

### Chinese Literature • Cultural Studies

"This well-researched and tightly argued book demonstrates the centrality of an imagined female community, rallying around the notion of 'sisterhood,' in the construction of modern Chinese nationalism and Chinese modernity."

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"Yun Zhu's cutting-edge and eye-opening book offers an important and inspiring study of sisterhood imaginations from late Qing to mid-Republican China. Built upon substantial archival studies, the chapters are thematically woven together and offer a nuanced, rigorous, and interdisciplinary analysis of a broad array of sisterhood narratives in diverse genres, including traditional chantefable fiction, modern novellas, short stories, film, and periodicals. Refreshing, timely, and well-researched, this compelling study urges readers to confront and critically assess the complexities, paradoxes, and hybridizations of female subjectivities in China's long process of transition toward modernity in a shifting global context."

-Li Guo, Utah State University

Imagining Sisterhood in Modern Chinese Texts, 1890-1937 investigates sisterhood as a converging thread that wove female subjectivities and intersubjectivities into a larger narrative of Chinese modernity embedded in a newly conceived global context. It focuses on the period between the late Qing reform era around the turn of the twentieth century and the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, which saw the emergence of new ways of depicting Chinese womanhood in various kinds of media. In a critical hermeneutic approach, Yun Zhu combines an examination of an outside perspective (how narratives and images about sisterhood were mobilized to shape new identities and imaginations) with that of an inside perspective (how subjects saw themselves as embedded in or affected by the discourse and how they negotiated such experiences within texts or through writing). With its working definition of sisterhood covering biological as well as all kinds of symbolic and metaphysical connotations, this book examines the literary and cultural representations of this elastic notion with attention to, on the one hand, a supposedly collective identity shared by all modern Chinese female subjects and, on the other hand, the contesting modes of womanhood that were introduced through the juxtaposition of divergent "sisters." Through an interdisciplinary approach that brings together historical materials, literary and cultural analyses, and theoretical questions, Zhu conducts a careful examination of how new identities, subjectivities, and sentiments were negotiated and mediated through the hermeneutic circuits around "sisterhood."

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## Introduction

Gender, Nation, Subjectivities, and the Discourse on Sisterhood in Modern China

"All of you are my dearest elder sisters and younger sisters," thus begins "To All My Sisters" (Jinggao zimeimen 敬告姊妹們) by the pioneering feminist and Chinese nationalist revolutionary Qiu Jin 秋瑾 (1875-1907). Published in the first issue of Chinese Women's Journal (Zhongguo nübao 中國女報, 1907), this seminal article called on Chinese women to fight collectively against traditional gender norms and to strive for independence and gender equality in order to bring not only themselves but also the whole Chinese nation into a "new civilized world." The term zimei 姊妹 and its (subsequently more popular) alternative jiemei 姐妹, both meaning "sisters," were of course anything but neologisms; even the metaphorical usage—referring to non-biological sisterly bonding—had often occurred in both everyday and literary discourses in premodern China. Qiu Jin's use of the word in an open call to a newly imagined community made up of all female Chinese nationals—addressed as "200,000,000 female compatriots" (erwanwan nütongbao 二萬萬女同胞)3—however, was a rather recent usage that went well beyond its conventional denotation of familial and personal connections. It endowed the term with fresh meaning and a potent significance that has been vital to understanding the so-called "woman question" (funü wenti 婦女問題) in China and, in no lesser degree, the construction of Chinese modernity at large. A look at Chinese women's periodicals—edited and published by both men and women—in the transitional and transformational late Oing and early to mid-Republican era reveals that "sisters" (either as jiemei or zimei) was one of the most often employed catchphrases for feminist advocacy, especially when used in the metaphorical manner of Qiu Jin's.

In terms of both its conceptual extension and its elevation of the importance of women's issues, Qiu Jin's application of the sisterhood metaphor reflected a dramatic transformation in the Chinese imaginary concerning women's societal roles and relationships to each other as much as to the nation. Unlike brotherhood, which had long been included in the "five relationships" (wulun 五倫) of the Confucian tradition, sisterhood had never before occupied a central position in the Confucian social and moral order, which defined the (male) self through a series of concentric circles—the family, the nation, and the world. In fact, no type of female-female relationship was considered important in this concentric world order. Instead, the gendered doctrine of the inner/outer boundary led women's identities to be defined first and foremost, if not exclusively, by their roles in the patriarchal family, that is, as men's daughters, wives, and mothers.

The expansion of the connotations of sisterhood toward a newly imagined "women's sphere" in the last couple of decades of the Qing took place largely against the emergence of a novel background language that considered female subjects as an important half of a prospective modern Chinese "imagined community." The broadly defined female-female tie that the new sisterhood discourse established thus constituted an essential conjoining of feminist emancipation on the one hand and national liberty and modernization on the other. Despite their many confinements and limitations, these conceptual changes broke through the old view of female existence as being only meaningful when situated within the boundary and context of the patriarchal family and, subsequently, opened up fresh possibilities for redefining female subjectivities and intersubjectivities in the following decades.

Yet the proliferating literary and cultural representations of biological as well as metaphorical sisters arose not only from the changed meaning and usage of the word but also from the tremendous anxieties and the many diversified responses they aroused, from both male and female subjects. In addition, like the modern conception of the "Chinese nation," the imagined community of Chinese "sisters" was almost always envisioned against the background of China struggling to catch up with an evolving modern world. Therefore, as old and new sisterhood narratives flourished in all kinds of literary and cultural texts, they constituted an important part of the contested construction of modern Chinese female identities and gender relations by presenting "sisters" in a variety of ways—as co-sufferers of gender biases and national crises, as feminist compatriots or patriotic feminists, as bearers of sociocultural challenges and changes, as romantic competitors, as fellow consuming subjects, as empathetic female-female lovers, and so on. In this way, the characteristically elastic notion of sisterhood became a phenomenal nodal point to process and negotiate different yet entangled leitmotifs of sociocultural transformation from the individual to the national and even transnational levels.

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There is a growing body of Chinese- and English-language scholarship on writings by and about women in China's turbulent twentieth century, and special attention has been given to the relationship between gender and nation. For instance, in her genealogical study of the discourse around "women" in modern China, Tani E. Barlow has argued that, while the dominant "catachreses" funü 婦女 (women) used between the eighteenth and the early twentieth centuries "signified the collectivity of kinswomen in the semiotics of Confucian family doctrine," the use of the word nü 女 (female) in the early twentieth century served as "a trope or symbol of nationalist universality in masculinist discourse," and the modern term nüxing 女性 (female gender/ sex) "constituted a discursive sign and a subject position in the larger frames of anti-Confucian discourse" reflecting "the rhetoric of global sex and eugenics theory."6 In a related but different vein, Amy Dooling's Women's Literary Feminism in Twentieth-Century China provides an exploration of the emerging feminist ideologies articulated by "new women" (xin nüxing 新女 性) writers, who intervened in the dominantly nationalist discourse with female experiences and perspectives. Also rejecting the reduction of women to merely passive objects during the rise of Chinese nationalism, Joan Judge has turned to a group of female Chinese students studying in Japan at the turn of the twentieth century, who were "the first Chinese women to address the issue of nationalism directly" in a time when "[t]he Chinese nation and the Chinese national subject were still in the process of being invented," and pointed out that these women exercised their agency by appropriating nationalism to "cut out new subjectivities."8

In contrast to the emphasis on such key terms as "women," "women's rights," and "new women," however, there seems to be an imbalance between the noticeable profusion of narratives and images about sisterhood and the scarcity of systematic attention it has so far attracted. Few academic books in English on China studies published in recent decades have underscored "sister" in the title; one exception is Emily Honig's Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919-1949, a historicalsociological study of sisterhood among female workers in the textile industry of Republican Shanghai. 9 Nevertheless, the importance of sisterhood in Chinese women's literary traditions and social history has already been evidenced in such works as Hu Siao-chen's Talented Women Burning the Midnight Oil: The Rise of Female Narrative in Early Modern China, which has revealed the importance of textual sisterhood in women's tanci novels (tanci xiaoshuo 彈詞小說) in the Ming and Qing dynasties, mostly targeted at a female readership made up of the writers' relatives and friends in gentry families. 10 Feminist sisterhood has also been touched upon, though not focused on, in Zheng Wang's historical portrait of Chinese women activists in the May Fourth era (roughly mid-1910s to mid-1920s), Women in the Chinese Enlightenment, in which Wang's demonstration of the vigorous role

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played by women in China's nationalist/feminist enlightenment disrupted the previous popular belief that women did not exercise much agency themselves and were merely liberated by male-led revolutions. <sup>11</sup> As a pioneering examination of the literary and cultural discourses of female same-sex love in modern China and Taiwan, Tze-lan D. Sang's *The Emerging Lesbian: Female Same-Sex Desire in Modern China* has brought to light the discursive emergence of lesbian sisterhood, its literary representations and social reception, and lesbian activism under contemporary conditions. <sup>12</sup>

Given the respective foci of Honig's, Hu's, Wang's, and Sang's books, there remain many interesting and important unanswered questions about the rich connotations of the term "sisterhood" and its derivative images in the late Qing and early to mid-Republican discourses. For example, how did the apparent but problematic symbiosis between nationalist sisterhood and feminist sisterhood in the late Qing "women's sphere" narratives affect later feminist quests and endeavors? With the elasticity of sisterhood encompassing a range of bonds—from familial ties to socially and intellectually bonded friendships, nationalist and/or feminist associations, and even broader transhistorical and translocal identifications—how did the narratives and images of "sisters" and "sisterhood" interact with the changing ideas about the self, the family, the nation, and the world? How did the newly expanded and more metaphorical ways of imagining sisterhood influence the ways in which women as individuals and as a group were portrayed henceforth?

Indeed, as I hope this book will show, the transforming and proliferating sisterhood narratives in the last two decades of Qing rule and the early to mid-Republican era is significantly revealing as to the complicated relationship between women and Chinese modernity in at least three aspects.

First, "sisterhood," originally a kinship term, is rooted in biological ties and familial relationships. The emergence and popularity of its newly developed, broader, and more flexible framework provided a unique angle to look at how the perception of women's identities and roles on the one hand and a restructured understanding of the relationships among the self, the family, the nation, and the world on the other mutually redefined each other in modern Chinese history. As in the case of the mother, which Sally Taylor Lieberman has found as "a crucial sign profoundly and intricately implicated in the discursive battles of China's modern period," writing and rhetoric about sisters and sisterhood carried many divergent (sometimes paradoxical or contradictory) messages and images. A careful examination of these narratives may shed further light on the subtle shades of meaning of such important and related terms as *funü*, *nü*, *nüxing*, and *xin nüxing*, all of which, despite their very different approaches, considered the relationship between women and the family as a key reference point in the discourse on gender.

Second, instead of presenting polemic oppositions between nationalism and feminism or between individual female subjects and women as one col-

lective subject, sisterhood narratives mediated a spectrum of subject positions and negotiated not only female subjectivities but also gendered intersubjectivities. Hence, while constituting an important part of the overall cultural discourse on the "woman question," they provided a more heterogeneous picture of what Joan Judge has termed as the "historically unstable nature of the relationship between women and the nation." <sup>14</sup> At the same time, they encouraged a dialogical, rather than monological approach, which may help to reveal dynamic dialectics of cohesion and fragmentation within and with regard to the emerging "new women." As negotiations arose as to the commonalities and differences among modern Chinese female subjects, the inclusion/exclusion of sisterhood became an indicator for the sharing/non-sharing of identities and mentalities.

Third, the gendered nature of sisterhood and an ensuing feminine or feminized thematic focus often led to a feminized positioning that added nuances to such binary paradigms as China/West and traditional/modern. As in the case of Qiu Jin's article, for instance, a master-slave view of the existing gender hierarchy, where "men always occupy the position of masters, and women are reduced to the status of slaves,"15 added another layer to an otherwise commonly interpreted linear perception of nationalist revolution and social evolution. At the same time, Qiu's advocacy for publications by and for women as the cornerstone of an enlightened "Chinese women's sphere" (Zhongguo nüjie 中國女界)16 complicated the strata of this imagined community of the "nation," which, according to Benedict Anderson, "is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship," a "fraternity that makes it possible . . . for so many millions of people . . . willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (italics mine). 17 That is, what happens if we compare the Andersonian model of an "imagined community" with Qiu Jin's "women's sphere," where "comradeship" is made less "horizontal" because of gender differences and a gendered elite-subaltern spectrum, and where "fraternity" is replaced by "sisterhood"?

This book investigates sisterhood as a converging thread that wove female subjectivities and intersubjectivities into a larger narrative of Chinese modernity embedded in a newly conceived global context. It focuses on the period between the late Qing reform era around the turn of the twentieth century and the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, which saw the emergence of new ways of depicting Chinese womanhood in various kinds of media. In a critical hermeneutic approach, I combine an examination of an outside perspective (how narratives and images about sisterhood were mobilized to shape new identities and imaginations) with that of an inside perspective (how subjects saw themselves as embedded in or affected by the discourse and how they negotiated such experiences within texts or through writing). With its working definition of sisterhood covering biological as well as all kinds of symbolic and metaphysical connotations, this book exam-

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ines the literary and cultural representations of this elastic notion with attention to, on the one hand, a supposedly collective identity shared by all modern Chinese female subjects and, on the other hand, the contesting modes of womanhood that were introduced through the juxtaposition of divergent "sisters." While being keenly aware of the appropriation of sisterhood rhetoric in China's nation-building project, my approach avoids anything similar to the type of neat "repressive hypothesis" that Foucault has argued against <sup>18</sup> and, instead, suggests a more complex reading of the relationship among gender, sexuality, and nation. Through an interdisciplinary approach that brings together historical materials, literary and cultural analysis, and theoretical questions, I conduct a careful examination of how new identities, subjectivities, and sentiments were negotiated and mediated through the hermeneutic circuits around "sisterhood."

The first chapter traces the politicized notion of a nationwide sisterhood to the discussions of the "women's sphere" by reformist and feminist intellectuals at the turn of the twentieth century. It reveals how the discursive construction of this gendered sphere provided new vocabulary and a (re-)invented language for sisterhood beyond the limit of the household and how such nationalist sisterhood interacted with the construction of an Andersonian "imagined community." Reading "sisters" in the late Qing discourse as an elastic and fluid category situated at the intersection of feminist and nationalist causes, I maintain that this newly imagined sphere of 200,000,000 sisters—half of the estimated Chinese population at the time—served as a preliminary but contested "imagined community," where female subjectivities were perceived as largely based upon national enlightenment. As such, it thematically and stylistically impacted the literary and cultural representations of gender, nation, and modernity in later decades, which are discussed in the following chapters.

Diverging from the historical approach employed in the first chapter, the second chapter adopts an interpretative approach toward the depiction of sisterhood in two politically charged novels written by representative late Qing women writers in response to reformist intellectuals' call for "new fiction" (xin xiaoshuo 新小說). 19 My reading of Qiu Jin's Stones of the Jingwei Bird (Jingwei shi 精衛石, 1905–1907) and Shao Zhenhua's (邵振華, ca. 1882–?) Chivalric Beauties (Xiayi jiaren 俠義佳人, 1909–1911) pays much attention to their reinvention of literary sisterhood of the earlier guixiu 閨秀 (educated genteel women) tradition by promoting feminist awareness and adjusting it to the overwhelmingly nationalistic intellectual discourse. Whereas their advocacy for an extensive feminist union profoundly embraced the nationalist agenda of the "women's sphere," their respective renderings of this gendered community as a stratified, rather than homogenous, entity informed by an enlightenment-based vision also indicated potential divergences beneath a shared yearning for a modernized womanhood.

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Continuing with the issue of heterogeneity within sisterhood narratives with reference to the complexity and multiplicity of modernity/modernities, chapter 3 proceeds to explore the portrayals of competing sisters—as rivals in love relations or as embodiments of contrasting mentalities—in Li Hanqiu's 李涵秋 (1874–1923) novel Two Flowery Sisters (Zimei huagu 姊妹花 骨, 1910), Bai Wei's 白薇 (1893-1987) novel A Bomb and an Expeditionary Bird (Zhadan yu zhengniao 炸彈與徵鳥, 1928), and Zheng Zhengqiu's 郑正 秋 (1888-1935) film Twin Sisters (Zimei hua 姊妹花, 1933). The competition between the juxtaposed sisters, I contend, symbolized what seemed to be a compulsory choice between the traditional and the modern modes of womanhood as each was respectively imagined (for instance, as rural versus urban, indigenous versus cosmopolitan, conservative versus revolutionary, passive versus active, weak versus strong, or dependent versus independent). While usually the textual fates of the rival sisters—either the failure of the premodern archetype and the victory of the modern one or a progressive reformation of the sisterly tie per se—well accorded with the then prevalent belief in social Darwinism and linear modernity, the sentimental potentialities behind the apparently rationalized choice often reflected pain, bewilderment, fragmentation, and ambiguities. As the tensions among these fictional sisters allegorized social and ideological dissonances and the different emotional responses they prompted, sisterhood became a vivid trope to epitomize, in a gendered manner, the oscillations between cohesion and fragmentation within the conceived Chinese modernity.

The fourth chapter is a case study of the cosmopolitan bourgeois sisterhood constructed by and around Lin Loon Ladies' Magazine (Linglong funü zazhi 玲瓏婦女雜誌), one of the most popular and influential women's magazines of 1930s Shanghai. Examining the magazine's cultivation of a sizable female readership via sisterhood narratives side by side with the ambiguities of its self-claimed female-centeredness, I investigate the shifting boundary between the private and the public with reference to reiterations of female subject positions. The magazine's encyclopedic coverage of cosmopolitan modern life, "polyphonic" 20 treatments of women's social positioning, and an intrinsic entertaining overtone, I argue, constituted a gendered prism of urban consumer culture and allowed some alternative ways to reimagine female subjectivities and intersubjectivities beyond the nationalist framework. On the other hand, while facilitating a feminine public space between the individual and the state that departed from mainstream intellectual discourse, the magazine's overlapping dualistic foci on women and entertainment also often made female subjects vulnerable to voyeurism, objectification, and exploitation. The sisterhood among Lin Loon girls embodied new gender-informed, self-reflexive (albeit self-questioning) ways of identification among modern Chinese women as empathetic participants in not only the public cultural discourse but also the consumptive dimension of a semicolonial, cosmopolitan modern life. The ambivalence of the magazine's female-centeredness and feminist potential, in this way, correlated with various dilemmas of the Chinese "New Woman" in her simultaneous fights against traditional patriarchal gender biases, the ongoing colonial imperialist threats, and the modern voyeuristic and misogynist commodity culture.

The last chapter looks into four stories by three representative women writers of the 1920s and the 1930s on the subject of female-female love among students and teachers in the new-style girls' school—Lu Yin's 廬隱 (1898-1934) "Lishi's Diary" (Lishi de riji 麗石的日記, 1923) and "Old Friends by the Sea" (Haibin guren 海濱故人, 1923), Ling Shuhua's 凌叔華 (1900-1990) "It Is Said That Something Like This Happened" (Shuo you zheme yi hui shi 說有這麼一回事, 1926), and Ding Ling's 丁玲 (1904-1986) "In the Summer Vacation" (Shujia zhong 暑假中, 1928). It discusses how the writers' respective delineations of female-female love in the heterotopic space of the girls' school engaged with alternative possibilities of envisioning female subject positions. The utopian/dystopian dimensions of these stories demonstrated how young educated women were both empowered and confined at one and the same time by mainstream enlightenment ideals. In this way, they questioned the implicit but dominant patriarchal-nationalist tendencies in the embedding May Fourth discourses on women's psyches, bodies, and sexualities. The challenges and frustrations facing the sisterly lovers, who were so often caught in a dilemma of rebelliousness, escapism, and disillusionment all mixed together, self-reflectively problematized a gender paradox in the legacy of the iconoclastic New Culture Movement of the mid-1910s through the 1920s, which, in turn, could be traced back to the earlier problematic symbiosis between nationalism and feminism in the late Qing discursive construction and promotion of the "women's sphere."

In the conclusion, I summarize the significance of sisterhood in the modern Chinese imaginary, which lies not only in its positioning at the confluence of many important leitmotifs in literary and cultural discourses but also in its innate complexity, elasticity, and fluidity. As such, sisterhood imaginings constantly, dynamically, and dialectically interacted with various sociocultural transformations in an emphatically gendered manner. An examination of women and Chinese modernity through the lens of sisterhood may thus open up alternative understandings to the gendered master narratives of enlightenment, national salvation, and modernization.

### **NOTES**

<sup>1.</sup> Qiu Jin, Selected Works of Qiu Jin, ed. Guo Yanli (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2004), 12.

<sup>2.</sup> Ibid., 13.