

What's in a Field? Women, China, History, and the "What Next?" Question

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Abstract

In the November 2004 issue of the *Journal of Asian Studies*, I published a state of the field article covering about 500 recent scholarly publications about women in China's long twentieth century. This paper takes the form of an extended afterthought and a series of suggestions for the study of women in recent Chinese history, made in a spirit of creeping discomfort. Making gender visible and audible cannot be considered a finished project. If we take seriously what we have learned in the past three decades, however, we cannot continue to mine the gender field as though it were a space with fixed boundaries. It may be more useful to regard the field not as a space but rather as a conjuncture. The emergence, intensity, and complexity of gender as a conjuncture are not fixed; for scholars,

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these are and must continue to be entangled with the tracing out of other processes of subject formation.

This paper addresses these questions: First, why this explosion of scholarship, why now, and why in the China field? Second, what has this new scholarship illuminated, and what has it possibly caused us to look away from? Third, how can we keep this area of inquiry open, even risking its dissolution, rather than delineating its borders in ways that seal it shut? Fourth, if we were to require a rigorous permeability, or imagine an object of inquiry that emerges, changes, and dissolves over time, what sorts of new questions might we bring into view?

Key Words: gender, women, China

In the November 2004 issue of the *Journal of Asian Studies*, I published a “state of the field” article covering about 500 recent scholarly publications about women in China’s long twentieth century (Hershatter, 2004). It is axiomatic that every project takes far more time than one anticipates it will, but this one was nightmarish beyond my most pessimistic expectations. In 1996, Ann Waltner and I had agreed to divide the lively body of writing in English on Chinese women into two portions, reflecting the presentist bias in scholarship: pre-twentieth century, and twentieth century. We figured that we could perform a useful service for the readers of the *JAS* if we each surveyed about 20 representative books and articles and produced two 20-page articles. Then the level of scholarly production spiked, and our race to keep up with it became protracted and hopeless. The project continued for so many years that Ann eventually became editor of the *JAS*, thereby becoming the wrong person to dun the authors, as well as too busy to complete the premodern piece. I

slogged onward, producing the 75-page discussion in the *JAS* and a somewhat longer version that will eventually appear on the UC Press e-publications web site. It is a race to get it posted before the stack of new publications on my desk once again renders the task overwhelming, and whenever I slow down, I am galvanized by authors who email me to inquire why their pieces have not been included in the *JAS* survey.

This paper refers to but does not recap that survey. Instead, it takes the form of an extended afterthought and a series of suggestions for the study of women in recent Chinese history, made in a spirit of creeping discomfort. The project of "engendering China" has entailed enormous excitement and inspiration for several generations of scholars, of whom I am certainly one. Gender has pried open earlier historical conventions and narratives, disrupted them, troubled them, made visible some of the integuments that enclosed a discursive world in which "human" generally meant (unmarked) male. Making gender visible and audible cannot be considered a finished project. I nevertheless want to caution against the impulse to define a field, assess its state, map its gaps, and sally forth to fill them. If we take seriously what we have learned in the past three decades, we cannot continue to mine "the gender field" as though it were a space with fixed boundaries. It may be more useful to regard "the field" not as a space but rather as a conjuncture. Its emergence, intensity, and complexity are not fixed; for scholars, these are and must continue to be entangled with the tracing out of other processes of subject formation.

Three questions since the *JAS* article came out have pushed me to think

about “the field” as a specific conjuncture¹ (by nature deliquescent) rather than a stable body of knowledge:

1) In talking to me about it, Japan historian Karen Wigen wondered aloud, “Why don’t we have anything like this in the Japan field?”

2) An undergraduate student in my course on revolutionary China handed in a final assignment in which he compiled background information for a historical novel about China. He had chosen to research the life of a fictional working-class man in the steel industry. Reflecting on problems with the research, he asked why it was much easier to find information about Shanghai prostitutes than about any lower-class men in Shanghai.

3) In a recent roundtable discussion at a university where I was a visiting scholar, an anthropologist colleague commented that the *JAS* article had generally not specified which scholarly works were particularly good. Thus, he said, the article “read more like a textbook than a state of the field article.” He contrasted this approach to a speech some years ago in which one of the most eminent political scientists in the China field had laid out a fully elaborated agenda for researchers. Why, the anthropologist asked, was I avoiding judgment or directives? Shouldn’t a state of the field article also be an assessment and an intervention in the future shape of the field?

1 I use the term “conjuncture” here following Gramsci’s use as elaborated by Hall and others. In *Passato e Presente*, Gramsci defined conjuncture as “the set of circumstances which determine the market in a given phase, provided that these are conceived of as being in movement, i.e. as constituting a process of ever-changing combinations... Difference between ‘situation’ and ‘conjuncture’: the conjuncture is the set of immediate and ephemeral characteristics of the economic situation...” Gramsci, 1971: 177, n. 79. For purposes of this discussion of women’s studies, I want to loosen (not sever) the linkage to the market, while maintaining the notion of recombination, flux, and variety of determinants. In focusing on temporal change rather than spatial fixity, I may be merely reinvoking a historian’s favored tools, but it seems to me necessary to insist on the temporary and contingent properties of what otherwise becomes materialized, even somatized, as a “body of knowledge.”

Ruminating on these three questions requires a somewhat different approach from asking what we have learned about women in modern Chinese history over the past few decades. It entails questions not about the content of a "field," but about the conditions and shape of its emergence, about why certain questions have come to the fore while others have received less attention. Why this explosion, why now, and why in the China field? What has this new scholarship illuminated, and what has it possibly caused us to look away from? How can we keep this area of inquiry open, even risking its dissolution, rather than delineating its borders in ways that seal it shut? And if we were to require a rigorous permeability, or imagine an object of inquiry that (like us) emerges, changes, and dissolves over time, what sorts of new questions might we bring into view?

Why this explosion, why now, and why in the China field?

Why has the study of women in China, and to a lesser but still noticeable extent the study of gender, become such a sustained point of attention? As I said in the *JAS* piece, "it has been enriched by the growth of women's studies abroad and in China; by debates about gender as a category of analysis and its uneasy relationship to sex and sexuality; by discussions across the disciplines about agency, resistance, subjectivity, and voice; and by feminist activity, socialism's demise, and the development of postcolonial scholarship. During the past three decades, available sources and opportunities for research and fieldwork in China have expanded for both Chinese scholars and foreigners, giving rise to scholarly conversations that sometimes intersect and sometimes trace utterly separate trajectories." (Hershatter, 2004: 991)

This confluence of scholarly currents enabled new questions about the longstanding preoccupation of Chinese intellectuals and revolutionaries, and later of China scholars, with the failed state and hence the need for a

revolution (prior to 1949), and the expansive revolutionary state and whether it was succeeding (after 1949). Very early on in that preoccupation, women's status emerged as a key symptom of a weak state and a key sign of a strong one. Long before the emergence of the P.R.C. state and its policies, "the woman question" focused on a critique of Chinese state forms that shaded over into a critique of Chinese civilization itself. In the late 19th century, Liang Qichao famously declared that China was being decimated by an expansive west because it was a weak civilization, and that it was weak, in part, because its footbound, cloistered women were not productive citizens, but parasites. Factual accuracy is not important to this argument: Liang had to look away from the massive amounts of productive labor performed by both peasant and elite women, in the household (for all) and in the household's interaction with the market (for poorer families), in order to make this statement. Nevertheless, the linkage he made between women, the health of the civilization, and the viability of the state was taken up enthusiastically by others.

Eventually this linkage was elaborated into what Dorothy Ko has called the "May Fourth story,"² told by intellectuals of the New Culture movement and its political offshoots (including, eventually, the CCP): that Chinese civilization was in thrall to a disabling hierarchy, that women and their status in the family, under the weight of Confucian (later "feudal") thinking, were emblematic of that disability, that only by ending the hierarchy would the Chinese people, and their state formation, cast off disability and "stand up," as Mao put it in 1949. In this telling, Chinese women were simultaneously the victims of disabling ideologies and practices, and the site of disability, the backward and benighted object in need of reform.

For the revolutionary CCP (and for its less effective adversary, the GMD),

2 Ko, 1994. She has since elaborated upon this theme in a number of recent pieces.

the status and treatment of women was taken as a signal of how well state-building was going. Again, scholars (especially those attentive to feminism) took up this story, tracking the changing policies of the P.R.C. state and asking: How have they affected women? How successful were their reforms? How willing to subordinate gender to class? With the onset of economic reform in the early 1980s, women's studies scholars continued to ask many of the same kinds of questions, although an attention to socialism's neglect of women was replaced by dismay that the state might be abandoning women altogether to the depredations of global capitalism.

Globalization, of late, is replacing the Chinese state as the motive force of history in some, but not all, scholarly quarters. The question in much of the most recent scholarship has become: How has globalization affected, empowered, or (more often) disadvantaged women? This shift in attention away from the state has not been uniform. For women's studies scholarship in the P.R.C., an emergent and very lively field, it is still the state that is held to account for its policies and their effects on women. Or, rather, the state is still the major actor, but perhaps for the first time it is being held to account on gender grounds. In P.R.C. scholarship, the effects of the reforms upon women are still largely framed as a national debate, albeit one profoundly influenced by transnational theories of development, empowerment, and feminism.

For scholarship based in the U.S., including that of some diasporic scholars, the critique of globalization now trumps concern with a Chinese state that no longer provides any semblance of a partner in socialist romance or an imagined beacon of women's liberation. Current scholarship on women in the workforce, on the move, in the newly transnational marriage market, and in the sex trades participates in a wider conversation about globalization, with globalizing forces often cast as the villain or at least the irresponsible force that must be called to account. Still, if the principal actors have changed, the narrative arc shows important continuities with the earlier story about the state.

The controlling question in much of this scholarship remains: how has some larger force shaped the options available to women?

Perhaps it is the very zigs and zags in Chinese party-state policy, and the changing shape of China's engagement with the world, that have helped to create the scholarship boom on women in China, in contrast to scholarly writing on Japan. The Japanese government did not make such explicit claims about or on behalf of women, present itself as a progressive beacon for world change, change course dramatically a number of times, or suddenly emerge as a powerhouse in the past 20 years. The changing configuration of the Chinese state continually compels attention by scholars of China, and we have stuck with Liang Qichao's practice of understanding women as a key indicator of state success. Even feminist scholars, who began writing social history with a mission to enlarge inquiry beyond state-centered history, are not as detached from the state-centered story as we often like to think.

But why *this* explosion in knowledge production, the one that made the *JAS* article so difficult to finish? There is the obvious impetus of China's reform-and-opening, which has changed the conditions for scholarly work by both foreign and Chinese scholars, even as gender appeared at the center of new debates in the Chinese press, within the state, and among emergent groups such as women's studies scholars, social workers, legal experts, and labor analysts. An additional factor, for foreigners and for the past 15 years or so for scholars working in China, is interest in scholarship that entails attention to gender: feminist scholarship, subaltern studies, psychoanalysis, postcolonial theory, and sexuality studies, among others. Hence my student's complaint about more attention being paid to (female) prostitutes than to men in recently published works.

Larger trends in scholarship, as well as in state formation, have shaped writing on Chinese women. Both have thickened our description in some places while leaving it inadequate in others.

What has this new scholarship taught us, and what has it possibly caused us to look away from?

Three pairings have dominated writing on women in twentieth-century China: women and marriage/family/sexuality, women and labor, and women and national modernity. Each has stimulated excellent scholarship, some of which is surveyed in the *JAS* article; each presents a problem.

The first of these, women and family/marriage/sexuality, centered on twentieth-century ethnographic and textual materials, tends to assume a timeless projection backward of certain patterns into the indefinite past, with a huge jolt coming variously in the 1920s, the 1950s, or the 1980s, depending upon one's class and geographic position. Here, the timelessness is the problem.

The second, women and labor, is largely organized around twentieth-century economic refigurings and political movements, and as yet has done little to create a bridge to the emergent literature on the late imperial/early modern period, with its studies by Francesca Bray (1997), Susan Mann (1997), Kenneth Pomeranz (2005), and others suggesting that patterns of women's work were no more timeless than those of marriage.

The third, women and the nation, is the most directly entangled with the grand revolutionary narrative, and the very term "nation" marks it as a modern construct. The "woman and the nation" story, as already described, began with the New Culture/May Fourth moment and marched forward, more or less (depending on who was writing) in step with the growth of the revolutionary movement. (In some accounts the May Fourth moment was preceded by a brief surge of heroic women's revolutionary activity in the immediate run-up to the 1911 Revolution.) This story rests on two foundational assertions. The first, made mostly by recuperative feminist historians, was that "women were there too" as participants in every important revolutionary moment. The second held

that women had long been oppressed by “Confucian society” and that only revolution could free them. Tracing this story out, praising the revolution for its successes, holding it accountable for its failures, has produced much of the scholarship addressed in the *JAS* article. But the formulation “state shapes women, for good and ill” may have exhausted itself. At the very least, it needs to be joined by attention to a few new questions.

The twentieth-century narrative of revolution is now a bit tattered, and not only because the particular revolution that bisected the twentieth century has done everything but declare itself over. We now know that 1895 did not by itself mark the end of a world; that 1911 was both less of a revolution and more of an extended process than previously understood; that the CCP barely cohered in its early years and regularly marched off in hundreds of different localized and incompatible directions after that; that state-building activities were on the shared agenda of the Qing rulers, the revolutionaries who overthrew them, the Guomindang, and the Communists, and so forth. The withering away of a grand twentieth-century revolutionary story must surely raise questions about whether making women the barometer of social crisis, or of revolutionary success, is tenable. It is one thing to note that women, and Woman (as state subject), were regarded as such barometers in the past, by the people whose lives we try to apprehend across time. It is quite another thing to use women, or Woman, that way ourselves.

How can we keep this area of inquiry open,
even risking its dissolution, rather than
delineating its borders in ways that seal it shut?

To address this epistemological question, I first return to the challenge put forward by the China anthropologist. Why didn't I make more judgments? Not for a lack of opinions about quality of scholarship. Most of what I

surveyed in the article was, in my assessment, thoroughly researched and clearly argued. Some of it made me want to argue back, to be sure, and some pieces were more pleasurable to read than others. But what interested me in the explosion of scholarship was precisely the burgeoning, sprouting, somewhat chaotic nature of it. The range of topics, methodologies, even conclusions, is not easily plotted into a progress narrative, although scholarship on women has certainly gotten broader and deeper. Rather, the multiplicity of questions, approaches, and answers suggests something else: that scholars are raising questions about gender in a broad range of conversations, many of which transcend the geographical focus of the China field. What unites this scholarship is (to borrow and twist Judith Butler's phrase), gender as a means of making trouble. Scholars asked, how might attention to gender trouble our stories of political development, e.g. the rise of Communism? or our stories of economic success, e.g. the market reforms? And, at the same time, how might attention to China trouble stories of gender that had been crafted to explain European or North American events, or those of colonized South and Southeast Asia? Just as intriguing, how might critical attention to earlier stories about Chinese gender—the May Fourth story, for instance—alert us to the political and ideological work that these stories performed in the making of a Chinese nation-state? If we were to go back and challenge those stories of the oppressed, silent, foot-bound, uneducated Chinese woman suddenly bursting forth in a frenzy of subject-making and visibility, what other parts of the big national narrative might come unstuck?

This field, then, or (as I suggested above) this conjuncture, has been characterized by gender as method, in the sense that people working in queer theory talk about queer as method. Asking questions about gender, coming at established China-field questions from an angle, has been enormously productive of new knowledge.

Thinking *with* gender *and* China is also a way of troubling the field of

women's history and its encompassing field of women's studies, although real conversations are going to require some further serious work. The critique of Eurocentrism, colonial vestigialism, and obliviousness to race in the field of women's studies is by now well-rehearsed, and has had palpable effects on institutional practices. For instance, the triennial Berkshire Conference on the History of Women ("the Berks"), held since 1973, has from at least the 1980s welcomed panels on the history of Women from Elsewhere. I gave my first paper there in 1984, and remember marveling at how different the panels on European and U.S. women's history appeared from the one or two on China: all those women historical subjects with middle names and organizational archives and voluminous collections of personal letters. In the last twenty years, the Berks program has shifted considerably, as signaled by the title of the 2005 conference, "*Sin Fronteras: Women's Histories, Global Conversations.*" In the program I only found one panel devoted exclusively to a China topic: the early twentieth-century revolutionary martyr Qiu Jin. But by my rough count, of 217 panels, 91 were comparative or transnational in scope.³ China made an appearance in 16 of these comparative panels. Some of the comparisons are forced: a piece on Song courtesans paired with "The 'Thrills' and 'Tinglings' of Sex Work" (place unspecified, presumably U.S.) (panel 16); a discussion of prominent women in recent Taiwan politics grouped with papers on Argentine women in the nineteenth century and Palestinian women under the British mandate (panel 80); Song-era women weavers examined next to women in the United States New Deal South and Franco's Spain (panel

3 This total of 91 includes 14 on colonized or new imperial regimes, the 16 comparative panels that include China, and 61 others. A bare majority of panels still focused on North America, but many of these attended to questions of ethnic and racial difference or interaction. There was a smattering of single-region panels: sixteen on Europe, four on Japan, three each on India, the Middle East, and Africa, two on Jews in diaspora, and one on Australia and New Zealand. Each of these totals could be adjusted at the margins, since some panels could be plausibly classified several ways. *Sin Fronteras*, 2005.

215). Other panels were organized around developments or social movements that appeared in multiple national locations, with China as one of an array of national case studies: women's encounters with medical professionals (panel 29) or with foreign missionaries (panel 214), medical knowledge in the national imagination of gender (panel 97), the construction of the female body (panel 38), transnational colonial history (108), religious belief among poor women (118), prostitution and reform movements (187), women in migration within their own nations (178), transborder adoptions (panel 155), suffrage movements (panel 209), global feminism (panel 71).

Women's history, clearly, is no longer primarily a North American enterprise. Yet these panels, however well-intentioned and promising, suggest the need for further trouble-making. How can we move beyond the juxtaposition of national case studies to serious comparison or (better) cross-talk? How do transnational phenomena (medical professionalism, prostitution reform, suffrage) circulate via the movement of persons, texts, images, and other means? What is the directionality of such circulation, and specifically for China, how do we take the measure of inequalities? To name just one framing problem: should we understand such circulation as ideas that seem to flow largely one way (from metropole to semi-colony; here the colonizers have the knowledge advantage and set the terms), or as uneven cosmopolitanisms (here the semi-colonized are more sophisticated and multicultural than their putative civilizational superiors)? How might we trouble the nation-based framing of gender research, while still taking account of the fact that archives, narratives, social movements, and gendered subject-making are frequently organized along national lines? Is gender in a semi-colony different from gender in a colony, and if so, what are the implications for, and limitations of, postcolonial theorizing?

In women's history research at present, as reflected in the Berks panels, we still have arrays rather than carefully-thought-through relationships, and

single vectors of circulating ideas rather than densely mapped intersecting fields. Both are an improvement on hermetically sealed fields called (unmarked white) women's history or (culturally and nationally fixed) Chinese women's history, but it would be useful to continue to pry open the categories of "gender" (multiply and locally fashioned, unevenly perceptible and important across time) and "China" (formed and reformed through encounters that often traverse national borders).

Gender-as-method, then, has not exhausted its possibilities for people who think about China, or *from* China (in the sense of situated knowledges), or *with* China (as in using China to think with). But in my judgment, the practice of gender-as-trouble is useful only insofar as it is kept open to other forms of trouble-making. A field of knowledge named "history of Chinese women" or even "Chinese women's studies" lends itself too easily to being visualized as a box, or a grid, or a map, with blank spots, and with the job of the scholar being to fill them in or articulate points of connection only with maps of gender elsewhere. This sort of hermetically sealed story about women fits nicely into a single lecture on the syllabus devoted to gender, or a single course on women in a history department curriculum that otherwise keeps telling an uninterrupted story about (unmarked) men. It is precisely the ability to trouble that course syllabus, or that history curriculum, or even more capacious knowledge domains, which interests me. At the same time, attention to gender in isolation from other questions runs the serious intellectual risk of assuming gender as stable, foundational, fixed, and therefore undermining what makes it interesting and powerful as a domain of inquiry in the first place: its profoundly historical, variable, situated character.

As feminist scholarship on China has developed, it has been constituted as a field with its own logics, agenda, and vocabulary, one whose practitioners may be tempted to talk primarily to each other. Such conversation is useful, stimulating, fun, and absolutely necessary, but it is not sufficient. It narrows

the obligation to mount challenges, and to consider challenges about what gender is or could be.

The uneasy feeling that the success of women's studies scholarship may actually blunt its critical edge and its receptivity to criticism parallels a broader and very heated discussion about the place of women's studies programs/departments in university curricula. Some years ago, political theorist Wendy Brown laid out the challenges to developing a coherent women's studies curriculum. One was "the fact that contemporary feminist scholarship is not a single conversation but is instead engaged with respective domains of knowledge, or bodies of theory, that are themselves infrequently engaged with each other"; another comprised "theoretical challenges to the stability of the category of gender, and political challenges to a discourse of gender apart from race, class, and other markers of social identity."⁴ Brown went on to argue that the political and intellectual promise of women's studies lay precisely in these challenges, and that it was blunted when it became institutionalized and defined "woman" as a discrete and classifiable object of study.⁵

The same can be said, should be said, of how the study of women—or

4 Brown, 1997: 83. She continues by noting the "profoundly important political moment in the academy, the moment in which women's movements challenged the ubiquitous misogyny, masculinism, and sexism in academic research, curricula, canons, and pedagogies. Indisputably, women's studies as a critique of such practices was politically important and intellectually creative. Women's studies as a contemporary institution, however, may be politically and theoretically incoherent, as well as tacitly conservative—incoherent because by definition it circumscribes uncircumscribable "women" as an object of study, and conservative because it must resist all objections to such circumscription if it is to sustain that object of study as its *raison d'être*."

5 "...[S]ustaining gender as a critical, self-reflexive category rather than a normative or nominal one, and sustaining women's studies as an intellectually and institutionally radical site rather than a regulatory one - in short, refusing to allow gender and women's studies to be disciplined - are concerns and refusals at odds with affirming women's studies as a coherent field of study." Brown, 1997: 86.

even gender *tout court*—sits within “the China field” (bracketing for the moment the parallel problems of “the China field” itself as a discrete domain). Gender maintains its usefulness as an analytic only insofar as we can make it visible *while at the same time* tracing its relationship to other modes of subject formation—Chineseness, for instance, or identification as elite/educated, or as rural. As Brown puts it, “despite the diverse and often even unrelated formations of the subject according to race, class, nation, gender, and so forth, subject construction itself does not occur in discrete units as race, class, nation, and so forth. So the model of power developed to apprehend the making of a particular subject/ion will never accurately describe or trace the lines of a living subject.” (Brown, 1997: 93)

If it is living subjects we are after, in all their messy and entangled specificity, we cannot limn them with gender analysis alone, nor can we content ourselves with talking about “Chinese gender” as though either term in that phrase were a stable one. And whether gender is dominant at any given moment when a historical subject (individual or collective) is formed is conjunctural, not preordained or even predictable. Several decades of fine, slowly cumulative work—the work described if not exhaustively catalogued in the state of the field piece—has presented us with some good questions to ask *in conjunction with* other questions. It has not, and should not, give us a formula for finding the answers.

If we were to require a rigorous permeability,
what sorts of new questions might we bring into view?

And so to the second challenge posed by the anthropologist: what is to be done? Shorn of its connection to a fixed domain of inquiry—“how should scholars of women in China fill in the gaps in our understanding?”—it becomes a less prescriptive, even hapless question of temporality—“what

now?" Put another way, we might continue to ask "what happened?" while also keeping in mind two other questions that situate and destabilize the first: what people, and what processes, created and left behind the material we use to answer? And why do we want to know now? Rather than prescribing topics, then, I prefer to suggest five habits of mind that might allow us to frame our topics differently.

Understand the boundaries of the state as blurry. In the context of my own recent work on gendered memories of rural collectivization in China,⁶ I have found especially useful Timothy Mitchell's work on what he calls "the state effect"—not "the effect of the state," but rather how is the effect "created that certain aspects of what occurs pertain to society, while others stand apart as the state?" (Mitchell, 1991: 89) He suggests that

The precise specification of space and function that characterize modern institutions, the coordination of these functions into hierarchical arrangements, the organization of supervision and surveillance, the marking out of time into schedules and programs, all contribute to constructing a world that appears to consist not of a complex of social practices but of a binary order: on the one hand individuals and their activities, on the other an inert "structure" that somehow stands apart from individuals, precedes them, and contains and gives a framework to their lives. . . . We should examine it not as an actual structure, but as the powerful, apparently metaphysical effect of practices that make such structures appear to exist.⁷

6 Further discussion of that project, as well as the two Mitchell quotations and footnote cited here, are in Hershatter, 2002.

7 Mitchell, 1999: 89. Mitchell's analysis is aimed at the postwar capitalist state, with interlocking connections between state and "private" institutions on the one hand and a naturalized separation between "state and society" or "state and economy" on the other. Although I have wrenched it from its original context, I find his work useful for thinking

We need to pay consistent attention to how state discourse is modified, appropriated, even reformulated altogether in the implementation, particularly when these activities point to the unclear boundaries of the state and the work required to produce and maintain those boundaries. For instance, the Women's Federation is usually understood as a one-way transmission belt through which party-state policies were communicated to the women masses. But Zhang Naihua has argued that in the 1950s, women working at the highest levels of the women's federation in fact pushed within the higher echelons of government for more attention to women and what we would now call the gender-specific consequences of government initiatives (Zhang, 1996). Wang Zheng's recent work on urban residence committees shows how "women of different backgrounds and motivations all participated in producing the socialist state while being produced as new state subjects." (Wang, 2005: 207) Lisa Rofel's book on the meanings of economic reform among three generations of Hangzhou women silk mill workers points out how meanings of the state, and state initiatives, are reconfigured or modified or stymied on the ground (Rofel, 1999). And my own work on the Women's Federation at the county and local level shows that local federation cadres were often operating, with very few resources and little state support, on an "uplift" model specifically directed at village women—the patient cultivation of local leadership, improvement of women's health and status within the family, and so forth. These activities were not opposed to state discourse—indeed, they participated fully in it, and were most effective when they articulated with larger state goals, e.g. mobilizing women for collective rural production. However, they were not identical, in emphasis or content, to state policies articulated by other agencies. And sometimes they piggybacked onto state

about the socialist Party/state and the production of a sectionally differentiated entity known as "the masses," among whom women (or "woman-as-state-subject," in Tani Barlow's [1994] formulation) were an important constitutive part.

discourse, and therefore captured scarce state resources, in order to do something with directly beneficial practical consequences for women.

A recent example of this process is the *suzhi*, or human quality, discourse, which attributes China's economic and social woes to the low quality of its population, and calls for intensified efforts to raise that quality. In many realms—the workplace, the Party, the family, the schools—*suzhi* discourse has transformed what were formerly conceived as collective social projects into matters of individual effort and responsibility. In the case of women in particular, low status and even abuse are understood as the individual's responsibility to remedy, if not entirely as her fault. The conversation about women's low *suzhi*, in some respects, picks up where Liang Qichao left off: China's ills can be explained, at least in part, by reference to the status of its women, although the privatization of *suzhi* down to the individual level is an important and not entirely salutary departure from Liang's earlier formulation. Nevertheless, by framing certain projects in terms of *suzhi*, the Women's Federation has obtained state resources for local economic activities and training projects that benefit women.

Ask who has been left out of history from below. Although Cultural Revolution memoirs have become practically a cottage industry in the past two decades, biographies of Chinese women at any point in the twentieth century are exceedingly rare. Urban working women, and rural women of every class, have been treated by historians as collectivities, while elite and intellectual women have appeared almost not at all. Women whose agenda did not parallel that of the CCP, e.g. those who worked for suffrage or in the GMD, or those whose labor or studies took them in and out of China, fade in and out (mostly out) of view. Before we hurry to dig in this underworked corner of "the field," however, we need to ask at least two questions. First, what does the relative absence of such works to date tell us about the shaping of historical inquiry (the nationalist narrative, the CCP narrative, the feminist project to rediscover

subaltern heroines, the heft of the paper trail)? Second, is biography as a method possible or promising in simultaneously building on those early projects (it would be foolish to discuss suffrage without warlordism) and interrupting them (by introducing modes of individual subject formation that include but do not stop with gender)?

Question chronology and narrative organized around ruptures. Work in women's history to date has had two important nodes: the imperial period, particularly from the Song onward; and the twentieth-century revolutionary period. In between, largely unaddressed, is the 19th century, when the nation form (and its entanglement with the very writing of history) reached its first apogee. Women in the 19th century show up late, as stock figures in the story told by Liang Qichao and others about civilizational degeneration and the need for reform.

As I mentioned earlier, Dorothy Ko has been raising a skeptical eyebrow at the Confucian/oppression May Fourth story for some time now, asking modern historians whether we really want to mistake a compelling narrative crafted at a specific conjuncture for a usable account of gender in the late imperial past. Her work for the late Ming (Ko, 1994), as well as Susan Mann's for the long eighteenth century (Mann, 1997), have (among other accomplishments) shown how much erudition and publishing activity by literate Jiangnan women had to be forgotten in order to craft the May 4th story. Meanwhile, Paola Zamperini (2003), Catherine Yeh (1998), Christian Henriot (2001), and others who have looked at late nineteenth-century writings about courtesans have helped us see the many ways in which this particular group was represented—and maybe represented itself—as both embodiments of a world being lost and as avatars of new fashion, new commercialized sex relations, new automobiles, and other objects and practices signifying experimentation with a local version of modernity. Recent work by Joan Judge (2001, 2002, 2003) and Hu Ying (1997, 2000, 2001, 2002), among others, has

pushed the generative moment of women's revolutionary activity, and women's representation as icon of the nation, back into the last decade of the Qing, or even perhaps into the last moments of the nineteenth century.

We might think of this new scholarship in the history of gender as a kind of pincer movement—pushing the story of learned women forward into the nineteenth century's early years, pushing the story of modern girls and revolutionary activists back into the nineteenth century's waning years. Still, we are many monographs and a few framing devices short of a nineteenth-century history here. When I teach a seminar on gender in China from the late imperial period to the present, about halfway into the syllabus my students and I invariably try to navigate what feels either like a black hole or a vertiginous drop where the nineteenth century ought to be.

In between the work of Susan Mann on the eighteenth century and Joan Judge on the last years of the nineteenth, surely things happened. Surely, to return to that cherished recuperative project, "women were there too." Surely, at minimum, the arsenal-makers and self-strengtheners and frontier-settlers and language reformers and science experimenters and Taiping rebels and Nian rebels and Boxers and displaced porters and opium smugglers and compradores lived in households with some of them. (Yes, we have the Taiping move to alter the status of women and the Red Lanterns—but I think it is time to move beyond our two or three recurrent exercises in synecdoche and try to get at something more substantial, varied, and confusing.) Additionally, the move to reconfigure women as parasitic and oppressed dead weights on the body politic could not have sprung full-formed from the brain of Liang Qichao—it gestated somewhere, or several somewheres. We know that women were a powerful figuration of social crisis long before the late Qing, but what are the particularities of the nineteenth-century situation? What did women write and do? How and for what were they written and done to? As Woman (anodyne subject of History) was reformulated, what about Man, and

masculinity? What might happen to our sinological truisms about key points in nineteenth-century history if gender was placed at the center, or in the picture at all?

Pay attention to moments when gender matters to the participants, and moments when it recedes. In Chinese history over the past century and a half, gender has often been a salient axis of difference or point of identification, and sometimes both. It was an axis of difference, for instance, in late Qing and May Fourth writings on the benighted status of women and the need to remedy it. It was a point of identification among women's suffrage groups in the Republican period. When the new P.R.C. state formed branches of the Women's Federation in the 1950s, it became a different point of identification—what Tani Barlow has called “Woman as state subject.” (Barlow, 1994) So one important question when gender emerges in discourse is to ask, how and why is it erupting? Who gives it expression? Who recognizes or takes it up, with what degree of passion, and to what ends? Recognizing that people do not just take up a label, but are continually remade in the process of doing so, we need to ask how gender helps to produce political and/or personal subjectivity at particular moments. This is, of course, separate from the question of when gender emerges as a salient axis of difference or identification for historians, enabling some questions and undoubtedly obscuring others.

At the same time, we also need to attend to moments when gender as difference or gender as identification recedes, and to ask why and how that happens. After the violent suppression of the 1989 demonstrations in China, Rey Chow wrote

I heard a feminist ask: “How should we read what is going on in China in terms of gender?” My immediate response to that question was, and is: “We do not, because at the moment of shock Chinese people are degendered and become simply “Chinese.”

To ask how we can use gender to "read" a political crisis such as the present one is to insist on the universal and timeless sufficiency of an analytical category, and to forget the historicity that accompanies all categorical explanatory power... Any analytical discourse on the Chinese situation in terms of a single category, when Chinese prodemocracy protesters are being arrested, punished, or killed for having demonstrated peacefully for freedom, is presumptuous. The problem is not how we should read what is going on in China in terms of gender, but rather: what do the events in China tell us about gender as a category, especially as it relates to the so-called Third World? What are gender's limits, where does it work, and where does it not work? (Chow, 1991: 82)

To say this, I would add, is not to deny that "women were there too" (who can forget Chai Ling?) or that "Woman was put to symbolic uses" (remember the Goddess of Democracy). Nor is it to foreclose the possibility that the post-June 4th crackdown had gendered dimensions: the masculinism of a militarized state, for instance, or the informal and risky organization by relatives of the disappeared under the sign of maternal grief. (Nor, finally, is it to regard the category of "simply Chinese" as consistent across time.) Rather, it is to recognize that the movement, as its everyday dynamics unfolded and as it is remembered, was neither *about* gender (in an ideological sense) nor *enacted* via gendered dynamics nor *retold* as a moment in which gender mattered. If gender is, as Joan Scott famously put it, "a useful category of analysis," it remains so only insofar as it can be flexibly applied. To establish that "women are everywhere" or that the unmarked male (discursively speaking) is nevertheless a gendered entity is a beginning, not an end. Too often the moments when gender recedes have been read by feminist scholars as moments of betrayal (the state sold women out) or moments devoted to a

larger and more important truth (gender doesn't matter when the PLA opens fire; only being Chinese, or human, matters at that moment). Rather than excoriating those who turn away from gender, or reproaching those who insist on it in all times or places, I would like to see us reframe the question. If gender is a meaning-making category, we need to track when and by whom it is used or discarded, as well as attending to how and why it is entwined with or displaced by other categories.

Assess the displacement of Woman as modernity's exemplar and Other. The work that gender did in discourse about the state, for generations of Chinese intellectuals and for us as scholars, is still partly done by gender in the contemporary moment. Scholars and activists ask such questions as: Are the reforms good or bad for women? Is the new ubiquity of sexual expression, or the obvious hierarchies in sexual privilege, a sign of resurgent patriarchy, modernity in a globalization mode, or both? But other subaltern groups are increasingly deployed in similar ways. Of late (since the reforms, but with more intensity in past five years), "the rural"—that is, the peasant—has emerged as the problematic figure dragging China down. If Liang Qichao characterized women as parasites, then the 1988 TV series *River Elegy* characterized toothless aged peasant men who persisted in having dozens of children as the main threat to China's development, the embodiment of insular "yellow" (as opposed to cosmopolitan "blue") civilization (Heshang, 1988; Su, 1991). (The formulation works like this: Why did our revolution go wrong? Because the May Fourth agenda was hijacked by an ignorant peasant, Mao, who was kept in power by a party leadership full of peasants and, more broadly, by ignorant peasants who revered him throughout China.) And although *River Elegy* was banned by the government, in fact official discourse has shared much of its approach. Peasants, like women in the May Fourth story, are both the victims and the embodiment of the problem. They need uplift; they need their quality improved; they need to change to be worthy

citizens, vessels of the nation. At the same time, in segments of the New Left, peasants—the inequalities the state has created and allowed to stand, the injustices visited upon them—are *the* symptom for what has gone wrong with the reforms. At the moment, one might argue that it is *their* status, rather than the status of women, that has become the bellwether in official assessments of how China is doing—that their weaknesses, frailties, shortcomings, and victimization, rather than that of women, is the central sign for understanding Chinese modernity and the Chinese future.

This might not be a bad thing, both for China and for feminist scholarship. “Peasants” need the attention. Some of us are going to have to become involved in troubling the category of peasants by asking questions that years of doing gender research have made us practiced at: is “peasant” a unitary category? Is it gendered? (Or, to reprise an earlier, cruder, but still useful question: where are the women?) Is it locally differentiated? Is it historically specific? What work is this category “peasant” doing in contemporary debates, and how is that work related—if it is related—to the everyday, the material, the question of change over time?⁸ In short, “gender as method” may be useful in troubling other scholarly paradigms and political formulations, much as it troubled an earlier narrative of unmarked-male-as-subject-of-history. But this usefulness will continue only if we recognize that “gender” and “peasant” are different methods of subjectification; we cannot reduce every form of subject production to a parallel process of creation.

Meanwhile, the displacement of Woman as the central signifier of China's national distress, or success, may open up other possibilities for thinking, for scholarship, and for activism. Perhaps, freed from the central symbolic burden of representing China, women—and even Woman—may turn

8 I want to acknowledge the dissertation-in-progress of UC Santa Cruz Ph.D. candidate Alexander Day, “The Return of the Peasant,” as crucial in shaping my questions about this topic.

out to have other possibilities, in new modes of scholarly analysis—and activist agendas—that take full account of the state and its importance but are not propelled by it.

--In memory of Jan Stackhouse (1952-2005)

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