, 1983.

impact of late imperial state authority on gender hierarchies and on conceptions of sexuality.

If we then wish to place these insights in historical perspective, we must ask when these two gender systems were different, and how they changed. Here Patricia Ebrey's work on women in the Sung has provided important insights into the roots of the late imperial binary structure of sexuality. In an early essay published in 1981, Ebrey noted that women in the upper class lineages of the emerging "gentry" society, unlike upper-class women in Ch'ing times, enjoyed property rights within their natal families and prolonged close contact with their natal families after marriage. The Sung family system, she argued, was both structually and symbolically different from its Ch'ing counterpart. In her subsequent work, Ebrey (1990, for example) has continued to elaborate that view.

Clearly, as Ebrey's work has shown,⑦ the T'ang-Sung-Yuan transition is a period on which feminist historians of China should train their lenses to clarify precisely the temporal and regional scope of changes in structures of sexuality, and to explain how and why they occurred. If male-female relations in the Sung upper classes were more egalitarian and open than they were by the Ch'ing period, what of gender relations outside the elite? The Sung upper class was probably a much smaller percentage of the total population than the upper class of the Ch'ing period. In the Sung lower classes that comprised the bulk of the population, females may have been confined within structures of indentured servitude, sequestered both from the commoner marriage market and from commercial sex markets. If that is the case, then the urbanization of the Sung period, with its new job markets for women, may be a portent of the more market-based traffic

⑦ See Ebrey 1990 and 1991 for broad statements of the issues.

in women characteristic of late imperial times.

Such a view would shed new light on Sung Neo-Confucian ideology stressing the importance of female virtue. This ideology may have been a profound outcry of rage and dismay *not* at the breakdown of female virtue *per se,* but at the erosion of the system of elite land tenure and labor management in the countryside, which was threatened by growing urban economies.

Critiques of Western feminist theory

Promising though it may be, Western feminist theory has come under increasing criticism during the past two decades, by feminist scholars themselves. Some of the most important criticism has come from feminist scholars writing about India and about Islamic societies who, because of colonial legacies, have long addressed a scholarly audience using English. In many cases, these scholars have reacted angrily to Western feminist judgments about their culture and women's place in it. They argue that Western feminists have imposed a universalistic framework of analysis on cultures where Western feminist theories have little or no explanatory power, and they charge that Western feminists are heirs to an insidious legacy of Orientalism ⑧ or what has come to be called colonial discourse (Mohanty 1991).

Some of the most articulate critiques of Western feminist

⑧ See Said's (1978) critical analysis of what he called the " discourse " of Orientalism. Said charged that Western scholarly analyses of Asian societies had an implicit common goal: to " enlighten " the people called Orientals; to make change happen so that Orientals would become more like Westerners. Orientalists, he noted, spoke of " our Orient, " " our people " " our dominions. " In other words, according to Said, Western scholarship on Asia was rooted in a Western impulse to appropriate the Orient, to make Asia its own, to define and change it in the West's own image.

scholarship come from Islamic cultures, where the return of the veil has become an emblem of resistance to Western imperialism in Muslim fundamentalist movements. In the U.S., Leila Ahmed's writings have drawn the attention of feminist scholars to the relationship between feminism and the colonial legacy. As Ahmed (1992:154-55) points out in her latest book:

> " Whether in the hands of patriarchal men or feminists, the ideas of Western feminism essentially functioned to morally justify the attack on native societies and to support the notion of the comprehensive superiority of Europe ... [W] hatever the disagreements of feminism with white male domination within Western societies, outside their borders feminism turned from being the critic of the system of white male dominance to being its docile servant. "

Ahmed's studies have emphasized the particular contradictions that face non-Western feminist scholars critical of Western feminist theory. Reviewing a leading Egyptian feminist's attack on clitoridectomy and other abusive customs in Middle Eastern societies,⑨ Ahmed took note of the book's paradoxical " anger at the West, its imperialism, its despoiling of the peoples of the Third World, and its civilizational arrogance resting, as it does, so squarely upon ignorance. " Then she made the following comment:

> " I think that there is not one of us who has not known the anger out of which she speaks and who has not known what it is to be slighted casually and constantly in one's racial or cultural identity. Such a slight, a belittlement, a degradation can be, as many feminists have made clear, even more

⑨ Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World,* trans. Dr. Sherif Hetata (London: Zed Press, 1980) .

unendurable than our oppression as women. " ⑩

Ahmed then offered some tentative advice to Western feminists:

> " It would be well if Western women did not merely replicate Western men's view of the Third World, particularly in their assumption that technological and material backwardness denotes civilizational backwardness, and it would be well if feminists at least made themselves more aware of the elaborate and rich traditions out of which ' other ' women speak. "

Ahmed's point was echoed in an early exchange between Vina Mazumdar, a leading Indian feminist, and Dorothy Stein, who published a critique of the victimization of women resulting from the practice of Indian *sati* (widow-burning) . Mazumdar, describing her own great-great grandmother's act of *sati*, pointed out in its cultural context, her great-great-grandmother's act represented not victimization but defiance by casting herself on her husband's funeral pyre, she flouted the law of the land along with the concerns, the interests, and indeed the orders of the living male patriarchs of her family.⑪

Critiques like Mazumdar's and Ahmed's stimulated a search for less ethnocentric approaches to the study of women in non-Western cultures. One early example, again from Arab studies, appeared in Rosemary Sayigh's article criticizing orientalist approaches to Arab women. Sayigh proposed an agenda to purge Western feminist scholarship of its orientalist legacy:

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⑩ *Signs* 6.4 (1981) : 750-51.

⑪ Dorothy K. Stein, " Women to Burn: Suttee as a Normative Institution, " *Signs*4.2 (1978) :253-268; Vina Mazumdar, " Comment on Suttee, " *Signs* 4.2 (1978) : 269-273. For recent critical views of *sati* stressing the complexity of doing cross-cultural and transnational research, see Lata Mani, " Multiple Mediations: Feminist Scholarship in the Age of Multi-National Reception, " *Feminist Review* 35 (1990):24-41.

> " A new approach to Arab women would begin, not with Arab ' difference, ' but with social formations and the political and economic forces that shape them. The focus would not be on unchangeability but on historical change, not on ideal-typical " Arab woman, " but on variations between regions, groups, and castes. "

She stressed that class and sect can dramatically reshape the role that powerful kinship organizations play in prescribing women's roles. She also argued that by focusing on " status, " Western approaches to Arab women had ignored women's roles and activities, perpetuating the image of passivity so compatible with the orientalist perspective.⑫

Martin King Whyte's (1978) important survey of the status of women in preindustrial societies pointed to other ways of analyzing women's status. Whyte demonstrated that no single variable or cluster of variables serves as an adequate measure of what one might call " women's status " in any society. In all preindustrial societies, women have more power in some spheres than in others, and women's spheres of power and influence vary across cultures. Whyte found, on the other hand, that the development of complex agrarian empires may have represented the historic nadir of women's status. His findings suggest that scholars interested in the status of women in Ming and Ch'ing China need to reexamine both the particular context of late imperial culture in all its varieties *and* the common history of preindustrial bureaucratic states.

In sharp contrast to Whyte's multivariate sociological analysis, but also in the spirit of Sayigh's critique, was Lila Abu-Lughod's

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⑫ " Roles and Functions of Arab Women: A Reappraisal, " *Arab Studies Quarterly* 3.3 (1981) :258-274.

(1986) anthropological study of women's communities and women's writing among the Awlad 'Ali Bedouins of the Egyptian Western desert. Abu-Lughod portrays the women's community among the Bedouin as an autonomous sphere where women develop social responsibility, pride in their personalities and their bodies, and a realm of shared experience that provides them with lives that are rich in affect and intimacy. She challenges the feminist critique of veiling and female seclusion, and forces a reexamination of the premises that conflate sex segregation with the subjugation of women.

The transnational critique of Western feminist theory and resistance to its colonial legacy is just beginning to have its impact on the China field in the U.S.⑬ However, as Sayigh pointed out, and as studies of women in Chinese history have already begun to show, it is possible to deploy insights of feminist theory in cross-cultural or comparative studies while avoiding the orientalist pitfalls of some Western feminism, especially by focusing on variation by class and region, and through time.

Conclusion

Feminist theory has not only caused historians to reexamine familiar materials and query them for new insights. it has also inspired a quest to recover lost or neglected sources by and about women. Sources written by or about women have been ignored by China historians because these sources have not been readily

⑬ See, for example, critical essays on feminist approaches to the study of China in the first issue of the new cultural studies journal *positions: east asia cultures critique* 1.1 (spring 1993) [editorial office 94 Castro Street, San Francisco, CA 94114].

available, or because they have seemed irrelevant to the " larger " enterprises of institutional or intellectual history that mainstream historians like to do. However, the social, political, and economic institutions that constitute the favored subjects of China historians, and the intellectual traditions China historians like to study, are all intimately connected to the cultural construction of gender. Feminist theory deployed to reveal sexual meanings in the Chinese cultural context will yield a more complex understanding of institutions and ideas in Chinese history. It will advance us beyond the stage of criticizing a timeless patriarchy and the oppression of Chinese women. And it will reveal systems and structures erased by conventional historical methods that ignore gender and conceal women from the historian's gaze.

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GLOSSARY

feminist theory	女性主義
defamiliarizing the familiar	舊題新解
structures of power	權力結構
kinship, community, class, state	親屬，社群，階級，國家
gender	性別
sexuality	性
norms, ideologies, values	規範，意識形態，價值取向
female, male, masculine, feminine	女性，男性，男子氣，女子氣

" uterine family "	母親中心家庭
statecraft	經世
reconceptualizing	概念重建
Orientalism	東方特徵主義
universalism	普遍主義
structural conditions	深層結構所造就的條件
marriage and reproduction	婚姻與生育
prostitution and procurement	娼妓與淫媒業
traffic in women	婦女人口買賣
sisterhoods	姐妹組織
mores	習俗
laws and normative sanctions	法律和規約
gender hierarchies	性別等級
cultural construction of gender	性別的後天性

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