UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

Asian Women in Transition. Edited by Sylvia A. Chipp and Justin J. Green. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980. 262 pp. \$25.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7cd1507h>

Journal

The Journal of Asian Studies, 40(4)

ISSN

0021-9118

Author

Leonard, Karen

Publication Date

1981-08-01

DOI

10.2307/2055681

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Book Reviews

ASIA GENERAL

Asian Women in Transition. Edited by SYLVIA A. CHIPP AND JUSTIN J. GREEN. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980. 262 pp. \$25.

Two political scientists, Sylvia A. Chipp and Justin J. Green, have edited this interdisciplinary collection of eleven articles on Asian women, organized by geographic area. Their audience is not clear. The preface states that all the articles are based on field research, implying an audience of Asia specialists interested in recent research. But five of the articles are not based on field research, and many articles contain no data later than 1973. It is more likely that this is intended to be a text for undergraduate use; there is no index.

The introduction is badly written and does not serve to unify or even represent the contributions. It keeps shifting focus. The opening sentence hints at male oppression: "The growing consciousness that women have rarely if ever received justice is a worldwide phenomenon," but the editors then distinguish between women in modernized nations and developing countries and observe that women's role and status are in a state of flux in Asian societies. They suggest that the economic, social, political, ideological, and religious factors affecting the process of role and status change must be examined and that it is the purpose of this collection of articles to do so. They further wish to develop "role and status theory that might contribute to an understanding of the change process," and they review social science concepts of role, status, power, and authority.

The editors emphasize religion. In a book partially aimed at Asia specialists, it is somewhat surprising to read: "Unlike Western societies, which generally pride themselves on being secular, many Asian societies are essentially religious societies where virtually everything is explained in religious terms, whether it be Islam or Maoism" (p. 7). Their subsequent survey of major religions (here noted as Hinduism, Islam, Catholicism, and Maoism) contains equally jarring assertions (the remarks on class and caste in India I found particularly confused and unconvincing). There is no attempt to fit these different frameworks—developed and developing nations, role and status theory, religion against secular modernization—together. They summarize the volume thus: "as the contributors to this book demonstrate, women in Asia—sometimes deliberately, more often circumstantially, usually slowly, and mostly in fits and starts—are moving into new roles and have begun to climb the status ladder" (p. 11).

In the preface to the East Asia section, the editors suggest that women's real status, by some empirical measure of power, has been higher than their ideal status, which is that prescribed by cultural norms. The three contributors here address different issues. Joyce Kallgren's fine, up-to-date summary of the political and economic roles of women in cities examines issues initially raised by Ester Boserup: whether economic development and urbanization are improving or harming the

position of women. Susan Pharr writes about Japanese women's evolving views of life and role, setting forth three viewpoints represented in her sample of 100 young women participating in political activities in 1971–1972. She predicts that growing numbers of “new women” will find the Japanese economic system to be the major barrier to their aspirations. Kay Ann Johnson completes the section with a competent survey of women's progress and remaining problems in the People's Republic of China, but her coverage ends with 1973. (Both Pharr and Johnson published earlier versions of these pieces in 1976 in different collections.)

In the Southeast Asia section, the editors hypothesize in the preface that the bilateral kinship systems and the ample land supply “that make bilateralism possible” account for the relatively high status, both real and ideal, of Southeast Asian women. The four essays here really do not address these issues. Justin Green examines the attitudes and values of 145 Filipino elite women to test the hypothesis that the underlying attitudes of elites may subvert their publicly articulated goals and values. His questionnaire, based on Gunnar Myrdal's modernization ideals, pits rationality against tradition, personalistic against universalistic approaches to employment and politics; unsurprisingly, he finds these elite women to be “an intermediate type, neither modernizing nor traditional,” interested in the preservation of their elite status (p. 121).

Heather Strange presents a socioeconomic study of rural Malay women, using village data gathered in 1965–1966 and 1975 and outlining changes over the ten-year period. Her material is interesting, although presented in a rambling and inconclusive fashion; she points to the continuing strength of women's cooperative networks. The other two articles here are on Indonesia. Stephen Douglas suggests that *adat* (customary law, local and diverse) has been selectively used at the national level to propagate the sociopolitical myth that “the norm of equality has been realized in government and politics” (pp. 153–54). He gives us a good overview of the Indonesian women's movement and its subordination to the nationalist movement and the independent government. He concludes that the behavioral pattern is one of minimal political participation by women and that it is unlikely to change for the better, given the structure of the Indonesian economy and military dominance of politics; unfortunately, his coverage ends with 1973. Ann Ruth Wilner apparently disagrees with Douglas, suggesting in the final piece here that Javanese culture and traditions are enabling Indonesian women to attain better positions than women hold in many technologically advanced Western countries. But this is an essay, not a systematic presentation of her own or others' recent research.

The final section is on South Asia, where the editors believe the status of Asian women is “at its lowest in both real and ideal terms.” They also opine that “the patience with events bred into South Asian women through centuries of yielding to fate will serve them well during the slow movement to a higher status level over the long and difficult years ahead” (p. 191). In the first article here, Gail Minault argues that purdah did not prevent Muslim women from participating in (according to the title) the Indian nationalist movement. Her specific data are limited to the mother of the Ali brothers and one of her daughters-in-law, however, and the women's meetings and women's branches mentioned are almost entirely those of the Khilafat movement. Sylvia Chipp then describes the characteristics and views of Pakistani elite women, from her 1969 survey of twenty-two leaders of the All Pakistan Women's Association. She shows that these women, while interested in improving women's status, seek no drastic alteration of their society's complementary sex roles or purdah

norms. This is a good piece, but again one wishes that more recent political developments and their impact on women had been covered, if only minimally. Next, Rounaq Jahan gives us one of the best pieces in the book—a case study of women in politics in Bangladesh. She measures their participation in several ways, first through 1974 interviews conducted with 283 of the parliament's 315 members. These show clear differences between the 15 female officeholders and their male colleagues. She then uses interviews with 1,652 voters in the 1973 national elections to discuss sex differences in participation as citizens (in voting patterns and participation in mass political movements). She concludes that the major cause of women's limited political involvement is the sociocultural norms of *purdah*, which must be challenged if Bangladesh women are to achieve political equality. In making her point, she contrasts Bangladesh with other Third World countries that have experienced national liberation or revolutionary movements, which reminds the reader of the absence of such comparisons elsewhere in this cross-cultural volume. In the last article, Manjulika Koshal makes a simplistic defense of Indira Gandhi's first Prime Ministership, updated to cover her defeat in 1977 and comeback in 1978. She fails to discuss other Indian women or issues relevant to them.

On the whole, despite a few good contributions, this volume is of limited value. The focus is most often on women in politics or elite women, but the volume's use as a text for courses on women in contemporary Asia is hampered by the failure to update several otherwise good pieces. The coverage of Asian nations, and of women within each nation included, is quite uneven, as is the quality of the editing and the contributions.

KAREN LEONARD
University of California, Irvine

Celebration of Continuity: Themes in Classic East Asian Poetry. By PETER H. LEE. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979. viii, 264 pp. Introduction, Epilogue, Appendixes, Abbreviations, Notes, Index. \$17.50.

In this book, Peter H. Lee, the well-known authority on Korean literature, does two things for which there is a particular need at this time. To begin with, as scholarship in East Asian literature focuses on smaller and smaller spans of time, and becomes increasingly concerned with specific specialized "problems," there is a danger of losing sight of the forest for the trees. A "forest" there most certainly is—from the perspective of world culture, China, Korea, and Japan do belong together, and are more similar to each other than they are different. It is useful occasionally to have an intelligent critic stand back and give us the broad view.

Second, as the microscope of modern scholarship focuses closer and closer in, it is easy to forget that, as Lee reminds us, "conventionality was a mark of East Asian poetry"; at the same time, "tradition meant all that was vital and alive for the community, a source of inspiration and a repository of techniques" (p. 213). Lee goes as far as to suggest that one can speak of "formulaic expressions" in East Asian poetry, even where this poetry is written as opposed to oral (pp. 1, 226n), something I have always believed. The real dichotomy implied by the work of Parry and Lord was never "oral" versus "written," so much as it was "traditional" versus "individualistic" concepts of creativity, where "traditional" creativity refers to a mode of artistic creation in any medium based overwhelmingly on the use of conventions or formulas.