

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Huang Xingtao 黄兴涛, “Ta” zi de wenhua shi “她”字的文化史 [The Cultural History of the Chinese Character “ta” (the third person feminine pronoun)]. Fuzhou: Fujian Jiaoyu Chubanshe. 2009.

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In written Chinese, in contrast to English, the third-person feminine pronoun—the equivalent of “she”—was completely absent until the early twentieth century. In the late 1910s, when the voices of women’s liberation rang out in China, the Chinese character *ta* 她, for the third-person feminine singular pronoun, was invented. The invention and dissemination of the word *ta* not only reflected an ideological gendering of the Chinese script but also provoked heated academic and popular debates well into the 1930s. Thus, the history of *ta* provides a prism through which to explore modern Chinese history. Huang Xingtao’s “*Ta*” *zi de wenhua shi* is the first major work to survey the term’s creation.

Huang’s eight-chapter monograph provides an ambitious and informed examination of how *ta* was invented and promoted in relation to the gender equality movement, the politics of neologism, and other domestic elements and international catalysts. Huang draws on diverse sources, including monographs, journals, textbooks, and dictionaries published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His use of textbooks deserves particular mention as his analysis of these sources beautifully illustrates how both the modern education system and linguistic changes contributed to the spread of the third-person feminine pronoun among a wider audience. His interviews with eight historians who experienced the popularization of *ta* as youths in the 1930s and 1940s also provide a persuasive history of this phenomenon.

In traditional Chinese, the third-person pronoun had no gender distinction and could refer to “he,” “she,” or “it.” This became problematic for some Chinese scholars and Westerners in the mid-nineteenth century when they encountered the question of how to render “she.” As early as

the 1860s, missionaries such as Robert Morrison raised it as a problem but failed to reach a widely acceptable resolution. According to Huang, Guo Qisheng, a Chinese scholar, provided the first creative and influential answer to the question. While writing a book on English grammar in 1878, Guo Zansheng noted the lack of a third-person feminine pronoun in Chinese and imaginatively solved the issue by rendering the English pronoun “she” into *yi* 伊, a word once used to refer to the third person.

This use of *yi* did not receive much attention until the late 1910s, when the issue of women’s liberation came to the attention of Chinese intellectuals. The writer Ye Shengtao was among the first intellectuals to intentionally refer to women as *yi* to signify their gender equality by rendering them linguistically distinct. It was through that process that Liu Bannong, a poet and linguist, first used *ta* in its modern sense after refining Kang Baiqing’s use of the term in his short stories and poems as the third-person feminine pronoun. Huang attributes its subsequent wide use to the changes that followed the coeducation system in the late 1910s.

Huang observes that, because of the new term’s invention, the meaning of the traditional *ta* 他 was narrowed down to refer exclusively to the masculine third person. By the 1920s, a new pronoun system emerged consisting of three different words, with *ta* 他, *ta* 她, and *ta* 它 referring to the masculine, feminine, and neutral third person, respectively. Gradually, writers, poets, and journalists adopted the new pronouns and introduced them to a wider audience. This was accomplished primarily through two channels: textbooks and dictionaries published in the 1920s and 1930s. Although some scholars proposed alternative solutions to the problem of the third-person feminine pronoun, *ta* 她 eventually won out. Huang explains that the *ta* consensus emerged as the result of the vernacular language movement in the 1920s that fundamentally reshaped modern written Chinese.

The author’s analysis of the resistance to *ta* focuses on the feminist rejection of the term in the 1920s and 1930s. For opponents of *ta*, the creation of gendered pronouns further emphasized the division between men and women and, as a result, worked against gender equality. Some feminists pointed to the contradictions within the new word *ta*, as its feminine radical was usually negatively connoted in classical Chinese. Other opponents critiqued *ta* as a blind Eurocentric imitation: the famous historian Chen Yinke argued that the Chinese writing

system had its own tradition, and it was wrong to create a word for the third-person pronoun simply to follow the English model (137–139).

Huang also reveals that, although mounting nationalist sensibilities fueled by the anti-Japanese movement promoted native cultural traditions and, as a result, contributed to the opposition of *ta*, an imitation of the Western third-person pronoun, in the 1930s, *ta* continued to gain momentum in the academy and the public sphere. Due to the above oppositions, some journals refused submissions that used *ta* rather than *yi* (93–94). Ultimately, these negative reactions were unsuccessful in deterring writers, poets, and dramatists—such as Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, and others—from promoting and accepting *ta* as the third-person feminine pronoun.

In the concluding section of the book, Huang links the cultural history of *ta* to the broader issue of Western cultural hegemony in modern Chinese history. In contrast to some current scholars who treat Chinese intellectuals as passive receptacles of Western ideas, Huang argues for a recognition of agency in his analysis of twentieth-century Chinese scholars' selective adaptations and appropriations of Western linguistic principles in the development of the modern Chinese writing system.

To be sure, Huang's work leaves some questions unanswered. The author seems relatively unconcerned about issues of popular reception. Even so, this book successfully complicates our understanding of gender studies, mixed-sex educational systems, social linguistics, and other issues central to the study of modern Chinese history, and it will be of interest to scholars and graduate students of twentieth-century China.

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