學術討論

# From the Sung to the PRC:
# An Introduction to Recent English–Language
# Scholarship on Women in Chinese History

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The theoretical and thematic trends which have emerged in English–language scholarship on gender in Chinese history have been well–documented over the last few years.① In fact, many of the dominant themes/theories which have come to take precedence in material published in just the last year or so previously had been identified in these review essays. In Paul Ropp's examination of works from 1985–1990, for example, he presented English–language scholarship on the theme of evolving kinship patterns and marriage institutions, wherein he noted that scholars had moved away from examinations of the so–called "victim" mentality of earlier feminist theorization toward the interplay of historicized constructions of gender and changing social, political, and economic institutions and intellectual traditions (Ropp, 1991). More recently, Susan Mann reiterated the persistence of this trend (Mann, 1993). In addition, Ropp suggested

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①   For excellent overviews in Chinese, see Cheng, 1993 and Hu, 1994.

that the vision of women as mere commodities had been refined by the exploration of such topics as widow chastity and suicide – both of which presented a revisionist view of women's agency; historically varying constructions of sexuality; and a growing awareness of companionate marriage and women's literary activities in the Ming and Ch'ing. Within this last topic, he pointed out, we see the promotion of the concept of "women's culture," wherein, as Mann likewise indicates, we no longer conflate "sex segregation" with "the subjection of women." Ropp predicted that these subjects would continue to command the attention of scholars, and to a great extent, we know he was right. He also suggested that it remained for scholars to integrate studies of women and gender issues into the general history of China – a task which has yet to be realized.

In Susan Mann's review she, like Ropp, concluded that overarching analytical concepts and generalized terminology, such as "patriarchy" and "women's oppression," have been eschewed in favor of more specific analysis. Thus, for example, she found that through the recovery of "familiar" and "neglected" sources, as illustrated by women's writings from the Ming and Ch'ing, we are fashioning a more nuanced portrayal of at least elite women. What may be of greater significance to analyses of Chinese gender from various historical periods, however, is her introduction to the use of postcolonial theory as an analytical tool for historical inquiry, a construct which had not wholly surfaced in English–language scholarship at the time of Ropp's writing. Nonetheless, it has had a tremendous impact on the most recent English-language scholarship on Chinese gender history.

So – where are we now? *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State* (Gilmartin, etal., 1994) is the product of a 1992 conference, the proceedings alone having been so pivotal that the potential impact on the field of the work done by the scholars involved in this symposium had been

much referenced before the text had even been published.② Like Ropp and Mann, the editors of this collection provide another concise overview of the evolution of English–language scholarship on Chinese gender in their introduction; furthermore, they include an historical analysis of gender research by Chinese scholars working in China.③ More importantly, for the purposes of this essay, they have carefully identified key themes and theoretical issues which inform and provide the underpinning of current English–language scholarship on Chinese gender.  Therefore, a few of these notions have been selected to provide the structure of this review of some of the most recent work in the field.  Again, many elements of their interpretations echo those already mentioned by Ropp and Mann.

## Constructions of Gender/Women's Visibility

The prevailing focus of English–language scholarship on women in Chinese history remains the construction of gender, together with the continuing effort to expand women's "visibility" in an historicized sense. A recent example of a text which actively incorporates these concerns is Patricia Ebrey's social history of women's lives and gender construction in Sung China, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (1993). Here she examines the different familial roles women played over the course of a lifetime, such as that of daughter, wife, mother, concubine, and/or widow, as well as various features of women's lives, such as their household activities, their involvement in ritual practices, and their hand in childrearing techniques. In her treatment of the subject, Ebrey consistently describes how these roles interacted with

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② See, for example, Mann, 1993; Hu, 1994.
③ Also see Li and Zhang, 1994.

historical processes and change over time, and how women were able to shape and negotiate their lives by employing certain institutional, legal, and social practices to secure their and their family's welfare.  In the end, however, while Ebrey believes women gained or maintained a certain amount of authority throughout the Sung – for elite women, through the escalation of dowries and increasing literacy; for lower–class women, through the growth of the economy – she concludes that "the growth in the market for women" and "the strengthening of patrilineal principles" ultimately inhibited women's potential (Ebrey, 1993: 268).④ Yet, again, this analysis is not meant to explain women's "subordination"; instead, Ebrey utilizes context to suggest the reasons for historically changing visions or "representations" of gender. ✐

## The Issue of Representation: Modernity and Discourse

Originally a tool of literary criticism, interpreting representation has become a common means by which historians have been able to dissect constructions of gender.  To illustrate, the editors of *Engendering China* point out that the rhetoric of gender was regularly deployed to reformulate representations of "modernity" in late–nineteenth and twentieth–century China (Gilmartin, etal., 1994:  2).  In order to critically use such an analytical device, however, a specific representation must be discerned as more than just reproducing the authentic; indeed, it is the representation itself that can motivate change.  In other words, representations are not explored for their value as manifestations of "extradiscursive 'objective

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④     For a particularly thorough treatment of the interaction between changing construc-tions of gender, the transformation of dowering practices, and women's property rights over the course of the Sung, and through the Sung–Yuan transition, see Birge, 1992, as well as her forthcoming book.

realities"' ; rather, they have emerged to form a "repertoire of discourse by which Chinese people actively produce very particular social forms" (Zito and Barlow, eds., 1994: 15). The definition of discourse, then, is extended to include changing representations of gender as we might find them in clothing, in advertisements, or in orthodox texts. While the possibilities for what counts as historical evidence thereby has been tremendously enlarged, when we return to the word, the most common representation which has been studied has been the male voice as a sort of nexus through which constructions of "masculine" and "feminine" convene.

In "Gendering the 'Origin' of Modern Chinese Fiction," Yue Mingbao locates the heritage of modern Chinese fiction from the May Fourth period in the socio-scientific discourse of the time, which she believes sanctioned a distinctive rhetorical paradigm: "the inquirer adopts an objective point of view in order to 'investigate' and 'expose' the suffering of the oppressed"; the "suffering person" is the "object ··· without voice or subjectivity"; the "inquirer is usually a male intellectual and the suffering person a woman from the lower classes," a dimension of her analysis which incidentially refutes the more common exploration of gender and class as isolated phenomena (Lu, ed., 1993: 5; Yue, 1993: 52–54).⑤ Stephen Chan, in "The Language of Despair: Ideological Representations of the 'New Woman' by May Fourth Writers," likewise argues that by using representation as the fundamental means by which to analyze the new or recast portrayals of women by male writers of the New Literary Movement, we can see how the "modern intellectual wanted desperately to represent *him*self via a mutation in the crisis of the 'other'" (Chan, 1993: 14). Chan succeeds in

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⑤   Obviously, the constraints of this review prohibit a discussion of all of the articles included in each of the collections to be mentioned here. I have chosen to highlight individual pieces as they seem to speak to or introduce the various themes under consideration. I encourage the reader to examine each anthology thoroughly in order to give the work of scholars I have ignored the reflection they deserve.

proving that specific cultural and historical "formations of dispair" relied on the ability of May Fourth intellectuals to construct, again, a "suffering" female who was awaiting salvation by a male, rendered impotent by an unjust semi–colonial/ Confucian/ patriarchal society.

On one level, the value of looking at literary representation for historical analysis has been in its ability to reveal the interplay between constructions of femininity and masculinity.[6] Moreover, literary representation suggests the methodological weaknesses of social–scientific studies that feature socioeconomic developments simply from the perspective that they afforded women certain occasions to discover innovative "subjectivities."[7] Finally, using representation as found in other sorts of discourse has further implemented historical inquiry. For example, in Harriet Evans' "Defining Difference: The 'Scientific' Construction of Sexuality and Gender in the People's Republic of China," she suggests that essentialist representations of "women's sexual and gender attributes" as they were conflated in 1950s scientific discourse reflected efforts by the state to employ such constructions in the name of "social stability and economic progress" (Evans, 1995).[8] At the same time, she contends, such representations found in scientific rhetoric not only bolstered "male authority" in 1950s China, but continue to serve as the basis of contemporary rep-

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[6]    See, for example, Bederman, 1992.

[7]    Of course, these "weaknesses" have begun to be addressed in studies such as Kathy Walker's analysis of the interaction between the sexual division of labor and the intertwined processes of development and social change in the early twentieth-century Nantong countryside. In her formulation, "despite changes in their labor roles, women remained under the control of male family members," women's work was "invisible since men controlled the marketing of commodities and the income women generated," and "female infanticide, child marriage, contract prostitution, and the buying and selling of women ⋯ may have been on the rise." Walker, 1993: 355, 377–79. Also see Entwisle, etal., 1995.

[8]    Also see Dikotter, 1995.

resentations of Chinese women's "gender subordination" as "biologically determined."

# Postcolonial Theory: The Self/Other Binary, Subject Positions

Postcolonial theory, together with representation, has had much of the greatest impact on the most recent English–language analyses of Chinese gender. Of course, China was not entirely colonized, so its association with postcolonialism is not an easy one to disentangle. Yet, as a theoretical construct, it provides one means of confronting the adversarial relationship that has come to inform the use of theory as developed in "the West" (which remains to be deconstructed) as a method of understanding, and thereby (often inadvertantly), objectifying Chinese women. On the one hand, this allows us to avoid the notion of "the West" as "the Self," or a faultless archetype, against which the contrast of "the Other" (Chinese women) is gauged. On the other hand, just as there are assorted positions of individual men (such as those who profit from hegemonic power and those who agonize under the rule of others) to colonial circumstances, there are differences in the relationships of specific women to those men. Thus, domination has a different significance for and impact on the "wife," "daughter," and "independent woman" of the colonizer, and the "wife," "daughter," and "independent women" of the colonized. By looking at representation under the guise of (semi–) colonialism in China, "subjectivity" and "subject positionality" also become important as

> subjectification takes us beyond 'roles' that presume a unified, unchanging self ⋯ [it] takes into account ⋯ that one person can simultaneously occupy many 'subject positions' (woman, female, mother, daughter, wife, reader, consumer) ⋯ subjectivities are

imposed, suggested, or pieced together.⑨

Gail Hershatter's "Modernizing Sex, Sexing Modernity: Prostitution in Early Twentieth–Century Shanghai" provides one of the best examples of how an historian can exploit a combination of theoretical paradigms, in this case, notions of representation, an expanded sense of discourse, postcolonial theory, and subject positions to paint a more subtle historical picture than what we have had before. By employing late–nineteenth century guidebooks to Shanghai, the "mosquito" press of the early–twentieth century, as well as police reports and court cases, Hershatter reveals how representations of prostitutes varied according to the changing social clime. In the late–nineteenth century, as China was undergoing swift, sometimes alarming change, the question for many elite males was "What is Chinese about China?"(Hershatter, 1994: 152) Thus, in part, she argues, they glorified Chinese cultural practices, such as the courtesan who embodied "urban sophistication." By the early twentieth century, prostitution was written about by a reforming elite who argued that it was a national disgrace and a contributory factor in China's national weakness. In this rendering, prostitutes were both victims and morally deficient. By the 1930s, prostitution was represented as "a modern problem" from which Shanghai suffered "just like Paris." In other words, it had become "a badge of modernity."

Relying entirely on English–language sources, such as the letters, records, and texts composed by foreign missionaries and Chinese Christian converts, Gael Graham is able to trace the subject positions and emergent conflicts between American men and women missionaries, and male and female Chinese students, as each sought to define women's new roles in China (Graham, 1994a). With her article, "The Cumberland Incident of 1928: Gender, Nationalism, and Social Change in American Mission

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⑨ Zito and Barlow, eds., 1994: 8–10. Also see Smith and Watson, eds., 1992.

Schools in China," Graham not only succeeds in showing how none of these groups was in agreement with how they were represented by the other, but she also begins to fill the void of material which employs postcolonial theory and gender as theoretical paradigms by which to individualize the so–called "missionary presence" in China.

# The Body

Another theme which frequently emerges in the most recent English–language works on gender in Chinese history centers on the body. Again, Gael Graham has looked at the turmoil that was incited by and subsequently located in the female body in early twentieth–century China when the "liberated Chinese woman" entered the "public space" (Graham, 1994b).

The sexed body, commonly female, is often employed for explorations of how colonialism may have shaped and transformed national and sexual identities.[10] In her essay on "The Female Body and Nationalist Discourse," Lydia Liu argues that perhaps one of the best ways to look at the part women took in "the nationalist struggle" is through their bodies. If we do this, she says, we'll find that as a result of women's "bodiliness," variously but ambiguously bordered by, for instance, women's experience of menstruation or childbirth, rape or sexual disease, they can reject nationalist discourse as "profoundly patriarchal" (Liu, 1994: 164, 174).[11]

The body is also engaged as a site for various renderings of social

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[10]  See Parker, etal., 1992.

[11]  Also see Lynn Hunt, 1992. Using the body as one strand in her examination of the French Revolution, Hunt argues that when we are talking about nationalist or revolutionary movements, we must keep in mind that "The body of the 'individual' [the "new citizen" of the nation–state] is very different from women's bodies; his body is tightly enclosed within boundaries, but women's bodies are permeable."

or cultural attributes. Katherine Carlitz, for example, details the context in which late Ming writers promoted stories of "virtuous women" who had sacrificed their lives or parts of their bodies. She observes that the language of these texts deviates over time from originally envisioning desire as "negative" to rhetoric which championed the bounds of women's physical travails in order to elicit intense emotion ("qing"), thought of as a "positive" urge which inevitably incorporated "romantic love" and "sexual desire" (Carlitz, 1994: 104). Over this same period of time, however, a woman's body was no longer viewed as a symbol of "exemplary loyalty"; instead, it was transformed into an "object of connoisseurship."

C. Fred Blake brings an elegant argument to his analysis of the female body and foot–binding in "Foot–binding in Neo–Confucian China and the Appropriation of Female Labor."⑫ Using the notion of the "mindful body," which originated in medical anthropology, Blake contends first, that in deliberately deforming her body , a woman coerced the "(re) embodiment of her self by the application of a rigorous discipline designed to inflict and overcome protracted physical pain" (Blake, 1994: 677–78). In this way, not only would the mother live on in the daughter in the guise of her bound feet,⑬ but as Blake sees it, this literally enmeshed the mother and daughter in an enterprise that "embodied the world in its spatial modality"; in other words, "femininity" rested in "the muted management of body and space while 'masculinity' came from the articulation of language and time" (Ibid., 680). Second, Blakes believes that within

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⑫   For a worthy English–language translation of a fictional account of the topic, see
     Feng, 1994.
⑬   Using biographies written by sons about their mothers in the Ming–Ch'ing period,
     Hsiung Ping–chen similarly concludes that the mother located her self within the
     body of the son also through the kind of intimacy generated by shared pain.
     She suggests that it is because of "the mother within the son" that many male
     ideologues espoused "feminist" beliefs, and in this manner, people could transcend
     gender boundaries in "traditional" China. See Hsiung, 1994.

Neo–Confucian discourse foot–binding was linked to "human effort" and a woman's "individual initiative," which in turn became part of the "mystification of gender." The faithful execution of the act itself helped to construct notions of femininity which included the belief that women could control their "individual fates," and that a woman's "self–sacrifice" was associated with "self–exaltation" (Ibid., 693–94). Finally, Blake argues, the labor that foot–bound women continuously performed was rendered invisible when the foot, "natural symbol of labor power," was crippled as an object of "erotic desire" (Ibid., 704–06).

## The Search for Women's Agency: Women's Culture

In Blake's reading of foot–binding, he alludes to the theme of "women's culture" which has emerged as a means of re–reading women's seclusion. Within women's culture we see the search for agency, or the diverse ways in which Chinese women, individually or together, conformed to their prescribed roles in some contexts, mediated them in different places, and defied them completely at other times. Within this framework, scholars have been able to virtually eliminate the outmoded view of women as victims of oppressive patriarchal doctrine.

Dorothy Ko deconstructs "ahistorical traditional Chinese women" by using women's own words to interpret their world(s). By acknowledging temporal, spatial, socioeconomic background, and generational difference, she also circumvents the "victim/agent" paradigm as constructed in May Fourth writings, Chinese Communist Party rhetoric, and Western feminist discourse. Instead, she analyzes "the range of constraints and opportunities" that educated, elite, urban women in seventeenth–century China faced (Ko, 1994:4). Through her examination, we can see how women helped to forge and reproduce the gender system as it served their indi-

vidual purposes. Moreover, by articulating the interplay between " theory or ideal norms, practice, and self–perceptions," Ko reveals the variable ways in which women exercised power and built personal and professional networks between and within fluid spheres of "domestic" and "public" activity.⑭

Cathy Silber identifies women's culture in a much different place and time – the *nushu* or writing system used only by women from rural Hunan during first half of the twentieth century (Silber, 1994). While she notes that men could understand the language when they heard it sung aloud, only a select group of women were literate in it. She suggests that they used it to communicate their most intimate feelings regarding especially tramatic life transitions, such as that of marriage. She does not read the script as a "discourse of resistance," but offers it instead as an example of how women maneuvered to express their feelings as well as to develop a network of female friendships that lasted long after marriage.

# The State: Official Constructions of Gender

The last theme to be discussed here which recently has emerged in English–language scholarship on gender in China is the pivotal role con-structions of gender may play in state–formation and state policy–making. In other words, how might official (state–endorsed, state–sponsored) dis-course have a vested interest in shaping gender.

Christina Gilmartin argues that in their effort to create a unified nation–state, both the Chinese Nationalist and Communist political parties employed the language of emancipation to motivate women from all social classes to participate in the Chinese Nationalist Revolution of 1924 – 1927

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⑭    For more on the literary, emotional, and intellectual worlds linked to women's culture, see for example, Mann, 1994, and Grant, 1994.

(Gilmartin, 1994).⑮ However, she finds that the "feminist agenda" never received the financial support it needed in order to become more than just an "abstraction." Moreover, it often was in conflict with a masculinist nationalism and rural patriarchal practices. Inevitably, as the coalition came apart and supporters of feminist–oriented programs were deemed "sexually immoral," the project was abandoned.

In this thematic arena we also see legal cases (from new archival sources recently made available in the People's Republic of China) as a discourse of gender construction. For example, in "Women and the Law: Divorce in the Republican Period," Kathryn Bernhardt claims that the Republican Civil Code (May, 1931), which advanced the principle of "male–female equality" in a concerted effort to "confront the backward social reality of Republican China," was not fully realized in actual application. Bernhardt argues that the Civil Code was an important link between gender as conceived in the Ch'ing Law Code and a more "modern" construction of gender, exemplified by the impartial Republican Civil Code which guaranteed women the right to secure a divorce. However, she concluded that in court women's access to divorce was obstructed by lingering notions about "a woman's place," the rigorous demands placed upon women in their presentation of evidence, time limits which inhibited their opportunities to file, and so on. Yet, Bernhart claims, the state clearly intended that the law act as an "agent for social change." Divorce had become an option and women turned to courts in numbers unimaginable in the Ch'ing.⑯

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⑮    Also see Gilmartin, 1993.

⑯    Also see Mark Allee's brief discussion of the extent to which female petitioners in nineteenth–century Taiwan, admittedly through a proxy, frequently turned to the legal system for aid in disputes (1994). Much more obviously awaits to be done on law as an official discourse on gender construction in China.

# Future Directions

One of the themes addressed in most of the pieces included in *Engendering China* has to do with recent attempts to discern the individual voices subsumed in the category "Chinese women." The editors of the volume note current efforts to enunciate the disparate views of women according to, for instance, generation, class, time, and space. While the volume has succeeded in providing many of these voices – women writers from the Ch'ing, revolutionary activists from the 1920s, prostitutes from the 1930s, or women workers from the 1950s, English–language translation of recent scholarship from Taiwan has been entirely overlooked.⑰

The inclusion of Taiwanese scholarship on modern Chinese women's history may also suggest the usefulness of cross–cultural comparisons. In general, this would assist in our quest to deconstruct the category "(East) Asian women" which in turn may contribute to revised theoretical constructs diffused of a "Western" bias. Moreover, further insights are assured when exploring, for example, women's experience of state intervention in the construction of gender – where might it correspond and where might it divergee.⑱

Finally, when the editors of *Engendering China* advocate works which

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⑰  For works which deal with the construction of gender under a colonial administra-·
tion, see Yu, 1988; Chuo, 1993; Yang, 1993. Also see Chang, 1993 and Ng, 1993
for analyses of Taiwanese women's writings.

⑱  In Marina Deuchler's analysis of gender in Korea, she historicizes the so–called
"traditional" Korean woman by outlining how the importation of Neo–Confucianism
inspired a new class of Korean scholar–officials to actively reconstruct gender with
an eye to determining and identifying social status. In fact, she argues, Korea
became more Neo–Confucian than China ever was, or that the Neo–Confucian
vision was realized in Korea, as it never quite was in China. See, Deuchler, 1992.

reach "beyond family, household, and kinship," this seems to infer that we have a firm understanding of women's position in domestic space. Yet, recent scholarship in other fields suggests that much more work needs to be done in order to clearly comprehend the sexual overtones of public/private space, a binary which is much less fixed and always negotiated along with constructions of gender; how the institution of the family is made possible through the production of domestic space; or how the production of private space both mystifies the interior world of sexuality and reproduction and masks the privatized bodies that both inhabit and are constituted by ideologies of privacy.[19] Moreover, in contrast to earlier conceptual preoccupations with domesticity, by employing post-colonial theory in such analyses, scholars are beginning to highlight the ideological dimensions of this concept and its broader political, economic and sociocultural ramifications.[20] In sum, it appears that such theoretical frameworks provide an opportunity to raise new questions about emergent meanings of the forms and activities associated with gender, space and culture in modern Chinese history.

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[19]   For example, see Colomina, ed., 1992 and Spain, 1992.
[20]   See, for example, Hansen, ed., 1992.

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