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New Modern Chinese Women and Gender Politics

The centennial of the end of the Qing
Dynasty

Edited by
Chen Ya-chen

ROUTLEDGE



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New Modern Chinese Women and Gender Politics

The past century witnessed dramatic changes in the lives of Chinese women and in gender politics in China. While some revolutionary actions to rectify the practices of the feudalist patriarchy, such as foot-binding and polygyny, were first seen in the late Qing period, the termination of the Qing Dynasty and the establishment of Republican China in 1911–12 initiated truly nationwide constitutional reform alongside increasing gender egalitarianism. This book traces the radical changes in gender politics in China, and the way in which the lives, roles, and status of Chinese women have been transformed over the last 100 years. In doing so, it highlights three distinctive areas of development for modern Chinese women and gender politics: first, Chinese women's equal rights, freedom, careers, and images about their modernized femininity; second, Chinese women's overseas experiences and accomplishments; and third, advances in Chinese gender politics of nonheterosexuality and same-sex concerns.

This book takes a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on film, history, literature, and personal experience. As such, it will be of huge interest to students and scholars of Chinese culture and society, women's studies, gender studies, and gender politics.

Chen Ya-chen is currently a Visiting Scholar at the Weatherhead East Asian Studies Institute, Columbia University, USA.

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Preface and acknowledgments

Recent medical and linguistic research outcomes have shown that embryos in their mothers' bellies can clearly hear their mothers' voices before their mothers give birth to them. If I am allowed to make everything as dramatic as possible, I guess that what motivated me to work on Chinese feminist, queer, and gender studies seemed to take root at the moment when I was only an embryo that could hear my mother's voice from inside her. As I was mistaken for the first son during my mother's pregnancy, my correct biological status as a baby girl was shockingly outside of the original anticipation of my parents, grandparents, and relatives. Indeed, some Chinese-heritage parents still prefer sons to daughters and show strong disappointment as soon as they realize that their babies are not male. Gender inequality still continues to appear in different formats regardless of mainlanders' "one child" policy as well as the current low birth rate in Taiwan and Hong Kong. If I am permitted to cite William Shakespeare's globally renowned drama, the sentence which I would like to quote would be this: "To be [male/female], or not to be [male/female], that is the question." Although no reasonable people would publicly admit that it is correct to discriminate against female embryos, all the disparate treatment that I experienced since my female-embryo era became a strong force to pave the way to my nonstop academic pursuits of research related to sexual inequality and gender differences. When writing and editing this book, I am writing and editing my own life as well as the lives of many other female embryos.

This book would not have been completed without the following researchers: Daniel Palm, Linda H. Chiang, Chang Chiung-fang, Harris Harden, Zheng Tian-tian, Guo Jie, Luo Liang, Valerie Levan, Fan Xing, and Cui Shuqin. In addition to these scholars' academic chapters, attorney Marian S.K. Ming graciously added her autobiographical information and career experience to enrich this book. My special thanks also go to academic conferences hosted by Columbia University, the University of Pennsylvania, Wellesley College, the Association for Asian Studies, and the American Association for Chinese Studies. At the time of publication, I have accepted Tsing Hua University's invitation to give an academic speech. My acceptance of this invitation and my talk about the final chapter in this book at this prestigious university are extremely meaningful to me because around fifteen years ago my mother forced me to give up the right to

enroll and study in this university after I successfully passed the entrance exam, as her traditional gender ideology and jealousy disallowed her first daughter to pursue academic degrees at prestigious universities. There would have been no maternal obstacles for me to register for classes at this university if I were male.

Undoubtedly, there is no perfect academic book in this human world, and this book is no exception. Writing and editing academic publications to help gender egalitarianism, therefore, is a never-ending scholarly journey. On the ceaseless way toward the perfect ideal of sexual equality, I humbly thank people who are willing to kindly permit sufficient space for opportunities to upgrade either academic research or the activist practice of gender egalitarianism.

A note on romanization: every effort has been made to unify the romanization system throughout this book. Most chapters follow the pinyin system but there are instances where the individual contributors have chosen to use the Wade-Giles system instead.

The Chinese names of this book's contributors have been given in the Chinese style, with family name first.

AAARI (Asian American and Asian Research Institute), CUNY (City University of New York), hosted an academic speech about this book and included Skype sessions with five of the authors in this book on May 9, 2014: www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7VP0waRRe4 (online video accessed May 2014). CUNY TV (Channel 75, New York City) had a special TV interview episode about this book in May 2014: www.youtube.com/watch?v=qz3apCgfBg4 (accessed June 2014).

Chen Ya-chen 陳雅渢 陈雅渢

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Introduction

Chen Ya-chen

From the prehistoric era to the twenty-first century in Chinese history, three periods have so far witnessed the dramatic rise of women's empowerment and liberation of gender ideology: first, the matriarchal periods; second, the Tang¹ Dynasty, which included the Da Zhou period established by China's only female emperor, Wu Zetian; third, the period from the late Qing era to the present. It would be certainly illogical to naively claim that there were no improvements of gender egalitarianism in all the other eras; however, these three eras seem more outstanding than others in a bird's-eye view of Chinese history overall. Among three above-mentioned periods, the period from the late Qing era to the present has resulted in the deepest and broadest impacts on heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, and all the other aspects of gender politics. The introduction to this book will cover the three influential periods and offer a chronological outline of what took place over the centuries in Chinese women's, gender, and queer history; however, after the introductory chapter, this book will focus on the most influential era among the three—namely, the century from the end of the Qing Dynasty to the present.

A brief chronological outline of Chinese women's, gender, and queer history

While Chinese history is globally regarded as extremely long and thorny, the subtleties and richness in women's, queer, feminist, and gender aspects of Chinese history are undoubtedly complicated. Some background knowledge of what took place in different sections of Chinese women's, feminist, queer, and gender history might help to pave the way to a more complete understanding of the above-mentioned three eras; therefore, below are some paragraphs to briefly outline important incidents in women's, feminist, queer, and gender history in China.²

Matriarchal social systems and marital systems of heterosexuality

In prehistoric or primitive eras of Chinese history, men and women originally shared all the workload, such as hunting, fruit-picking, or fishing. Later on, their

division of labor began naturally according to biological and physical differences without any attachments of higher or lower status. Men do not experience the biological or physical restrictions of menstruation, pregnancy, birth-giving processes, and breast-feeding; therefore, they served as hunters, fishermen, or fighters against wild animals. Depending on different kinds of risks they encountered every day, men's work was usually dangerous without any guarantee of steady profits at that time. Women were in charge of fruit-picking, plant-growing, milking, weaving, sawing, child-raising, cooking, animal husbandry, and so on. In other words, women were the chief managers of agriculture, pasturage, aquaculture, and forestry; therefore, women could guarantee more and steadier profits from their daily work, provide a higher quantity of foods and better quality of life to other members in their societies, prevent themselves and people surrounding them from starving and from suffering from cold weather, win more respect and higher social status, and gradually become dominators of human society. Their societies turned out to be matriarchal societies.

Numerous classical literary masterpieces endorsed the truth that matriarchal societies existed in Chinese history, such as *Shanhai jing haiwai xijing* (山海經海外西經 The Classics of Mountains and Ocean: Overseas Western Classics), *Huainanzi dixingxun* (淮南子地形訓 Huainanzi: Geographical Guide), *Sanguo zhi wei zhi dongyi zhuan* (三國志魏志東夷傳 The Book of Three Kingdoms: Biography of Eastern Barbarians in Wei Zhi), *Hou han shu dongyi zhuan* (後漢書東夷傳 The Book of Eastern Han: Biography of Eastern Barbarians), and *Liang shu dongyi zhuan* (梁書東夷傳 The Book of Liang: Biography of Eastern Barbarians). In addition, anthropologists excavating graves of the 6,000- to 7,000-year-old matriarchal society in Liu Town, Hua County, Shanxi Province (陝西省華縣柳鎮), found stone spindles and knives made of clams or mule bones in women's tombs only. Around 1952, anthropologists doing field work on the 6,000 to 7,000-year-old *panpo* (半坡 Half-Hill) matriarchal village discovered matriarchal tribes' principle food, grains, as well as pitchforks, choppers, and shovels made of stone in women's crypts. Etymologically speaking, many Chinese surnames currently include the radical (部首) or word root (字根) of "nǚ" (女 women), which show their matriarchal ancestry because descendants had mothers' surnames, not fathers' surnames, in matriarchal tribes.

In matriarchal China, women suffered from no gender oppression. They enjoyed superior power over men. They faced no glass ceiling. Women's empowerment and gender equality were out of the question for women in Chinese matriarchy. Mothers were household heads, and they left properties to daughters only. Fathers, sons, uncles, and grandfathers were insignificant and powerless in matriarchal systems. Although the mainstream of current Chinese social systems is patriarchal, some Chinese minorities never stopped the centuries-old tradition of matriarchal gender practice even into the twenty-first century. The gender practice of the Mosuo (摩梭) tribe in Yunnan and some Taiwanese aboriginal tribes, such as the Ami tribe (阿美族), the Beinan tribe (卑南族), and so forth, still belong to matriarchal systems now.

With reference to changes of marital systems in matriarchal societies, men of all different ages or generations were originally married to women of all ages and generations. This type of promiscuous marriage (亂婚制) was practiced by Yuanmo people (元謀人) 2.5 million years ago, Lantian people (藍田人) 700,000 to 800,000 years ago, and Beijing ape-men (北京猿人) 400,000 to 500,000 years ago. This marital system was seen even during the Western Han Dynasty. Wang Zhaojun (王昭君), for instance, was married to the Huhanye Chanyu (呼韓邪單于) of Xiongnu (匈奴) by the Yuan Emperor of Han (漢元帝) and then married to Fujulei Chanyu, who was Huhanye Chanyu's biological son and her stepson, after Huhanye Chanyu's death according to the political order from the Cheng Emperor of Han (漢成帝): "cong hu su" (從胡俗 following the levirate custom of Hu).³

Later on, differences in generations and ages were taken into consideration, and people married others of the same generation or similar ages only. Brothers married sisters, no longer mothers, daughters, or grandmothers, because brothers belong to the same generation as sisters but not as mothers, daughters, or grandmothers. Sisters shared brothers as their husbands in common. Brothers shared sisters as their wives in common. Children shared all the men of the same generation as their fathers in common. Husbands and wives shared the same parents and heritage. This sort of consanguineous marriage (血婚制) is indirectly proven by the ancient Chinese mythological legend of Fuxi (伏羲) and Nüwa's (女媧) brother-sister endogamy (兄妹族內婚). In the circumstances, uncles and fathers were the same because they were men who belonged to the same generation, and mothers and aunts were the same because they were women of the same generation. Even nowadays, some aboriginal tribes in Yunnan (雲南) or northeastern China show no differences when they call their mothers and aunts.

Since children shared all the men of the same generation as their fathers in common in the consanguineous marital system, they were unable to identify which men were their biological fathers, but they could easily and clearly specify which women were their biological mothers. Thus, all the children in matriarchal societies belonged to mothers, not fathers. The expression "zhi qi mu buzhi qi fu" (知其母不知其父 knowing mothers but not recognizing fathers) repetitively appeared in various classical Chinese literary records which touched upon ancient Chinese matriarchy, such as *Shangjun shu kaisi pian* (商君書開塞篇 The Book of the King of Shang: The Essay of Expanding the Fortress), *Zhuangzi Daozhi* (莊子盜跖 Zhuangzi: Biography of Daozhi), and *Baihu tong* (白虎通 The Story of the White Tiger). Numberless Chinese mythological tales matched the tradition of "knowing mothers but not recognizing fathers" in consanguineous endogamy, such as the story of Jiandi (簡狄), the woman who swallowed a swallow's egg and gave birth to the Shang (商) Dynasty's first leader, Qi (契), as well as the legend of Jiangyuan (姜原), the woman who became pregnant and gave birth to the Zhou (周) Dynasty's initiator, Qi (棄), after she curiously compared her foot with a giant footprint on the ground. Matriarchy does not disappear in Chinese-speaking areas; for instance, the Mosuo (摩梭) tribe in Yunnan Province is currently regarded as a matriarchal society.⁴

The consanguineous marital system was replaced by the ex-clan marital system (族外婚制) and incest taboo later on, and people started to choose spouses from candidates who did not have the same surname or were not paternal relatives. Stories about people who married maternal cousins who did not share the same surname were not unheard of even in the early Republican era or early twentieth century. Cao Xueqin's (曹雪芹) well-anthologized masterpiece *Hung lou meng* The Story of Stones/石頭記 (紅樓夢 The Dream of the Red Chamber) featured the male protagonist's romantic relations with two of his maternal cousins in the Qing Dynasty. Anthropologists observing jade ornaments, which seemed to be tokens of marital promise with people outside of the same family line, in vaults believed that exogamy took place in Lingjiatan (凌家灘) around 5,000 years ago.⁵

Patriarchy and dynasties in Chinese history

Patriarchy jockeyed and won the position of power over matriarchy after men, whose physical sizes and energies are greater than women's, joined women's work of agriculture and pasturage. The patriarchal system collaborated with the polygamous marital system in the mainstream of Chinese history. The marital system began to grant superior authority and higher status to wives and ranked concubines or minor mistresses lower than wives. For instance, Yao (堯) married his two daughters, E Huang (娥皇) and Nüying (女英), to Shun (舜). E Huang was Shun's wife with higher status, but her younger sister, Nüying, was Shun's lower-rank spouse or concubine, not ranked as Shun's wife. However, men's polygamous ecstasy in patriarchy was not hindered even after concubines or mistresses were ranked lower than wives. As a matter of fact, patriarchy strengthened men's sexual pleasure with multiple women who shared the same husband and guaranteed men's powerful positions in polygamy. Michel Foucault⁶ highlighted the Chinese patriarchal legitimization of men's sexual pleasure in polygyny.⁷ Anthropologists' field studies of the 4,000- to 5,000-year-old graves in Mount Long (龍山) found that the husband's corpse was usually placed at the center while his wife's corpse and all of his concubines' corpses seemed to respectfully face and surround him.⁸ This anthropological evidence verified that polygyny in patriarchal China expected wives and concubines to be submissive to the husband whom they shared.

Male political leaders established dynasties in the Chinese patriarchal system. Except for the Tang Dynasty, Chinese dynasties never had any female emperors. Apart from the Tang Dynasty, almost every Chinese dynasty had serious oppression of women under patriarchy—especially the strong Confucian impacts in the Han, Song, and Ming Dynasties. Although this does not prove that no woman in the Tang Dynasty suffered from gender inequality, the overall improvements of women's rights seems to have been better in the Tang Dynasty than other dynasties. This is why the Tang Dynasty may be seen as an influential period of Chinese women's rights and empowerment. The later part of this introduction will touch upon gender practice of women's rights in the Tang Dynasty. Before the journey to explore the Tang Dynasty, Table I.1 presents a brief list to help readers who are unfamiliar with Chinese dynasties.

Table I.1 Chinese dynastic periods

Dynasty		Time period
Xia 夏		21–16 centuries BC
Shang 商		16–11 centuries BC
Western Zhou 西周		11 century BC–770 BC
Eastern Zhou 東周	Spring-and-Autumn Era 春秋	770–476 BC
	Era of Warring States 戰國	475–221 BC
Qin 秦		221–207 BC
Han 漢	Western Han 西漢	206 BC–AD 24
	Eastern Han 東漢	AD 25–220
Era of Three Kingdoms 三國		220–265
Jin 晉	Western Jin 西晉	265–316
	Eastern Jin 東晉	317–420
South-and-North Dynasties 南北朝		430–589
Sui 隋		581–618
Tang 唐		618–907
Five Dynasties 五代		907–960
Liao 遼		916–1125
Song 宋		960–1275
Jin 金		1115–1234
Yuan 元		1271–1368
Ming 明		1368–1644
Qing 清		1644–1911
Republic of China		1911–present
People's Republic of China		1921–present

Women's rights and social status in the Tang Dynasty

There may have been no perfect dynasty throughout Chinese history, and it is certainly unconvincing to claim that every woman in the Tang Dynasty was happy; however, the Tang Dynasty seems to have been more feminist and open-minded than other dynasties. Education is sometimes regarded as one of the most influential ways to help underdogs leave unhappy lifestyles and move up to a higher quality of living standards. Women in the Tang Dynasty, on the average, had better opportunities to receive a higher education or at least to avoid illiteracy than women in other dynasties. For instance, Song Juoxin (宋若莘) and Song Juozhao's (宋若昭) *Nü lunyü* (女論語 Confucian Analects for Women) was widely read by women at that time, and the large number of their female readers verifies that the female literacy rate was not low during the Tang Dynasty.⁹ In fact, the increase in the number of books on moral restrictions in the Tang Dynasty was more efficient than that in other dynasties. This also indicates that the literacy rate in the Tang Dynasty was not poor. Other evidence is Bai Juyi's (白居易) criterion to revise his poems. He wanted his poetry to be readable for ordinary women and children whom he randomly found on streets; therefore, the number of literate women and children at that time must have been large enough for Bai Juyi to aspire to this goal; the