

Edited by
Dorothy KO and WANG Zheng



Translating Feminisms

ⁿChina



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Translating Feminisms in China

A Special Issue of *Gender & History*

EDITED BY
DOROTHY KO
AND
WANG ZHENG



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Introduction: Translating Feminisms in China

Dorothy KO and WANG Zheng

From its inception, feminism has been a global process wrought of transnational and local circulation of ideas and practices. As a global discourse, it became entangled with other global processes such as imperialism, capitalism and socialist revolution. The complex dynamics involved defy generalisation because of the very nature of the geo-political structures of the modern world they produced. Therefore, local histories of feminism are of vital importance to our understanding of the interactions between the local and the global, and to our knowledge of the micro and macro processes that constitute modernity. To put it simply, feminism is always already a global discourse, and the history of its local reception is a history of the politics of translation. This volume offers a case study of these processes by focusing on modern China from the late nineteenth century to the present.

Although scholarly interest in the history of Chinese feminism in a global context has emerged recently,¹ much remains to be explored. To begin with, the very subject of ‘Chinese feminism’ is ambivalent and controversial linguistically and conceptually. There are two common renditions of the English term ‘feminism’ in Chinese. Feminism as *nüquan zhuyi* (women’s rights or power-ism) connotes the stereotype of a man-hating he-woman hungry for power; hence it is a derisive term in China today except for a small circle of scholars and activists. Feminism as *nüxing zhuyi* (female or feminine-ism), in turn, appears far less threatening. Its popularity may stem from its semantic flexibility; as curious as it may sound to an Anglophone reader, *nüxing zhuyi* is often taken to mean an ideology promoting femininity and thus reinforcing gender distinctions. Although few in the Anglophone world would consider this position ‘feminist’, this ‘softer feminism’ enjoys more purchase than *nüquan zhuyi* among Chinese scholars who identify themselves as ‘feminists’.

The contemporary linguistic messiness conceals a century-long process, from around 1895 to the present day, in which feminism has been entangled in China's political, cultural and social transformations. Indeed, the battles over the meaning of 'feminism' constitute an integral part of China's pursuit of modernity on its own terms, albeit in a colonial or semi-colonial situation. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the legacies of these struggles, the meanings of 'feminism' and its place in the history of the women's movement in modern China have been woefully neglected or maligned. This volume, which brings together eight articles by scholars and activists from China, Japan, Canada and the USA in multiple disciplines, seeks to illuminate the problems and possibilities involved in translating feminism from the metropolitan 'West' to a locale rife with its own ideas about gender, class, body and sexuality. Furthermore, these articles showcase the centrality of gender in the formation of modern China by demonstrating the extent to which translated feminisms – whatever they mean – have transformed the terms in which modern Chinese understand their own subjectivities and histories.

A chronology of modern China

The eight articles fall into four chronological periods: Late Qing (1895–1911); Republican (1912–49); People's Republic of China, which includes the Mao era (1949–76) and the post-Mao era (1976–present). The decline of the Qing (or Manchu) multi-ethnic empire and the attendant rise of its neighbour Japan as a modern nation state with colonial ambitions created new geo-political alignments in the East Asian region in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. After the Qing modern navy suffered a crashing defeat at the hands of the Japanese in 1895, Chinese reformers considered Japan at once an enemy and a model to emulate. As students, artists and diplomats travelled to Japan in increasing numbers, they facilitated circulation of new ideas about nation, gender and citizenship in a tripartite loop – Euro-America, Japan and China. Mizuyo Sudo, a Japanese historian, documents in her contribution to this volume the birth of the concept of 'women's rights' (Chinese *nüquan*; Japanese *joken*) in China, a by-product of an overarching effort to modernise Qing legal codes and institutions. This is the beginning of 'feminism' in modern China.

For all its cultural innovations, the Qing legal and military reforms fell short. The dynasty collapsed in 1911, giving rise to a short-lived republic (1912–15) and a period of warlordism. A second republic (1927–49; also called the Nationalist or KMT period) re-established a modicum of political and social order. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the tenuous reach of the political centre, new social classes and subjectivities emerged – the most salient ones were professionals, workers, urban dwellers and 'new

women'. Three articles in this volume illuminate the crucial role played by the popular print media – itself a new cultural institution that emerged in the 1870s – in this formation.

In particular, urban magazines served to 'translate' notions of rights and agency from the elitist legal discourse to a popular one. Carol Chin, a specialist in Chinese and American history, gives an overview of the importance of women's magazines to the nascent women's movement as well as the emergence of bourgeois male and female subjectivities in Republican China. Yung-chen Chiang and Yunxiang Gao, both historians, furnish case studies of two of the most influential magazines in the 1920s–30s, *The Ladies' Journal* and *Linglong*. In addition to legal reforms, the print media became the main venue for the tripartite circulation of new ideas about womanhood between Euro-America, Japan and China in the first half of the twentieth century.

The rise of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP; formed in 1921) that culminated in the inauguration of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, changed the discursive fields of feminist and women's movements, bringing to the fore discourses of 'equality between men and women' (*nannü pingdeng*) and 'women's liberation' (*funü jiefang*). Revising the conventional image of a hegemonic CCP or draconian Maoist policies, the three articles that cover the third period of our chronology reveal how contentious these notions were in their local implementations and how female agency could take various forms within and beyond the state or official discourses.

The possibility of multiple interpretations as state discourses were being 'translated' into local policies is particularly evident in political scientist Kimberley Ens Manning's article, which affords a radically new vista on the Maoist Great Leap Forward (1957–61) era. China-based sociologists and activists Jin Yihong and Gao Xiaoxian, in turn, investigate the birth of a new type of female role model – the working-class woman – in state-controlled media and its implications for the embodied women themselves in the subsequent decades. In the last article of this volume, literature specialist Xueping Zhong reveals the complex relationship between female agency and the body as well as between Chinese and Western feminisms, hence bringing the analysis of Chinese invention and reception of femininity and feminism up to the fourth period of our chronology, the post-Mao reform era.

The career of *Nüquan* (women's rights; women's power)

Attending to continuities, ruptures and absences in linguistic categories and discursive processes, we discern three salient themes that undercut the neat four-period chronology that derives from political history: the tumultuous

career of the concept of *nüquan* (women's rights; women's power); media and feminist visions of modernity; and the female body as a battlefield for contending discourses.

The shifting reception of 'women's rights' is instructive. Of the two key slogans of the women's movement from the late-nineteenth century, equality between men and women (*nannü pingdeng*) has remained a progressive goal for reformers and the sign of a desirable, cosmopolitan modernity until the present day. However, the other pursuit, women's rights or power (*nüquan*), experienced a drastic downfall from being a valorised category translated from the modern 'West' via Japan in the late-Qing period to its obscure and debased status in the mid-twentieth century. Its irrelevance is evinced by the fact that it does not appear even once in the three essays on Maoist policies (Manning, Jin and Gao Xiaoxian). By the time the term reappears in Zhong's article on contemporary China, *nüquan zhuyi* (women's rights-ism) as a translation of the English term 'feminism' has acquired an unmitigatedly pejorative meaning.

This reversal of fortune encapsulates the troubles of the women's movement as it became entangled with nationalistic concerns in China under colonial or semi-colonial conditions at its inception. As Sudo points out, the term *nüquan* (women's rights) emerged in the context of Chinese male reformers' promotion of 'people's rights' or 'civil rights', 'human rights' and 'natural rights' in the aftermath of the Sino-Japanese War of 1895 and Western allied forces' suppression of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, which provoked the ailing Qing dynasty to modernise its polity. The importation of the concept and vocabulary of 'women's rights' was a by-product of China's emulating a Western-style nation state in order to resist Western imperialism. In other words, the feminist project was implicated in a problematic nationalist scheme from the start. Although 'women's rights' were supposedly rooted in the notion that men and women enjoyed 'natural rights', the goal for women's rights in the eyes of its male Chinese advocates was to strengthen the nation. Furthermore, the nation imagined here was modelled after Western nation states that were based on rigid gender divisions of labour. The inherent contradictions in the West between a gender-neutral concept of 'natural rights' and a gender-specific practice of nation state went unnoticed by most Chinese reformers. The subsequent contestations over the boundaries and meanings of 'women's rights' in China were but local ramifications of this contradiction inherent in the Anglophone formulation.

The four interpretations of 'women's rights' discerned by Sudo represent a wide spectrum of views on the relations between gender and nation at the turn of the twentieth century. Both Jin Tianhe's envisioning women as 'mothers to the nation' and Qiu Jin's espousal of women as men's 'equals in duty' located women's duty in strengthening the nation. While

Jin's proposal extended women's traditional vocation into a new nationalist setting, Qiu embraced men's role as the normative means to achieving both a strong nation and gender equality. The other two positions were far more radical. Zhang Zhujun, in exploring new roles for women without gender distinctions and He Zhen, in repudiating masculinist nationalism altogether, opened up theoretical possibilities for transcending not only nationalism but also the gender dualism on which the former was based.

Debates on women's rights in the first decade of the twentieth century, as examined by Carol Chin, also represented deliberate efforts on the part of Chinese female elites to construct their versions of modernity and new womanhood. They often promoted women's rights to education, economic independence, sport and political participation by comparing the stations of Chinese and foreign women. Translations of biographies and information about Western women served to legitimise new social practices for Chinese women. Although it is tempting to construe such translations as one-way flows dominated by the metropolitan West, Chin argues that they involved a creative process whereby Chinese women writers and readers deliberated on the unstable meanings of modernity, a process that was ultimately 'an attempt to define a new identity for the nation as well as for women'. The lively debates on 'new women' continued in print media even when the women's suffrage movement was suppressed in 1912.

During the May Fourth New Cultural Movement (1915–24), debates on 'women's rights' reached a new peak, with shifted focuses and theoretical underpinnings. Examining the most influential women's journal of the era, *The Ladies' Journal*, Yung-chen Chiang identifies, among others, an exposition of an exalted motherhood based on a mixture of biological determinism, eugenics and sexology translated from Japan, the USA and Europe. This new 'scientific' promotion of motherhood was different from the advocacy of 'mothers to the nation' by male scholars two decades before. Not only did women enjoy natural rights to be mothers, but significantly also to pursue romantic love so as to ensure healthier progeny. Hence a silver lining of the problematic 'scientific' discourse on 'natural' gender differences is that the definition of 'women's rights' was expanded to include sexual rights, the right to free choice of partners and the right to divorce.

Debates on the meaning of 'women's rights' were particularly lively and cacophonous during the May Fourth era. Some crucial contentions need to be highlighted here although they do not appear in the essays in this volume, for their very disappearance from the discursive field in the Mao era is instructive. Apart from advocating the Scandinavian motherhood movement, journals in the May Fourth era produced a large quantity of feminist texts introducing 'women's rights' movements (*nüquan yundong*) in the global context. 'Women's rights' (*nüquan*) began to be connected with

'ism' (*zhuyi*), forming a compound noun '*nüquan zhuyi*'; it was one of several Chinese renditions of 'feminism'. In 1922, feminist organisations emerged nationwide demanding women's rights ranging from equal political participation as well as equal educational and employment opportunities to freedom of marriage and divorce. 'Women's rights' in this context were oriented more towards the individual advancement of women than to nationalism. As feminism found an organisational expression as a political movement, however, embracing a masculine subject position became inseparable from claiming a share of male privileges and power. Thus, of the four strains delineated by Sudo, Qiu Jin's position became the most prominent in the May Fourth debates on *nüquan*. Performing men's role in all public arenas was seen as the key to achieving gender equality. In the 1930s this line of thinking would be further developed in women's vehement promotion of a strong physique for women, as examined in Yunxiang Gao's essay.

The Chinese Communist Party was formed when feminism, women's liberation and equality between men and women were heated topics in the May Fourth New Cultural movement. From its inception, the CCP endorsed the May Fourth feminist demand for equal rights for women. In fact, several key founders of the CCP had been vocal advocates of feminism. After their conversion to Marxism, they began to steer the debates on women's rights towards a socialist programme with an emphasis on the elimination of private ownership and the class system. Competing for clientele when mobilising for a nationalist revolution in the mid-1920s, the CCP began an exclusionary strategy that derided *nüquan zhuyi*. Feminists who refused to identify with the Party's goal but focused on gender equality were called 'bourgeois narrow feminists', a strategy copied from European socialists. Demarcating the 'proletarian women's liberation movement' (*wuchan jieji funü jiefang yundong*) from the 'bourgeois feminist movement' (*zichan jieji nüquan yundong*), the CCP aimed for political realignment rather than theoretical development. Therefore, its promotion of a feminist agenda that emphasised 'women's rights' coexisted with a disparagement of *nüquan zhuyi*. Feminists in the CCP would eventually learn to manoeuvre in the discursive space of a 'proletarian women's liberation'; one strategy was to avoid the negative label of *nüquan zhuyi*.

The absence of *nüquan zhuyi* in all three essays in this volume on women's liberation in the Mao era reveals the status of 'feminism' as a taboo subject. Indeed, the Mao era witnessed a closing-down of both intellectual space for debating *nüquan* and social spaces for women's spontaneous activism. Nonetheless, 'women's rights', now spelt out as *funü quanli* (literally 'the rights of women'),² became the legitimate domain of the Women's Federation, a mass organisation led by the Party and consisting of feminists who struggled to promote equality between men and

women. Their efforts to advance the interests of rural and urban lower-class women in the socialist revolution expanded urban elite-based concepts and practices of 'women's rights' in the Republican era. Essays by Manning, Gao Xiaoxian and Jin Yihong provide valuable empirical research on these and other feminist practices, albeit without a feminist label, that were entangled in the process of socialist state building. Lastly, as Xueping Zhong reveals, the re-emergence of the term *nüquan zhuyi* in the post-Mao era – though loaded with negative connotations – marked an opening-up of both discursive and social spaces for feminist contestations and activism. The CCP no longer maintains control over the definition and circulation of feminism.

Media and feminist visions of modernity

Discourses of women's rights unfolded primarily in the print media in the twentieth century, the second theme that the essays in this volume take up. The contributors break with the prevalent tendency in feminist and Sinological scholarship to view the media and the state as oppressive of women if not downright hegemonic. In over-emphasising state dominance or media manipulation, previous studies of Republican and Communist China have left little room for the agency of male and female actors.

The new scholarship presented here suggests a complex negotiation between global influences, media, the state and women at various levels. Examining women's journals from the 1900s to the 1930s, Chin, Chiang and Yunxiang Gao demonstrate not only the centrality of gender in China's pursuit of modernity but also the prominent position women occupied in the rapid social, political and cultural transformations. Far from merely comprising a representational trope for modernity, women were political and social actors in the drama of envisioning and constructing modernity. The press was one of a handful of modern institutions to which women were able to gain entrance in the early twentieth century – as editors, writers and readers. That the translation and circulation of feminism on such a massive scale was possible in the first four decades of the twentieth century was in no small part a result of the active participation in the new media by women.

Women's participation in print media began as a form of feminist activism in the late-Qing period. Founding journals to advocate women's rights entailed financial hardship for the minority of women who did so, but the project itself was unproblematic, legitimised as it was by the reform-minded elite's modernisation drive. As such, it was not unusual for men to launch and operate women's journals that advocated women's rights. Indeed, it was a crucial performative act for men who wished to claim a modern identity. The feminist discursive space created by these elite

women and men in the early twentieth century shaped new gender norms in urban settings, enabling the rise of 'new women' as a social category in modern China.

The three articles on women's journals illuminate a local process of constructing 'new women' that was inseparable from the transnational translation of political, legal and intellectual paradigms as well as cultural practices. Multidirectional global resources interacted with multifaceted local discursive practices on the pages of the journals. The cultural field of representing and producing 'new women' is thus a dynamic space filled with contradictions and inconsistencies. Often, attacks on restrictive 'old' gender practices appear in the same journal with espousals of translated 'new' norms and ideals that are even more problematic. Chin, Chiang and Yunxiang Gao provide nuanced analyses of the complicated picture of the new womanhood that resulted.

The new identities that emerged from decades of debates on women's rights, though inconsistent and fractured, are unambiguous in their class orientation. The feminist 'new women' had to be imagined as belonging to the nascent urban middle class for them to function as a signpost of modernity in the context of 'colonial modernity' in the Republican era.³ As such they are a mirror image of the educated women and men who created them discursively. Although socialist analyses that introduced an awareness of class-based hierarchy had been integrated in the feminist discourse of the May Fourth era, the very practice of discursive construction was the privilege of the urban educated women and men. As the visual images included in this volume illustrate, rural or lower-class urban women had never been selected as the representatives of 'new women'.

The fact that the Republican 'new woman' served as a referent for Western cosmopolitanism is significant, for this qualification is strikingly missing in both historical women and images of the model females in the Mao era as discussed in the essays by Manning, Gao Xiaoxian and Jin. From 1949 on, the CCP pursued a new vision of modernity designed to disavow a colonial past, construed as western domination. Previous studies have shown that the socialist state in the early 1950s promoted images of socialist 'new women' that demonstrated an affinity with portrayals of Soviet working-class heroines.⁴ The discursive break with the West is also evident in the two essays by Gao Xiaoxian and Jin Yihong in this volume. Both authors demonstrate that as practices of women's liberation spread to the countryside, the discourses and concerns were entirely locally oriented; no reference was made to and no anxiety betrayed about catching up with the metropolitan West. Furthermore, although the Maoist discourse inherited the key feminist concepts formed in the early twentieth century's global context – women's rights

and gender equality – the ‘new women’ in the socialist period were unmistakably working-class and earthy, as represented by the ‘Iron Girl’ who had no cosmopolitan flair. Interviews with actual ‘Iron Girls’ and other labour heroines further illuminate a complicated process of women’s liberation in which the interests of the socialist state intersected and coincided with those of lower-class women. The socialist ‘new women’ were thus not simply statist subjects who were pawns in the nationalist project, but often empowered subalterns who chose to identify with the socialist state.

The translation of feminism as a project of colonial modernity in the Republican era was thus radically transformed by both the feminist cadres in the CCP and the lower-class women themselves. The cadres sought to mobilise women of the lower classes in the socialist state-building project as an explicit means to elevate the latter’s class and gender status; the lower-class women, in turn, entered the realm of discursive production of a socialist feminist modernity as labourers and role models. Just as the ‘new women’ of the 1920s and 1930s were not merely a trope of colonial modernity but the embodiment of an urban middle-class subjectivity, labour heroines and Iron Girls were at once tropes of socialist modernity and the embodiment of a new working-class feminist subjectivity.

Despite the radical shifts in class composition of the ‘new women’, discourses of the possibilities and limitations that they faced are at times strikingly similar before and after 1949. At first glance, it is most curious that Manning’s analysis of the debates about women’s liberation in the late 1950s countryside reveals themes and concerns that seem to be carried over from debates in the urban metropolis from the first half of the twentieth century. Both the Marxist maternalist position emphasising women’s biological difference and the socialist insistence on the comparability of women’s physical strength to that of men hark back to discourses of scientific womanhood, health and sport in the 1930s. They reveal that discourses of women’s liberation were grounded in articulations of the uses and capabilities of women’s bodies.

The female body as a battlefield

The third and most poignant theme that emerges from the eight essays in this volume is the centrality of the female body in tropes of modernity and women’s liberation in the twentieth century, although the source, image and class identification differed. It would not be an exaggeration to say that without the female body, it would have been difficult to imagine a modern Chinese nation. Conversely, being at the crossroads of contradictory desires and impulses, the female body could not have been a coherent or integral entity.

The female body became increasingly visible in public discourse during the twentieth century. In the late-Qing period, under the influence of evolutionism and social Darwinism, the female body emerged as part of nascent nationalistic concerns as an abstraction if not a fantasy – as the mother of national subjects (*guomin zhi mu*). In Republican print media, visual representation grew in vividness and specificity as magazine writers and editors took from Hollywood and American magazines images of the glamorous actress, the consuming housewife and the half-naked athlete. A healthy and robust body expressed the trope of a colonial modernity that was inseparable from the notion of women's liberation. The embodied female became the subject of state discipline with the New Life Movement in the 1930s, a tendency that continued into the 1950s and beyond.

The growing visibility of female bodies in itself was a symptom of a Westernised discourse and reference system in the Republican period, as is highlighted in Yunxiang Gao's examination of the discourse of *jianmei*, or 'robust beauty'. Although the Western gaze receded in the Maoist era, the fixation on the female body as both a representational trope and philosophical ground for debating women's liberation continued. For example, in Manning's careful examination of what she terms 'Marxist maternalism' developed by the All-China Women's Federation, one can discern strands of the sacred motherhood ideology developed in the 'scientific' eugenic discourse of the 1920s as elucidated in Chiang's essay; how far we have departed from the world of the late-Qing heroine Qiu Jin, discussed by Sudo, who insisted on women's capacity to struggle and suffer in equal measure to men. In refusing extra protection for women because of their biological weakness, the martyr stood as the antithesis to Marxist maternalism. Yet the essentialist beliefs of the latter could have positive effects for women. As Manning shows, lower-class labouring women gained limited relief from their harsh working conditions through the Women's Federation's advocacy of a Marxist maternalism. A juxtaposition of these studies of different historical periods makes it clear that the female body, mired in nineteenth-century Western scientific theories and gender concepts, was a battleground for contestations over modernity and women's liberation. The eugenic discourse, so popular in the 1920s, left a problematic legacy that has survived the Maoist revolution.

In the post-Mao era when China's elites have embraced the global capitalist economy as a means to reverse the Maoist course, the female body has re-emerged as the locus of contemporary debates about modernity. The robust working-class body of the Iron Girl is scorned by the urban elites as the symbol of Maoist ultra-leftist gender policy that distorted women's supposedly feminine nature and thereby masculinised women. Criticising gender uniformity as a symptom of Maoist statist domination,