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Women and Gender in Late Imperial and Republican China: Problems and Promise of Recent Western Historiography

AMY THOMAS

THE SOCIAL HISTORY of late imperial and early twentieth-century Chinese women has recently entered a new era.¹ From the 1970s until the late 1980s, the dominant Western scholarship of this "subfield" seems to have undergone two recognizable phases. In the early 1970s, liberal feminist investigations into Chinese women's history tended to focus on early twentieth-century elite "thought" and attitudes towards "the woman question," with special emphasis on the quintessentially "liberal" May Fourth (1919) era.² By the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was a shift to a more (critical) Marxist focus on how social institutions and economic processes structured the lives and delimited the political agency of twentieth-century Chinese peasant women. Kay Ann Johnson demonstrated how the efficacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in pursuing its agenda of "social equality" for women was undermined by its larger social program: the CCP's continuing investment in the patriarchal and patrilocal family structure and by its commitment to a Engelsian (rather than Levi-Straussian) Marxist analysis—predisposed cadre to ignore the radical potential of young peasant women. Emily Honig, looking at mobilization and self-understandings of female textile workers in early twentieth-century China, showed how their hierarchical and horizontal affiliations based on native place rendered understandings of "common class interests" less salient and made these women difficult to mobilize. And Judith Stacey, as a non-China specialist, grandly brought a "feminist materialist" analysis to bear on the "problem," arguing that the reorganization of "patriarchy" was a necessary precondition for the socialist revolution led by the Chinese Communist Party.³

Since the late 1980s, a new kind of (political) split has surfaced in this small academic community. Just as a new group of scholars emerged from long train-

ing seeking to render visible previously ignored or “silenced” women in late imperial China and to debunk historical analysis based on a framework of rigid and totalizing “patriarchy,” another set of scholars, coming generally from literature and greatly influenced by post-structuralism, began to use an entirely new set of theoretical tools (most notably an understanding of “gender” as a “knowledge construct”) to ask different kinds of historical questions. For the sake of brevity, I will call participants in the first project “historians of Chinese women” and those in the latter “historians of Chinese gender.”⁴ In this article, I will briefly review some of the more interesting work done by “historians of women,” critically examine the contributions “historians of gender” can make to our understanding of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century China by focusing largely on a seminal work, and conclude by offering some thoughts on the integration of the two trends.⁵

History of Chinese Women

One strand of scholarship on imperial Chinese women's history has emerged from a search for “women's culture” and “women's voices,” for both the basis and articulated understanding of shared, common experiences of women. The common focus is the “unprecedented” emergence of “women's literary culture” of the late imperial period, beginning in the seventeenth century, with its formation of networks of literary women, the education of daughters to participate in a larger literary culture, women's poetry anthologizing, editing and publishing of collected writings, the production of critical writings referring to this poetry and the collaboration of women and men on literary projects.⁶ Versions or pieces of some of this new scholarship have recently been published in a special issue of *Late Imperial China*. While sharing some problematic assumptions, this new focus has begun to shift the framework in which late imperial “orthodox” culture is understood and has also made both necessary and possible new understandings of twentieth-century Chinese women's history.

Using previous models of the social interactions of literary women in late imperial China as foils, Ellen Widmer presents an alternative view of the relational circumstances under which gentry women read, wrote and painted.⁷ Tracing the elusive figure of Xiaoqing, a famed sixteenth-century female writer who was supposedly driven to suicide by a hostile first wife and absence of romanticism, Widmer shows how her writings served as a focus for Ming loyalist writers and for literary criticism of women writers. She finds that the loose network of lower Yangzi delta women during the Ming-Qing transition, evidenced in the epistolary relations preserved in collections of *Modern Letters*, was neither male-centered like the poetry circle of Yuan Mei nor confined to the family

courtyard as was the *Haitang shishe* depicted in *Honglou meng* (*Dream of the Red Chamber*). The letters of these women reflected the social and political circumstances in which they lived. Uprooted and separated from stable communities, linked to men with Ming loyalist sentiments, courtesans, wives and concubines wrote and painted for various reasons. The increased commercialization of the late Ming with its proliferation of luxury trades and commodities not only recast female literary capability and talent as "negotiable" cultural resources in the "market of women" but also created a market for their writings and paintings, consisting of both men and women, that these female artists sought to enter.⁸ Perhaps more importantly, poems, paintings, and letters became both a medium for, and the basis of, crucial relationships of mutual support between women that occasionally even crossed boundaries of social class.⁹

Dorothy Ko focuses on the emergence of a new theory and practice of women's education in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which challenged the orthodox formulation that "only when a female is without talent can she be virtuous" (*nuzi wu cai bian shi de*).¹⁰ Such education along a mother-daughter axis operated on the premise that talent and virtue were compatible and even mutually reinforcing female characteristics. Looking at the arguments developed by women vindicating their "enlightenment," and the approaches taken by mothers and aunts as educators, Ko attempts to document the germs of a "women's culture" inside gentry households in seventeenth and eighteenth century Jiangnan through poetry and writings by women. Although she makes unnecessarily combative assertions regarding how elite women experienced gender relations and processes of the late imperial period, she contributes a great deal by showing how debate over women's education was joined, and how it served as a focal point in negotiations over boundaries between public and private space, or between "male" and "female" domains."

As "moral guardian of the inner quarters," women derived power, comfort and self-esteem through the respect accorded to them as mothers and educators of infants. This respect not only motivated women to conform to the norms of female virtue, but celebration of wifely and motherly duties also ironically served as the wellspring of poetic creativity for many erudite Ming-Qing women. For these women, talent and virtue were indeed mutually reinforcing. And such an understanding also informed one approach to the education of daughters, the use of poetry as well as moral precepts by mothers to cultivate virtue in their daughters; with the other identifiable approach, mothers who saw poetry as an end in itself used verses, the classics and histories as teaching materials, as well as drilling their daughters extensively in rhythmic and poetic allusions. And literary mothers such as Shang Jinglan consciously began to situate themselves

and their daughters within an unbroken tradition of women artists. So, while distinguishable from men's education both by its private and domestic nature and by its functional differentiation along class lines, elite women's education centered in the inner chambers afforded some women both the spatial site and social relations conducive to the discovery of themselves as self-conscious artists and historical agents. Surprisingly, however, Ko's perhaps ideologically motivated focus on mother-daughter relations obscures the overlapping relationships which characterized the Confucian family, especially the relations between brother and sister and mother and son, that may have been incubated within the early years of childhood education in the "inner chambers."

Susan Mann's contextualization of Zhang Xuecheng's "Fuxue" in the controversies that sharply divided the literati class of the late eighteenth century makes possible a historically nuanced and rich understanding of Zhang's views on women's literary culture.¹² Mann argues that Zhang, an elite Confucian scholar-official, sought to use women's education as a metaphor and as a linguistic weapon in debates only tangentially related to women. His main concerns included classical revival and the correct or orthodox interpretation of classical texts, the meaning and purpose of writing itself, especially poetry writing, and the legitimacy of Yuan Mei's poetry circle and his literary theories. However, she argues that the text of "Fuxue" is important, both for historians and for Zhang's female contemporaries, as a historicization of linkages between "women's learning" and "culture" and as a documentary record of erudite women in Chinese history.

The dissipation of the classical ideal idealized by Zhang led him to identify women, cloistered in the domestic realm, as the only possible agents of the recovery of the *Dao* through writing. For Zhang, if writing was to be an expression of the *Dao*, then women's writing must express women's *Dao* (*fu Dao*), not men's.¹³ Women's written *Dao* must give expression not to the principles of the polity and community, but to the "Four Womanly Attributes" of the *Liji* (*Analects*) and *Shijing* (Book of Poetry) summed up in the writings of Ban Zhao and cultivated in the domestic, as opposed to public, realm (i.e. *nei*/inner as opposed to *wai*/outer).¹⁴ Zhang took Ban (the first recognized Chinese female scholar) and her writings as his normative ideal in his attack against the writings of Yuan Mei's female entourage. The intellectual "boundary-crossing" of literate women into the public world, while acceptable under conditions prevailing in the classical period, led to an alienation of women's literary culture from its classical roots, with the creation of the Palace Music School in the Tang marking a historical turning point: this institution provided the setting in which women were transformed from literary subjects into the objects of male

(official) desire. The Manchu replacement of female entertainers in the Palace Music School by eunuchs, however, created anew the necessary conditions (that is, the complete and formal cloistering of women) for the full recovery of the womanly *Dao*. Zhang argues that under such historical circumstances, the mixed poetry circles encouraged by Yuan Mei were not only an historical anachronism but a travesty. What we learn from Mann is that in 1798, Zhang Xuecheng suggested that "women's learning" had classical precedents, provided a moral and philosophical justification for the *privileging* of a properly situated women's education, and used this idealized classical model to vehemently attack the activities of contemporary "loose" (i.e. literary) women. Ultimately arguing that literary women used Zhang's argument as a foil against which to posit their own historical accounts of female "culture" and female "voices," she fails to situate her textual analysis in a broader context of mid-Qing sexual politics.

In short, the works of Widmer, Ko, and Mann, while contributing substantially to our knowledge of Chinese women's history, are inadequate to the task of shaping a new generation of historiography because of their disproportionate reliance on an older and somewhat limiting feminist theoretical project, that of "recreating" an autonomous sphere of "women's culture." These scholars seek primarily to perform an additive function, "to make the invisible visible" and the silent audible. In doing so, they limit themselves to the representations of formal, structured, and sophisticated voices of elite women. They have yet to ask how the addition of these previously submerged voices and presences challenges and alters the "big picture" and our understanding of broader historical events and their meanings.¹⁵

Within this collection, however, there is one work that uses a different theoretical approach. Maureen Robertson looks both at how language constructs "the feminine" in discourses of sexuality and desire and how language and the "feminine" voice also becomes a site of resistance.¹⁶ Looking at constructions of gendered subjects in lyric poetry by women in medieval and late imperial China, she is interested primarily not in looking at "women's writing" per se, but in exploring the ways in which feminine voices are produced. She argues that the feminine subjects created for Chinese lyric poetry in the Tang were essentially products of Confucian "gender ideology," with the equation of chastity with silence, a doctrine of separate spheres and the identification of women with the body and sexuality through representations designed to answer the desires of literati poets for pleasure or comfort. However, some women writers in the Ming-Qing period used distinct forms of negotiation in efforts to decenter the masculinized language and voices of literati poetry, to produce feminine voices expressive of their own concerns, and to shape alternatives to simple interpola-

tion within the narrow scope of the literati-feminine.¹⁷ She demonstrates convincingly how this negotiation takes four forms for different female poets: Pang Wan and Gu Ruopu question the literati language by rewriting “image codes”; Chen Huanyong neutralizes the “gaze,” restructuring it to the pleasure of the woman, in the boudoir scenario; Wang Hui and Gu Ruopu mark out the new topical territory of relationships with children or other women, while also reworking conventional literary topical genres of travel poetry and the *dao wang*; and Chai Jingyi uses an admixture of both literati-feminine and literati-masculine voices from both friendship poetry and love poetry to express “friendship.” However, Robertson is curiously unwilling to explore further such ambiguous voicing. We need to ask what these friendship/love poems convey about not only the ambiguities of “voicing” but perhaps also about the ambiguities of the relationships themselves. The contribution of Robertson’s approach, however, for those studying women, gender, and sexual politics in the imperial period, lies in her theoretical self-reflexivity and her interest in the constituting powers of “discourse” as well as a recognition of the need to historicize such formations.

While these scholarly projects hinted at in this special volume are worthwhile, long overdue, and crucially important for development of the “subfield” of Chinese gender and women’s history, most seem to adhere to a set of methodological assumptions that threaten to keep imperial women’s historiography in the theoretical “backwaters.” Three of the most important are: 1) “women’s history” is comprehensible in isolation from histor[ies] of “the body,” gendering processes, and sexuality; 2) gentry women should be privileged as female subjects, and 3) language and texts are transparent. As early as 1991, however, publication of new kinds of work on Chinese women’s history in *Genders* suggested a new theoretical direction for those interested in understanding women and gender politics in late nineteenth and early twentieth Chinese history.¹⁸

History of Gender — The Second Strand

Tani Barlow’s deconstruction of “orthodox” discourses and attention to the historical genealogy of the shifting linguistic signs that shaped subject positions available to Chinese women has contributed to an exciting rethinking of Chinese women’s history.¹⁹ She argues that the Chinese intellectuals’ appropriation of the Western imperialists’ sex binary as linguistic weapon against Confucian patrilinealism made it possible for the Communist Chinese Party, in their later nativist resurrection of traditional *funu* as foundational sign for a newly universalized, biologized and essentialized “woman,” to use peasant women’s bodies as both space of, and material for, modernization.²⁰ This genealogy relies heavily on the distinction between the role-specific subjectivities “assigned” to late im-

perial women and the universalized and biologically essentialized sign of the "interim woman" deployed by Shanghai *zhishi fenzi* ("intelligentsia").¹¹ Her genealogy, however, requires a reading of three "discrete" elite male-dominated, i.e. "orthodox," narratives, however, that is less than obvious. It is important to think about the possibilities just in discourse analysis this approach forecloses, as well as problems of assuming their discreteness and internal continuity/consistency. All three were affiliated with a different institutional form of the state and, even as they served as sites of contestation, did so in ways that were easily contained.¹² I will, however, discuss here only the problems of her interpretation in light of potentially contradictory historical work of other scholars and then move to a discussion of the implications of such an approach to "reading" and understanding gender, the category of "woman," and women's history.

Barlow argues that the late imperial orthodox narrative, through *yin/yang* (as opposed to "gender") differentiation, generated a proliferation of relational, bound, unequal dyads: ruler/subject, husband/wife, father/son, etc.¹³ The females within these relations achieved social existence not through identification with a transcendent agent called "woman," but through the fulfillment of socially designated roles with specific protocols. Difference was designated not biologically but relationally, and "gender proper" did not exist because identity "was in no sense a property of bodies or something originally existing in human bodies" but rather "the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations" through deployment of "complex political technologies" (p. 136). Drawing on Cowie's feminist reworking of Levi-Straussian kinship theory, Barlow links her discourse analysis to kinship practices in the late imperial period, arguing that the patrilineal and patrilocal "exchange" of actual women produced not the "sign woman," "but a profusion of signs with one thing in common: though they all accommodated 'real' women, none could be reduced to a pre-discursive category 'woman.'" Such an interpretation of late imperial orthodox discourse and kinship practices rests on a particular reading of the social and medical Confucian texts of Chen Hongmou and Li Shizhen, two mid-Qing Confucian scholars.

Chen's "Inherited guide for educating women," with his categorizations of women within the patrilineal sublineage group of the *jia*, provides a key stepping stone for Barlow's genealogy. One part of the pivotal paragraph of Chen's piece merits reiteration:

When *fu* [persons, sages, women of rank] are in the *jia* [lineage unit], they are *nu* [female, woman, daughter]; when they marry, they are *fu* [wives], and when they bear children they are *mu* [mothers].¹⁴

Barlow argues that the very specificity of Chen's text concerning *funu* (women of rank) *forecloses a general category of "generic woman"*²⁵: here *funu* cannot transcend the female subjects within social categories, i.e. daughters, wives and mothers, that Chen wants to guide to virtue. Chen sees the women's quarters as the primary site of civilizing and of engendering virtue, and with this reading, women can enact virtuous behavior only as subjects of the *jia*. Having "established" the absence of a hegemonic "sign woman" in the late imperial period, Barlow turns to Li Shizhen's *Materia Medica* to demonstrate a "general instability of bodies" and the non-identification of "gender" with "body."

While Barlow reads Chen Hongmou as the quintessential late imperial Confucian thinker who sees women only in the *jia*-situated roles that they perform, William Rowe sees Chen as a man of his early modern times whose main aim was the reestablishment and maintenance of social roles *based on gender distinctions*.²⁶ The imposition of order on social disorder was an important source of concern for Chen and his contemporaries, and they commonly invoked the charge of blurring gender distinctions (*nannu wubie*) to condemn unorthodox religious celebrations (Chen Hongmou) or to attack such "sexually licentious" poets as Yuan Mei (Zhang Xuecheng). Rowe points out that *bie* in this sense referred to both physical segregation of men and women in daily life and more fundamentally to role segregation: however, while the multiple roles of women were diffused within "encompassing hierarchies," segregation was not arbitrary and required very clear physical distinctions between "male" and "female" beings.²⁷

And Chen's moral discourse is certainly imbued with a concept of "human nature" (*ren zhi xing*): the notion of "feminine personality" or "nature" also informed Chen's impassioned writings on the need for female literary education. While he makes no explicit reference to biological origins of difference, Chen, like his late imperial contemporaries, feels comfortable *generalizing* about the personality characteristics that women as a (sex-based) group share: besides being temperamentally and socially naive, women have a "natural instinct" for compassion (*ce*), and while women have a degree of native intellectual ability, it is cruder and less capable of nuanced understanding than that of men.²⁸ Rowe argues that such essentialist assumptions of female inferiority are entirely consistent with neo-Confucian tendencies to "orientalize" women. The protocols that Barlow identifies in the late imperial Confucian orthodoxy, then, would seem to be not simply kin-specific or *jia*-relational, but also, inextricably, related to identification of women as part of some type of sexual binary.

Barlow's understanding of the *yin/yang* construct, which she distinguishes from its totalistic and ontologically binaried stereotype in the minds of most

Westerners, lies at the crux of her argument. However, she deploys "gender" inconsistently, asserting as she does first that "gendering" proceeded here as a deeply cosmological activity, "whereby differential relations on the analogy of *yin/yang* established and positioned subjects normatively *on the primary site(s) of the jia*, in constantly reinscribed taxonomies, each of which included protocols of behavior."²⁹ However, later she contends that what "appears" to be "gender" are only differentiated positions produced by the forces of *yin* and *yang*. The productive potential of these forces seems nearly infinite: they can signify logical relationships, practical forces, "designations for the polar aspects of the effects" as well as powers inscribing hierarchy.³⁰ She suggests that "gender" was produced in late imperial China by *yin/yang* forces, not as a *place* (as in the bourgeois West), *essence*, nor as *symbolic* expression of fecundity or fertility, but as only one axis of identification among many. The sets of relationships reinscribed by the "Three Bonds" (*sangang*) encapsulated, then, the interpenetrating domains of patrilineal kinship which Barlow argues subordinated gender to kin categories: gender by itself could not define positions within the family or in society. Yet as Ann Anagnost perceptively argues, while the *yin/yang* dualism was fluid and dynamic, and both "men" and "women" as physical beings contain a measure of both, women are still, in both orthodox culture and popular religious thought, associated with *yin* in ways that men are not.³¹

Barlow tries to preempt an identification of the "gendering" shaped by *yin/yang* interactions with biological or sexual identity in her reading of Li Shizhen's *Materia Medica*. Arguing that for Li Shizhen these forces produce "fathers" and "mothers," not "men" and "women": the "father/mother" relationship "possesses temporality exceeding that of the bodies of any person answering to "father" or mother" at a given moment."³² The crucial passage in *Materia Medica* is translated by Barlow as follows:

Normally *qian* and *ku* make fathers and mothers; but there are five kinds of non-males [*feinan*] who cannot become fathers and five kinds of non-females [*feinu*] who cannot become mothers.³³

Barlow claims that such cases of anomaly represent for Li the "general instability of bodies in most Confucian discourse": these defective bodies *forestall* production because they all present "unstable surfaces" and hence cannot be automatically "gendered." The "flexibility" of bodily surfaces shaped by *yin/yang*, then, foreclosed the possibility of primary gender identification through biology or sexual physicality.³⁴

By looking at mid-Qing dynasty social understandings of both female re-

production and sexual anomalies in popular medical texts, Charlotte Furth interrogates the same "orthodox" Confucian discourses of "the body."³⁵ Her operating theoretical framework of "gender," which does not assume biological or sexual dualism, is both more clear and less abstracted from "materiality" than is that of Barlow: "sex, referring to physical characteristics and biological capabilities, is distinguished from gender, which represents the cultural and social meaning attached to sexed bodies. The "sexual" becomes that aspect of gender which deals with culturally constructed biological and erotic meanings."³⁶

Biological anomalies, which range on a continuum from barrenness in the functionally normal to those with reproductively "useless bodies," provide a way for Furth to reconstruct the complexities in the relationship between "the sexual" and "the social" in establishing gender identity in late Ming China. She, like Barlow, focuses on Li Shizhen's passage in *Materia Medica* on sexual anomaly. However, interestingly enough, she translates *feinan* and *feinu* as "defective/false males" and "defective/false females" rather than "not-male" and "not-female." She also considers important the subsequent two sentences which she translates as:

Can it indeed be the case that defective males are deficient in *yang qi*, and that defective females are defective in *yin qi*? The false females are the corkscrew, the striped, the drum, the horned, and the pulse... The false males are the natural eunuch, the bullock [castrated], the leaky, the coward and the changling.³⁷

These latter two sentences are crucial omissions by Barlow, because such groupings allow us to understand how anomalies are categorized into two distinct and asymmetrically situated groups corresponding to "male" and "female." Four of the five terms applied to women, Furth points out, "refer to genital abnormalities of the sort that would make sexual penetration possible" whereas "false males" are generally "the functionally impotent, not the physically marred."³⁸ The only exception is the "changeling" (*er xing*), classed with the male and described as capable of bisexual roles: here sexual action or initiative becomes a male attribute, whereas "false females" only fail to achieve the proper role of women. Androgynous males and deficient females, as categories of sexual anomaly, were apparently defined by medical authorities in terms of their reproductive capabilities.³⁹

Medical literature on pregnancy, childbirth and infancy provides a dual model of Confucian gender relations. Furth carefully situates the medical tradition recorded in these texts as part of an eclectic system of thought that constantly borrowed and adapted grassroots ritual and medical ideas and then fed them,

often in altered form, back into a mainstream of popular culture. Drawing on a medicalized version of mutually reinforcing folk beliefs about blood, such texts articulated the symbolic underpinning of apparently contradictory social understandings of "women as women." Beliefs about the polluting power of menstrual blood and the blood of parturition informed the discursive stress on the dangerous nature of female reproductive powers, while blood was simultaneously represented as an "essential source of life and vitality whose inevitable loss condemned women to weakness and bodily vulnerability."⁴⁰ Labeling women as the "sickly sex," traditional Chinese medicine helped reproduce, by constantly creating anew, a model of gender relations that opened two possibilities of agency: negative sexual power and socially acceptable weakness.

Furth's examination of the textual treatment of infancy as part of a coherent medical discourse also allows her to nuance our understanding of the *yin/yang* dualism. According to her reading, only in dealing with the sexually immature bodies of children did medical experts portray the flow of the crucial biological essences of *qi* and blood, based on the *yin/yang* model, as complementary: between menarche and menopause, women were identified primarily as the "sickly sex," harder to cure than males and hence needing more prescriptions. Males as a *sex group*, however, were stronger because their vital sexual energies or essences could be controlled through abstinence and limitations of sexual emissions.

While Furth nuances the workings of *yin/yang* forces over a normal lifetime, Anagnost historicizes this cultural construct. While "originally" the construct may have emphasized complementarity, *yin/yang* becomes part of a normatively ordered hierarchy with its absorption into the Confucian "orthodoxy" that emerged in the rise of a stable centralized state in the Han dynasty (206 b.c. - 220 a.d.). *Yang* became not only more highly regarded but also morally superior. Grafted onto a theory of human nature, *yin* was then associated with emotions (i.e. a source of disorder) and the negative character trait of covetousness, while *yang* was identified with the rational faculties and humanity (*ren*), the highest of Confucian values. So while these linkages within the system of hierarchical relations that ordered household and state provided only one of many axes of hierarchical principles, the "association of women with *yin* always carried the potential to undermine any positional advantage [enjoyed by a woman]."⁴¹

While I believe that at some level, such depiction of change in the construction of the category of "woman" in "official" or dominant discourses is important, I hope that the above discussion suggests that even the late imperial "official"/elite discourse is not nearly as simple as Barlow's discussion implies. Al-

though imperial *funu* may not have been “universalized” and “biologized” in the same (Western) sense as *nuxing*, this category was much more stable and located in “the (heterosexual) body” than Barlow might admit. I think part of the problem here, as suggested in the discussion of Furth’s work, is that Barlow posits or assumes a “pure” and static “pre-imperialist,” “pre-scientific” Confucian discourse that does not try to rationalize and organize “bodies” on the assumption of heterosexuality and to meet the “needs” of procreation for the state.⁴² It seems to me that the weakness of Barlow’s argument arises first in an overly stark juxtaposition between “Confucian” thought and that of “colonized treaty port intellectuals.”⁴³ Most of the best intellectual historiography of the semi-colonial period (roughly 1860-1949) suggests multiplicity, interpenetration and overlap of “discourses.”⁴⁴ A more nuanced depiction would, then, illuminate “elective affinities” between the two and take seriously the extent to which the Chinese intellectuals of the treaty ports were responding to a *semicolonial* situation in which “the” West and Chinese history and culture provided multiple poles of orientation and negotiation.

Conclusion

Barlow’s explanatory framework requires *nuxing* to be quite different from the “traditional” *funu* because she is arguing that the Western universalized, essentialized and biologized linguistic binary provided the necessary framework of identity for early twentieth-century feminists to mobilize politically *as a sex*. But if *nuxing* is not so very different from *funu*, then her “linguistic determinism” becomes suspect. Discursive conditions are often not enough to explain social and political movements. And even if we grant the validity of her “genealogy,” which I think in general is very powerful, we need to develop her account of the relationship between language, knowledge and power, and acknowledge the importance of shared social location and experience in shaping early twentieth-century Chinese political (including feminist and anti-feminist) epistemologies and consequent political action.⁴⁵

This is precisely the point at which the work being done by “historians of Chinese women,” inasmuch as they have focused on shared experiences and social locations in shaping female gender identity, can help us go beyond “linguistic constructs” to a broader understanding of the sources of collective political identity and action. The first arguments for the political practice of feminism in the early twentieth century might be interpreted by a “historian of Chinese gender” as indication that a discourse constructing feminism had just emerged. This new discourse would be understood to have “shaped” women’s consciousness and set the parameters of their political choices for the future as

well as their representations of the past."⁴⁶ This kind of account emphasizes the "very real oppression that individuals experience as a result of language" not of their own making, and illuminates how the discourse of feminism "produced subject positions (identities) that women could then take up and act upon."⁴⁷

"Historians of Chinese women," on the other hand, might interpret this same "event" as evidence that certain women had given "a name to the experiences many of them were already having, identities they were already forming, political commitments they were already devising, years before the actual word 'feminism' was used."⁴⁸ The discussion among "historians of women" of the relationship between "female experience" and "feminism" raises the question: How does the politics of feminism (and resistance to feminism) grow out of the historical experiences or identities of women, "female thought, women's culture, female consciousness"?⁴⁹ While healthy skepticism toward the essentializing premises and categories of such an inquiry should be cultivated, it does seem as though shared experiences, whether of new kinds of educational opportunities or of the threat of footbinding, *whose "construction" was the source of much contestation in the early twentieth century*, motivated certain women to act collectively and politically *as women*.⁵⁰ And motivated some to identify themselves as feminists.

The tension and perhaps false opposition between these two perspectives is maintained in part by seemingly mutually exclusive definitions of "gender." "Historians of Chinese women" seem to rely upon a usage that refers to the social organization of the sexes: social meanings are understood to be constructed and variable, while sexual differences are understood as universal and unchanging, existing prior to and underlying the various social meanings underlying them. Their discussion of "gender roles" and "gender differences" maintains and depends upon an opposition between underlying "natural" sexual differences and constructed social meanings.

For "historians of gender," however, Joan Wallach Scott is generally heralded as the bearer of new theoretical possibilities from the world of post-structuralism. For Scott, "gender" does not "reflect or implement fixed and natural physical differences between men and women" but rather, is "*the knowledge that establishes meanings for bodily differences*."⁵¹ She argues that sexual differences themselves are not properly understood as the "natural" basis out of which people create social organization, but merely another form of social organization that is culturally and historically produced and *given meaning through gender*: "sexual difference is not... the originary cause from which social organization can ultimately be derived... [gender] is instead a variable social organization that itself must be explained."⁵² So gender, present in language and collectively created

and shared, precedes and constructs the meaning given to both "bodily" and sexual differences and the social experiences of these differences.⁵³ This seems to be a perhaps unnecessary radicalization of her position articulated in the early and seminal "Gender as a Useful Category of Historical Analysis" article. Here she proposes, much as Furth does, that "gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based upon perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power."⁵⁴ This seems to me to be the formula for success. If those interested in Chinese women's and gender history can resist reductionism and maintain the tension between what could be considered idealism and materialism, as "constructed" an opposition as this may be, then it may be possible to move toward a "unified field of analysis." "Experience," recast as produced by and mediated through multivalent and overlapping cultural forms, could be a "new" focus of inquiry. The historian might then ask how changes in the representation of cultural forms relates to changes in experiences that specific groups of people construct for themselves.⁵⁵

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NOTES

1. Chinese scholarship on women's history and gender in the People's Republic of China has, until recently, been notoriously impeded by official Party emphasis on Maoist class analysis, whether oriented towards relations or forces of production as the primary explanatory framework. For discussion of a nascent Chinese women's studies movement, see Mary Beth Norton, "Women's History in China Today: A Report from Peking University" *Journal of Women's History* 1 (1989): 108-114. Likewise, academic research on women's history and gender have only recently become legitimate and even marginally popular areas of study in Taiwan. However, this article will be limited to dealing with some changes in the kind of work being done by Western-trained scholars.
2. Roxanne Witke, "Transformation of Attitudes towards Women during the May Fourth Era of Modern China" Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1970; Charlotte Beahan, "Feminism and Nationalism in the Chinese Women's Press, 1902-1922" *Modern China* 1 (1975): 376-416. There actually was also a fairly large leftist literature on "Chinese women," generated both in and outside of the academy, which I will not deal with here. As a self-consciously political literature, it was remarkably uncritical and non-analytic, and has not survived the scrutiny of "the" academic community. However, this literature would provide an interesting window into the history of the "second wave" of U.S. feminism.
3. Kay Ann Johnson, *Women, The Family and Peasant Revolution in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Emily Honig, *Sisters and Strangers: Women in Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919-1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986); Judith Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). Margery Wolf, conversely, used anthropological field work in Taiwan to suggest that Chinese women in the twentieth

- century had significant access to power resources precisely by virtue of their creation of a "uterine family" after marriage, centered around mother-son relations — this model, while only weakly historicized, has strongly influenced historians and social scientists alike. Margery Wolf, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985). For critical appraisals of this literature beginning in the mid-1980s, see Emily Honig, "Socialist Revolution and Women's Liberation in China—A Review Article" *Journal of Asian Studies* 44 (1985): 329–336; Rubie Watson, "Women, Family and Revolutionary Change in China" *Peasant Studies* 13 (1985): 61–64; Maxine Molyneux, "Women in Contemporary China: Change and Continuity" *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28 (1986): 723–28; Suzanne Pepper, "Review Article: Liberation and Understanding: New Books on the Uncertain Status of Women in the Chinese Revolution" *China Quarterly* 108 (1986): 704–718.
4. I make these kinds of distinctions with some trepidation. While the second group uses a *distinct* definition of gender, the work of the first group is of course informed by an older notion of gender, i.e., as simply the "social organization of the relations between the sexes." I will discuss this problem, and its implications, more fully in the conclusion. That *Chineseness* delimits the field of scholarly inquiry is also an interesting problem which I unfortunately cannot address here. On the carving out of the "discipline" of sinology, see Tani Barlow, "Colonialism's Career in Postwar China Studies" *positions: east asia cultures critique* 1 (1993).
 5. While I will only thoroughly deal with one work of the latter group, fascinating examples of this kind of scholarship can be found in the following: Tani Barlow, ed., *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism* (London: Duke University Press, 1993); Angela Zito & Tani Barlow, eds., *Body, Subject & Power in China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) and the new journal *positions*.
 6. On the necessity of clarity and care in situating the Ming-Qing transition in larger historical analysis, see Kathryn Bernhardt, "A Ming-Qing Transition in Chinese Women's History" *UCLA* (1993).
 7. Ellen Widmer, "Xiaoqing's Literary Legacy and the Place of the Woman Writer in Later Imperial China" *Late Imperial China* 13 (1992): 111–155. See also her groundbreaking work on Chinese literary women, Ellen Widmer, "The Epistolary World of Female Talent in Seventeenth Century China" *Late Imperial China* 10 (1989): 1–43.
 8. See Susan Mann, "Grooming a Daughter for Marriage: Brides and Wives in the Mid-Ch'ing Period" in Patricia Buckley Ebrey & Rubie Watson, eds., *Marriage and Inequality in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991): 204–230.
 9. See Widmer's discussion of Liu Shi, Widmer, "The Epistolary World of Female Talent in Seventeenth-Century China," 14.
 10. Dorothy Ko, "Pursuing Talent and Virtue: Education and Women's Culture in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century China" *Late Imperial China* 13 (1992): 9–39. See also her dissertation, "Toward a Social History of Women in Seventeenth-Century China" Ph.D. diss. Stanford University, 1989.
 11. I think Ko spends too much time and energy combatting an invisible, and I would argue, already vanquished, demon. Few Western scholars interested in "doing Chinese women's history" (at least among those who have published within the past ten years!) have any interest in working from an assumption of an ahistorical, universalized and rigid framework called "patriarchy." Her "discovery" that "power relations are dynamic processes, hence multivalent, shifting and open to manipulation" is not as new as she would have us believe. Ko, "Pursuing Talent and Virtue," 13.
 12. Susan Mann, "Fuxue' (Women's Learning) by Zhang Xuecheng: China's First History of Women's Culture" *Late Imperial China* 13 (1992): 40–62.
 13. While this reading of *fu Dao* as "women's Way" is not uncontested, it provides an interesting contrast to Barlow's reading of late imperial discourses as less interested in male/female dif-

ferentiation than relational identities enacted through protocols. Barlow would probably read it as "wife's Way." See below.

14. I suspect that Mann, like Rowe, is using early modern European history as the "lens" through which she sees late imperial Chinese history. Her work, here less than elsewhere, recreates the "public/private" historical framework with which students of European women's history are forever plagued. See Mann, "Grooming a Daughter for Marriage," 205; William Rowe, "Women and the Family in Mid-Qing Social Thought: The Case of Chen Hongmou" *Late Imperial China* 13 (1992): 1-41. While *nei/wai* seems to have been a meaningful distinction, the implications of using "private/public" as a translation have not been adequately examined.
15. For example, what does it mean for our understanding of history to take seriously the role of women as alliance builders, building bridges both among and between competing lineages and contending schools of thought? See Benjamin Elman, *Classicism, Politics and Kinship: The Ch'ang-Chou School of New Text Confucianism in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
16. Maureen Robertson, "Voicing the Feminine: Constructions of the Gendered Subject in Lyric Poetry by Women of Medieval and Late Imperial China" *Late Imperial China* 13 (1992): 63-110.
17. Here Robertson focuses on women of the *shi* (the gentry-scholar elite) for the very good reason that their poetry has been preserved much more faithfully than has that of courtesans or concubines, a situation much different from that of the Tang, for example. However, she suggests in her conclusion that all sorts of women were participating in this "revolution" while failing to illuminate how the work of non-*shi* women may have differed in content or form from those of their contemporaries.
18. While I will focus on Tani Barlow's work, it is part of a larger body of scholarship that seems to have been influenced by a shift in feminist and social theory to textual deconstruction, "postcolonial criticism," and "postorientalist historiography." See, for example, Lydia Liu, "The Female Tradition in Modern Chinese Literature: Negotiating Feminisms Across East/West Boundaries" *Genders* 12 (1991): 22-44. See also recent articles in a new journal, *positions*, established in 1993 and edited by Tani Barlow, Donald Lowe, James Hevia and Chungmoo Choi.
19. Tani Barlow, "Theorizing Women: *Funu*, *Guojia*, *Jiating* [Chinese Women, Chinese State, Chinese Family]" *Genders* 10 (Spring 1991): 132-160.
20. Confucianism was an important political philosophy from the fifth and sixth centuries B.C. onward and was firmly established as the primary basis of state legitimation in the Han dynasty (206 B.C. - A.D. 220). As a system of ethics, education and statesmanship taught by Confucius and his disciples and later reproduced through the state examination system of bureaucratic selection, it stressed "love for humanity, ancestor worship, reverence for parents, and harmony in thought and conduct," expressed in the aphorisms of the "Three Bonds" (*sangang*) or "Five Human Relations" (*wulun*). This ideology, after established as orthodoxy, was subject to serious internal elite critique as early as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the dynastic structure was fatally weakened in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by internal disorder and Western imperial incursions (*neiluan waihuan*). The Republican period, between 1911 and 1949, is generally considered a period of civil strife and little political stability, with continuing economic and social disruptions fueling mass political movements and rewarding the political work of the Chinese Communist Party with a broad base of peasant support. The People's Republic of China was based on an Marxist-Leninist ideology, vitalized by the flexible practical theorizing of Mao Zedong Thought. See Franz Shurman, *Ideology and Organization in Communist China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).
21. By "interim" I mean the period between the 1890s, with its radical delegitimation of Confu-

- cianism as social/political philosophy, and the 1940s, when the CCP was marking out geographical and human territory and establishing sovereignty.
22. See Pierre Bourdieu & Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* trans. Richard Nice (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1977).
 23. In Chinese philosophy and religion, *yin* and *yang* represent two principles, *yin* connoting darkness, negativity, and femininity, and *yang* brightness, positivity, and masculinity.
 24. Chen Hongmou, "Jiaonu yigui" [Posthumous regulation on educating women], *Wuzhong yigui* [Five Posthumous Regulations], *Sibubeiyao* edition, vol. 3 (Zhonghua shujyu, n.d.), cited in Barlow, "Theorizing Women," 133.
 25. Barlow, "Theorizing Women," 133 (emphasis added).
 26. Rowe, "Women and the Family in Mid-Qing Social Thought."
 27. "Encompassing hierarchies" is a term William Rowe borrows from Romeyn Taylor to speak to Mann's emphasis (in her 1991 "Grooming a Daughter for Marriage" piece) on relatively co-equal complementary spheres within ranked hierarchy. See Rowe, "Women and the Family in Mid-Qing Social Thought." Taylor outlines the principles of encompassing hierarchies in imperial China as follows: "Chinese society in its entirety came to be hierarchically organized in an empire and this empire-society was understood by its members to be universal (*tian-xia*, "all under heaven"). No autonomous political domain, no body politic, no state was acknowledged to exist in contradistinction to society. But the social whole itself was encompassed by the pantheon of the official religion, and this in turn was encompassed by the cosmos. It was the task of the official religion to integrate these three domains, all of which were hierarchical in form, nested one within the other to constitute a hierarchy of hierarchies. They were understood to be the products of a continuous cosmogonic process of differentiation and interaction that proceeded from the transcendent One and were ultimately consubstantial and identical." Romeyn Taylor, "Chinese Hierarchy in Comparative Perspective" *Journal of Asian Studies* 48 (1989): 490-511, 491.
 28. Rowe, "Women and the Family in Mid-Qing Social Thought," 25.
 29. Barlow, "Theorizing Women," 135.
 30. *Ibid.*, 138.
 31. Ann Anagnost, "Transformations of Gender in Modern China" in Sandra Morgen, ed., *Gender and Anthropology: Critical Reviews for Research and Teaching* (Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association, 1989): 313-342.
 32. Barlow, "Theorizing Women," 135.
 33. *Ibid.*
 34. *Ibid.*
 35. See Charlotte Furth, "Blood, Body and Gender: Medical Images of the Female Condition in China, 1600-1850" *Chinese Science* 7 (1986): 43-66; Charlotte Furth, "Concepts of Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infancy in Ch'ing Dynasty China" *Journal of Asian Studies* 46 (1987): 7-32; Charlotte Furth, "Androgynous Males and Deficient Females: Biology and Gender Boundaries in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century China" *Late Imperial China* 9 (1988): 1-31.
 36. Furth, "Androgynous Males and Deficient Females," 2.
 37. Furth, "Androgynous Males and Deficient Females," 5. *Qi*, somewhat similar to the Western notion of ether, is usually translated as air, gas, breath, life-spirit, or essence.
 38. Furth, "Androgynous Males and Deficient Females," 5. It is interesting to note here that one young scholar working on Qing legal cases, Matt E. Sommer, argues that the Qing code is "patriarchally structured" to protect the sexual monopoly of the husband over his wife and that rape is defined by sexual penetration outside the conjugal unit. Matt Sommer, "The Price of Chastity: Widows, Sex, and Property in Qing" Ph.D. diss. University of California, Los Angeles, 1994.
 39. This argument would seem to be further buttressed by her observation that "false males"

- include no category of homosexual: as a kind of male dissipation, homosexuality was apparently not seen in late Ming society as incompatible with appropriate male sexuality. Furth, "Androgynous Males and Deficient Females," 7.
40. Furth, "Concepts of Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infancy in Ch'ing Dynasty China" 321.
 41. Anagnost, "Transformations of Gender in Modern China" in Sandra Morgen, ed., *Gender and Anthropology: Critical Reviews for Research and Teaching* (Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association, 1989): 313-342.
 42. On scholarship that would have begun to undermine such assumptions, see the journal *Chinese Science*. Confucian imperial discourse had its own internal dynamic(s), which Elman's work suggests contributed to an internal process of unravelling. See Benjamin Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Change in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge University Press, 1984).
 43. By "colonized treaty port intellectuals," Barlow seems to mean those intellectuals who lived in the treaty ports and privileged the norms and values of the Western colonialists in their cultural work.
 44. Benjamin Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964); Hao Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Arif Dirlik, *Origins of Chinese Communism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
 45. Danielle LaVaque argues for a "standpoint epistemology" that encompasses theory, social location and experience in her unpublished paper entitled "Toward a More Effective Use of Standpoint Epistemologies." The *locus classicus* on the now old discussion of feminist epistemology is Sandra Harding, "Feminism, Science, and the Anti-Enlightenment Critiques" in Linda Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York & London: Routledge, 1990): 83-106. See also Bat-Ami Bar On, "Marginality and Epistemic Privilege" in Linda Alcoff & Elizabeth Potter, eds., *Feminist Epistemologies* (New York: Routledge, 1993): 83-100; Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Sandra Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is 'Strong Objectivity'?" in Linda Alcoff & Elizabeth Potter, eds., *Feminist Epistemologies* (New York: Routledge, 1993): 49-82; Nancy Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism" in Sandra Harding & Merrill Hintikka, eds., *Discovering Reality* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983): 283-310; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990). I am less interested in normative arguments for a "standpoint epistemology" than I am in historical investigations into knowledge formations, gender and politics using feminist epistemologies as a framework.
 46. Louise Newman, "Critical Theory and the History of Women: What's at Stake in Deconstructing Women's History" *Journal of Women's History* 2 (1991): 59-68, 65.
 47. Ibid.
 48. Newman, "Critical Theory and the History of Women," 64.
 49. On this problem, see especially Linda Gordon, "What's New in Women's History" in Teresa de Lauretis, ed., *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986): 1-30.
 50. For a radical critique of "experience," see Joan Scott, "Experience" in Judith Butler & Joan Scott, eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992): 22-40. She argues that "experience is not seen as the objective circumstances that condition identity... identity is not an objectively determined sense of self defined by needs and interests. Politics is not the collective coming to consciousness of similarly situated individual subjects," *Gender and the Politics of History*, 5.
 51. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 2.

52. Ibid.
53. I am greatly indebted, again, to Louise Newman's piece, "Critical Theory and the History of Women," 61-64.
54. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 42 (emphasis added).
55. Newman, "Critical Theory and the History of Women," 67.

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