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Chinese History: A Useful Category of Gender Analysis

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GAIL HERSHATTER and WANG ZHENG

FOR CHINA SCHOLARS, JOAN SCOTT'S WORK has been less a roadmap than a working guide on how to bushwhack and read partially obscured tracks. The specific ways in which Scott's insights might be applied depend on the terrain, as well as the eye of the explorer. "Gender" as scholarly practice, no less than "gender" as category, requires historical analysis. In recent China scholarship, gender (the concept) has proven extremely productive of new knowledge in both English- and Chinese-language writing, but "Gender" (Scott's specific working guide) has been less influential in Chinese-language scholarship than in the Anglophone world.

The scholarly trajectory of gender in Euro-American (primarily U.S.-based) historical scholarship differs from that in the People's Republic of China. These are not hermetically sealed scholarly geographies—cross-talk between these two locales, as well as with scholars in Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and elsewhere, has been important, as was an earlier wave of traveling feminist theories in the early twentieth century.¹ What follows, however, is not an attempt at comprehensive coverage. Tracing out two distinct but entangled contemporary scholarly formations is complex enough, and perhaps can suggest ways in which others might further expand the conversation.

Scott's essay "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" was published at a propitious moment for Anglophone scholars of China. From the early 1970s on, feminist scholarship on China had devoted itself to three basic lines of inquiry. The

The authors thank Emily Honig, Susan Mann, and Marilyn Young for their speedy and insightful comments. All remaining shortcomings are our responsibility. We dedicate this essay to the memory of Elisabeth Croll, with respect and gratitude.

¹ Two important works on Chinese women's history published by scholars in Taiwan are Li Yu-ning and Zhang Yufa, eds., *Zhongguo funü shi lunwen ji* [Essays on Chinese Women's History] (Taipei, 1981), and Li Yu-ning and Zhang Yufa, eds., *Jindai Zhongguo nüquan yundong shiliao, 1842–1911* [Historical Materials on the Women's Rights Movement, 1842–1911], 2 vols. (Taipei, 1995). See also the influential journal *Jindai Zhongguo funü shi yanjiu/Research on Women in Modern Chinese History*, published since 1993 by the Institute of Modern History at Academia Sinica, Taipei. Two recent articles in that journal survey the current state of women's history scholarship in Taiwan and the PRC/Hong Kong: Yu Chien-ming, "Shi buchong lishi yihuo gaixie lishi? Jin ershiwu nianlai Taiwan diqu de jindai Zhongguo yu Taiwan funü shi yanjiu" [Supplement to History or Rewriting of History? Twenty-Five Years of Taiwan Research on Modern Chinese and Taiwanese Women's History], *Jindai Zhongguo funü shi yanjiu/Research on Women in Modern Chinese History*, no. 13 (December 2005): 65–103; Hon-ming Yip [Ye Han-ming], "Funü, xingbie ji qita: Jin ershi nian Zhongguo dalu he Xianggang de jindai Zhongguo funü shi yanjiu ji qi fazhan qianjing" [Women, Gender, and Other Matters: Twenty Years of China Mainland and Hong Kong Research on Modern Chinese Women's History and Its Prospects for Development], *ibid.*, 107–163.

first, pioneered by anthropologist Margery Wolf, analyzed kinship practices with women at the center of the analysis. Women, Wolf pointed out, married out of their home villages, entering a marital kinship network as isolated, vulnerable, and potentially threatening strangers. Their status and emotional well-being depended on the production of children and an affective network she dubbed the “uterine family,” distinct from but compatible with the patrilineal family. This beautifully elaborated insight reconfigured kinship as a profoundly gendered realm.²

The second project engaged historians, anthropologists, and political scientists, asking whether the twentieth-century Communist revolution had been good or bad for women. The answers were mixed. Feminist scholars praised Communist organizers from the 1920s through the 1980s for paying attention to the status of women in the family, women’s need for education, and the potential of women as heroic participants in building socialism. But scholars also noted that whenever the goal of mobilizing peasants conflicted with that of liberating women, the former was given priority. Paralleling conversations on the 1960s activist left, scholars variously blamed inadequacies in Marxist theory, political exigency in Chinese Communism’s formative years, or perduring sexism among male peasants and party members. A subset of this literature expressed the worry that the post-Mao reforms, which were just getting under way in the early 1980s, would roll back whatever gains women had made under Maoist socialism. Doleful book titles summarized these judgments: *The Unfinished Liberation of Chinese Women; Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China; Revolution Postponed*.³

A third project in the 1980s took advantage of new access to Chinese libraries and archives, endeavoring to “make the invisible visible.” Scholars began to write women into the labor history of major coastal cities and the internal history of the nascent Communist Party, whose earlier versions had underplayed the presence of women.⁴

Collectively, this body of scholarship introduced consistent attention to women into the China field, but it left key assumptions unexamined. Like the Chinese rev-

² Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1053–1075; Margery Wolf, *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* (Stanford, Calif., 1972).

³ Important works from this body of literature, in order of publication date, include Marilyn B. Young, ed., *Women in China: Studies in Social Change and Feminism* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1973); Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke, eds., *Women in Chinese Society* (Stanford, Calif., 1975); Delia Davin, *Woman-Work: Women and the Party in Revolutionary China* (Oxford, 1976); Roxane Witke, *Comrade Chiang Ch’ing* (Boston, 1977); Elisabeth J. Croll, *Feminism and Socialism in China* (1978; repr., New York, 1980); Yi-tsi Mei Feuerwerker, *Ding Ling’s Fiction: Ideology and Narrative in Modern Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982); Phyllis Andors, *The Unfinished Liberation of Chinese Women, 1949–1980* (Bloomington, Ind., 1983); Kay Ann Johnson, *Women, the Family, and Peasant Revolution in China* (Chicago, 1983); Judith Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Berkeley, Calif., 1983); Kazuko Ono, *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution, 1850–1950*, ed. Joshua A. Fogel, trans. Kathryn Bernhardt et al. (Stanford, Calif., 1989); Margery Wolf, *Revolution Postponed: Women in Contemporary China* (Stanford, Calif., 1985); Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter, *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980s* (Stanford, Calif., 1988).

⁴ Gail Hershatter, *The Workers of Tianjin* (Stanford, Calif., 1986); Emily Honig, *Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919–1949* (Stanford, Calif., 1986); Christina K. Gilmartin, “Gender, Politics, and Patriarchy in China: The Experiences of Early Women Communists, 1920–27,” in Sonia Kruks, Rayna Rapp, and Marilyn B. Young, eds., *Promissory Notes: Women in the Transition to Socialism* (New York, 1989), 82–105; Patricia Stranahan, *Yan’an Women and the Communist Party* (Berkeley, Calif., 1983).

olutionaries who led an assault on “tradition” beginning in the early twentieth century, the new women’s historians regarded imperial China as a time of unchanging subordination for women, mistaking a particular depiction of gender hierarchy in classical writings for a complete description of social practice. The footbound, cloistered, uneducated, ignorant woman had been a central figure of distress when Chinese intellectuals discussed national weakness and semicolonialism in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Euro-American feminist scholars reversed the valence—woman became a powerful embodiment of revolutionary potential—but left the longer history intact. The focus on whether the revolution had done right by women generally stopped short of asking how gender had shaped, enabled, and limited the revolutionary process, or how it might help to enlarge historical understanding beyond a revolutionary storyline. “Add women and stir,” not yet exhausted as an activity, was nevertheless at a conceptual impasse.

“Gender: A Useful Category” enlarged the project beyond women to gender and beyond a male-female binary to a broader inquiry into relationships of power. Scott’s essay authorized a more capacious examination of gender’s entanglement with family, labor, state-building, and national revolution, one that was emergent but not yet fully articulated in the work of Anglophone China historians. Like the U.S. historians described in Joanne Meyerowitz’s essay in this forum, China historians made selective use of Scott’s approach. A few began to draw on Foucault, still fewer on Derrida, but Scott’s suggestions about the importance of culturally available symbols, normative concepts, politics and social institutions, and subjective identity marked an important conceptual turn, clarifying inchoate questions and suggesting productive ways of getting at them.

A key moment in articulating this expanded agenda was the 1992 conference “Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State” at Harvard University, which brought together scholars writing in English and Chinese to consider the mischievously named project of “engendering China.” The introduction to the resulting conference volume drew upon Scott’s essay, commenting that “By proposing to ‘engender China,’ we make the claim that research on women and gender does not rest in a corner of sinological endeavors, but revises the most basic categories through which we strive to apprehend Chinese social relations, institutions, and cultural productions.”⁵ In the years that followed, gender-inflected studies of China in English proliferated.⁶

⁵ Christina K. Gilmartin, Gail Hershatter, Lisa Rofel, and Tyrene White, eds., *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), 1–2.

⁶ For a survey of more than 650 English-language works in history and the social sciences focusing on Chinese women in the long twentieth century alone—many of them influenced by Scott’s mode of analysis—see Gail Hershatter, *Women in China’s Long Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, Calif., 2007), http://repositories.cdlib.org/gaia/gaia_books/1 (accessed September 30, 2008). Interested readers should also consult Tani Barlow, “The Direction of History and Women in China,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2003), http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_colonialism_and_colonial_history/v004/4.1barlow.html (accessed September 30, 2008). The literature on pre-twentieth-century gender is also extremely rich, and the selection of works mentioned in this essay should be understood as emblematic rather than exhaustive. This limited survey also necessarily neglects the ways in which scholarship has changed over the two decades in question, as the use of “gender” has become more common as well as more subtle with the accretion of a substantial body of scholarship. The analysis of masculinities, an important emergent topic regrettably not included here, is ably introduced in Susan Brownell and Jeffrey Wasserstrom, eds., *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities: A Reader* (Berkeley,

One fruitful area of inquiry is a renewed look at gender in China's longer history, in which scholars have moved away from a portrayal of the pre-twentieth-century period as an undifferentiated interval of women's oppression. Recent works have looked at the role of bodily practices and spatial arrangements in gender construction, the centrality of virtue to women's subjectivity and to statecraft, and the ways in which women's labor ensured family survival and the perpetuation of a lettered elite. Patricia Ebrey's work on women's lives in the Song (960–1279), for instance, paid attention to the production of gender distinctions through footbinding and arrangements of domestic space.⁷ Christian de Pee explored how Song marriage rituals provided brides with new subject positions (daughter-in-law, wife), while giving men exclusive access to "a place in the larger community as a social subject, a Man."⁸ Dorothy Ko drew explicitly on Scott's delineation of gender, emphasizing "normative concepts of gender gleaned from the Confucian classics and precepts, the key roles played by . . . kinship and education in the social construction of gender, and the subjective gender identities of seventeenth-century elite women as revealed in their own writings."⁹ In later work, Ko moved to unsettle one of the most fixed emblems of women's subordination—footbinding—by exploring its significance as a woman-controlled practice that helped establish a gendered subjective identity anchored in Confucian goals, while simultaneously creating a complex erotics of concealment.¹⁰

Scholars of the pre-twentieth-century period also traced out the links between gender and the politics of the empire, validating Scott's insight that gender's legitimizing function is often found in its analogical use to express the relationship between ruler and ruled. Beverly Bossler argued that during the period of Mongol threat and subsequent conquest, loyal male officials were celebrated for defending their jurisdictions to the death, while women won praise for killing themselves to avoid rape or dishonor.¹¹ Under the Mongol Yuan dynasty, faithful widows who did not commit suicide or remarry but who remained alive to serve their in-laws and raise their husbands' heirs garnered government honors, a pattern that Susan Mann also found recurring in the next conquest dynasty, the Qing (1644–1911).¹² Katherine Carlitz explored virtue as normative concept and subjective identity in her accounts of Ming-era (1368–1644) women who took similar actions; for generations of men

Calif., 2002); the volume's introduction also surveys anthropological literature on gender in China, which is not covered extensively in this essay. On masculinities, see also the five articles in the *AHR* Forum "Gender and Manhood in Chinese History," *American Historical Review* 105, no. 5 (December 2000): 1599–1666.

⁷ Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993).

⁸ Christian de Pee, "The Ritual and Sexual Bodies of the Groom and the Bride in Ritual Manuals of the Sung Dynasty," in Harriet T. Zurndorfer, ed., *Chinese Women in the Imperial Past: New Perspectives* (Leiden, 1999), 53–100. Other essays in that volume also put "gender" to productive use.

⁹ Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford, Calif., 1994), 5. For further exploration of representations by and of women in late imperial China, see Ellen Widmer and Kang-I Sun Chang, eds., *Writing Women in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, Calif., 1997).

¹⁰ Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley, Calif., 2005).

¹¹ Beverly Bossler, "Gender and Empire: A View from Yuan China," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 34, no. 1 (2004): 197–223, quotations from 197 and 201.

¹² *Ibid.*; Susan Mann, "Widows in the Kinship, Class, and Community Structures of Qing Dynasty China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 1 (1987): 37–56; Mann, *Precious Records: Women in China's Long Eighteenth Century* (Stanford, Calif., 1997).

who avidly wrote and read such stories, these women became models of the loyalty that a virtuous man owed his ruler.¹³ Janet Theiss argued that eighteenth-century Qing rulers, ever conscious of their status as non-Han outsiders, attempted to bureaucratize moral transformation, creating a state cult in which the chaste woman was rendered as model imperial subject.¹⁴ Officials and elite men drew multiple connections between gendered virtue, elite status, and good government, reflected in the awards and literary encomia bestowed on virtuous women.

In dying heroically, women embodied loyalty and faithfulness. By living in a chaste, frugal, and industrious manner, they ensured the continuation of their families and the stability of the empire. Francesca Bray's *Technology and Gender* examined the building of houses, the production of cloth, and the biological and social mothering of persons, highlighting women as simultaneously products of a gender system and producers of knowledge and commodities.¹⁵ Mann explored how women in the Qing period participated in shaping the family, the economy, and the broader culture through writing and publishing, the performance of manual labor, intense lifelong relationships with their sons, and religious practice. Mann saw an expanding eighteenth-century market for women's labor, one that increased the value of women, set off heated public debates about their role, and stimulated efforts by respectable women to mark their distinction from courtesans.¹⁶ The millennium prior to the nineteenth century emerged in this body of scholarship as a time of both subtle and momentous change, rather than an inert precursor to revolutionary China. Scott's injunction to attend to expanded meanings of gender was important to this reconfiguration of the imperial period.

Scott's ideas have also helped scholars move away from the binary formulation of "Western impact, Chinese response" to describe the nineteenth-century years of intense Western expansion into China. This formulation was a problem not because of its components—imperialist expansion certainly had a profound impact on recent Chinese history, and China was not inert—but because of its homogenizing impulse. "The West" was not a coherent entity, "Chinese" responses were multiple, and the degree to which "the West" and "China" constituted each other in the course of these often violent and unequal contacts bears examination. In all these respects, gender has been important. Mann, examining the poems of what she calls "the talented women of the Zhang family," showed that declining literati families depended on both the literary work of such women and their household management skills to eke out survival against a background of nineteenth-century rebellion, rural unrest, and

¹³ Katherine Carlitz, "Desire, Danger, and the Body: Stories of Women's Virtue in Late Ming China," in Gilmartin, Hershatter, Rofel, and White, *Engendering China*, 101–122; Carlitz, "Shrines, Governing-Class Identity, and the Cult of Widow Fidelity in Mid-Ming Jiangnan," *Journal of Asian Studies* 56, no. 3 (1997): 612–640; Carlitz, "The Daughter, the Singing-Girl, and the Seduction of Suicide," *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in Early and Imperial China* 3, no. 1 (2001): 22–46. This special issue of *Nan Nü* has been reprinted as Paul S. Ropp, Paola Zamperini, and Harriot T. Zurndorfer, eds., *Passionate Women: Female Suicide in Late Imperial China* (Leiden, 2001).

¹⁴ Janet Theiss, *Disgraceful Matters: The Politics of Chastity in Eighteenth-Century China* (Berkeley, Calif., 2004).

¹⁵ Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997). For an important account of how changing medical theory and practice from the Song through the Qing shaped understandings of women as powerful, dangerous, and frail, see Charlotte Furth, *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China's Medical History, 960–1665* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999).

¹⁶ Mann, *Precious Records*.

growing anti-Manchu sentiment. Among the Zhang women's works are poems on maritime defense and politics.¹⁷ Qian Nanxiu looked at women reformers in the 1890s who sought to draw upon earlier practices of women's learning to educate girls and strengthen the nation.¹⁸ Joan Judge helped uncover the important role of Chinese women students who went abroad to study in Japan and returned to help overthrow the Qing dynasty.¹⁹ Paola Zamperini and Catherine Yeh, working from late-nineteenth-century literary sources, described the ways in which the dress, accoutrements, and romantic liaisons of Shanghai courtesans introduced and mediated aspects of Euro-American modernity.²⁰

Most Chinese intellectuals of the early twentieth century, however, told a less sanguine story about gender and the emergent nation, in which women's footbound, cloistered status was equated with ignorance, economic parasitism, and China's humiliation at the hands of more virile powers. This formulation entailed forgetting a great deal: maternal power in a generationally ordered family configuration; the vast corpus of writing about women and the smaller body of writing by women; the economic contributions of women of all classes to the welfare of their households. Nevertheless, the "discovery" of women's benighted status produced exhortations to rearrange family practices, educate women, and make them productive citizens in order to stave off complete colonization and save the nation. The "woman question" provided language, symbols, policy imperatives, individual aspirations, and visions of national modernity as well as dystopic imaginings of calamitous alternatives. These have been highlighted in recent works by Rey Chow on translation and literary production, Rebecca Karl on slavery and citizenship, Hu Ying on the New Woman, Gail Hershatter and Christian Henriot on prostitution, Tani Barlow on several generations of Chinese feminism, Christina Gilmartin on radical women in the early years of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Weili Ye on women students abroad in the United States, Antonia Finnane on the debate over national dress for women, Susan Glosser on urban visions of companionate domestic life, Eugenia Lean on public sympathy, gender, and the law, Madeleine Yue Dong and Louise Edwards on women's suffrage, and Bryna Goodman and Wang Zheng on urban career women.²¹

¹⁷ Susan Mann, *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family* (Berkeley, Calif., 2007).

¹⁸ Nanxiu Qian, "Revitalizing the Xianyuan (Worthy Ladies) Tradition: Women in the 1898 Reforms," *Modern China* 29, no. 4 (October 2003): 399–454; Nanxiu Qian, "Borrowing Foreign Mirrors and Candles to Illuminate Chinese Civilization": Xue Shaohui's Moral Vision in *The Biographies of Foreign Women*," in Grace S. Fong, Nanxiu Qian, and Harriet T. Zurndorfer, eds., *Beyond Tradition and Modernity: Gender, Genre, and Cosmopolitanism in Late Qing China* (Leiden, 2004), 60–101. For a useful summary of the current scholarship on women at the turn of the twentieth century, see Susan Mann's "Introduction" in the same volume, 3–11.

¹⁹ Joan Judge, "Talent, Virtue, and the Nation: Chinese Nationalisms and Female Subjectivities in the Early Twentieth Century," *American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (June 2001): 765–803; Judge, "Citizens or Mothers of Citizens? Gender and the Meaning of Modern Chinese Citizenship," in Merle Goldman and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds., *Changing Meanings of Citizenship in Modern China* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 23–43; Judge, "Between *Nei* and *Wai*: Chinese Women Students in Japan in the Early Twentieth Century," in Bryna Goodman and Wendy Larson, eds., *Gender in Motion: Divisions of Labor and Cultural Change in Late Imperial and Modern China* (Lanham, Md., 2005), 121–143; Judge, *The Precious Raft of History* (Stanford, Calif., 2008).

²⁰ Paola Zamperini, "On Their Dress They Wore a Body: Fashion and Identity in Late Qing Shanghai," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 11, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 301–330; Catherine Yeh, *Shanghai Love: Courtesans, Intellectuals, and Entertainment Culture, 1850–1910* (Seattle, Wash., 2006).

²¹ Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between East and West* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1991); Rebecca E. Karl, "'Slavery,' Citizenship, and Gender in Late Qing China's

Opening up the discussion of gender has dislodged what Dorothy Ko has called the May Fourth story, in which intellectuals and the CCP were said to have freed women (and China) from a backward and stagnant past. It has begun to replace this comfortable teleology with exploration of a much messier process, in which Woman often has been linked with the state and the nation rather than with Man, not always with salutary results. It has encouraged the proliferation of histories of all sorts of women, putting the Communist revolution into a richer, more contingent context. Twentieth-century Chinese history can no longer be conceptualized without Scott's formulations of "gender [a]s a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender [a]s a primary way of signifying relationships of power."

Which returns us to the history of the Chinese revolution, particularly after the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949, and the question of what can be asked about that revolution, in addition to "Was it good or bad for women?" The recent literature on contemporary China suggests at least six possibilities. First, Harriet Evans analyzed the ways in which gender discourse in the 1950s, later re-circulated in the 1980s and 1990s, remained beholden to scientific notions of immutable biological difference, with women emotionally and sexually dependent upon men as initiators.²² Second, bodily difference notwithstanding, in PRC political discourse women were repeatedly held up as models who "could do everything that men could do." The effect of this formulation on publicly acknowledged and personally experienced gender possibilities, particularly for the period from the 1950s through the 1970s, was explored by many scholars, including Tina Mai Chen, Gail Hershatter, Emily Honig, Harriet Evans, and the contributors to the biographical anthology *Some of Us*.²³ Third, the combination of biological fixity and political malleability

Global Context," in Rebecca E. Karl and Peter Zarrow, eds., *Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period: Political and Cultural Change in Late Qing China* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 212–244; Hu Ying, "Naming the First 'New Woman,'" *ibid.*, 180–211; Gail Hershatter, *Dangerous Pleasures: Prostitution and Modernity in Twentieth-Century Shanghai* (Berkeley, Calif., 1997); Christian Henriot, *Belles de Shanghai: Prostitution et sexualité en Chine aux XIXe–XXe siècles* [Beauties of Shanghai: Prostitution and Sexuality in China, Nineteenth to Twentieth Centuries] (Paris, 1997), trans. Noël Castelino as *Prostitution and Sexuality in Shanghai: A Social History, 1849–1949* (Cambridge, 2001); Tani Barlow, *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* (Durham, N.C., 2004); Christina Kelley Gilmartin, *Engendering the Chinese Revolution: Radical Women, Communist Politics, and Mass Movements in the 1920s* (Berkeley, Calif., 1995); Weili Ye, *Seeking Modernity in China's Name: Chinese Students in the United States, 1900–1927* (Stanford, Calif., 2001); Antonia Finnane, "What Should Chinese Women Wear? A National Problem," *Modern China* 22, no. 2 (April 1996): 99–131; Susan Glosser, *Chinese Visions of Family and State, 1915–1953* (Berkeley, Calif., 2003); Eugenia Lean, *Public Passions: The Trial of Shi Jianqiao and the Rise of Popular Sympathy in Republican China* (Berkeley, Calif., 2007); Madeleine Yue Dong, "Unofficial History and Gender Boundary Crossing in the Early Chinese Republic: Shen Peizhen and Xiaofengxian," in Goodman and Larson, *Gender in Motion*, 169–187; Louise Edwards, *Gender, Politics, and Democracy: Women's Suffrage in China* (Stanford, Calif., 2007); Bryna Goodman, "The New Woman Commits Suicide: The Press, Cultural Memory, and the New Republic," *Journal of Asian Studies* 62, no. 1 (February 2005): 67–101; Goodman, "The Vocational Woman and the Elusiveness of 'Personhood' in Early Republican China," in Goodman and Larson, *Gender in Motion*, 265–286; Wang Zheng, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999).

²² Harriet Evans, *Women and Sexuality in China: Dominant Discourses of Female Sexuality and Gender since 1949* (London, 1997). For Republican-era antecedents, see Frank Dikötter, *Sex, Culture, and Modernity in China* (Honolulu, 1995).

²³ Tina Mai Chen, "Female Icons, Feminist Iconography? Socialist Rhetoric and Women's Agency in 1950s China," *Gender and History* 15, no. 2 (August 2003): 268–295; Gail Hershatter, "Local Meanings of Gender and Work in Rural Shaanxi in the 1950s," in Barbara Entwisle and Gail E. Henderson, eds.,

produced a gendered division of labor that remained naturalized even as its contents constantly shifted,²⁴ a crushing but largely invisible burden of domestic labor,²⁵ and generational differences about what was understood to be proper, possible, or desirable for women.²⁶ Fourth, attention to gender helped to illuminate important differences within the Communist Party, particularly over the degree of commitment to the May Fourth agenda of raising women's status, promoting companionate monogamous marriage, and providing access to education and employment.²⁷ Fifth, policies intended to alter gender relationships, such as the 1950 Marriage Law, often had unintended class effects, disadvantaging poor men and improving the position of high officials and young rural women in a marriage market that remained hypergamous.²⁸ More recently, gender in the post-Mao reform period was used both to articulate and to obscure emerging class tensions in an environment where the language of class is now largely shunned.²⁹ And sixth, gender in all the permutations that Scott defined—policies, social practices, subjectivity, symbolic language—provided a useful metric for tracking where revolutionary discourse did and did not go, and the often unexpected and unintended ways in which it transformed lives. Elisabeth Croll and Gail Hershatter, for instance, both explored rural women's sense of temporality and how it is different from that of men. Even the temporality of sustained socialist revolution, it appears, can fracture along gender lines.³⁰

All the scholars cited here have benefited from improved opportunities to con-

Re-Drawing Boundaries: Work, Households, and Gender in China (Berkeley, Calif., 2000), 79–96; Emily Honig, "Iron Girls Revisited: Gender and the Politics of Work in the Cultural Revolution, 1966–76," *ibid.*, 97–110; Honig, "Maoist Mappings of Gender: Reassessing the Red Guards," in Brownell and Wasserstrom, *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities*, 255–268; Honig, "Socialist Sex: The Cultural Revolution Revisited," *Modern China* 29, no. 2 (April 2003): 143–175; Harriet Evans, "The Language of Liberation: Gender and *Jiefang* in Early Chinese Communist Party Discourse," *Intersections*, no. 1 (September 1998), <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue1/harriet.html> (accessed September 30, 2008), reprinted in Jeffrey Wasserstrom, ed., *Twentieth-Century China: New Approaches* (London, 2003), 193–220; Evans, "'Comrade Sisters': Gendered Bodies and Spaces," in Harriet Evans and Stephanie Donald, eds., *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution* (Lanham, Md., 1999), 63–78; Xueping Zhong, Wang Zheng, and Bai Di, *Some of Us: Chinese Women Growing Up in the Mao Era* (New Brunswick, N.J., 2001).

²⁴ Wolf, *Revolution Postponed*; Honig and Hershatter, *Personal Voices*; Tamara Jacka, *Women's Work in Rural China: Change and Continuity in an Era of Reform* (Cambridge, 1997); Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China: Gender, Migration, and Social Change* (Armonk, N.Y., 2005).

²⁵ Gail Hershatter, "Making the Visible Invisible: The Fate of 'the Private' in Revolutionary China," in Lü Fangshang, ed., *Jindai Zhongguo de funü yu guojia (1600–1950)* [Women and the Nation in Modern China (1600–1950)], vol. 1 of *Wusheng zhi sheng* [Voices amid Silence] (Taiwan, 2003), 257–281.

²⁶ Harriet Evans, "Past, Perfect or Imperfect: Changing Images of the Ideal Wife," in Brownell and Wasserstrom, *Chinese Femininities, Chinese Masculinities*, 335–360; Evans, *The Subject of Gender: Daughters and Mothers in Urban China* (Lanham, Md., 2008), Gail Hershatter, "Virtue at Work: Rural Shaanxi Women Remember the 1950s," in Goodman and Larson, *Gender in Motion*, 309–328; Lisa Rofel, *Other Modernities: Gendered Yearnings in China after Socialism* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999).

²⁷ Wang Zheng, "Dilemmas of Inside Agitators: Chinese State Feminists in 1957," *China Quarterly*, no. 188 (December 2006): 913–932.

²⁸ Neil J. Diamant, *Revolutionizing the Family: Politics, Love, and Divorce in Urban and Rural China, 1949–1968* (Berkeley, Calif., 2000).

²⁹ Wang Zheng, "Feminist Activism in Contemporary China," in You-tien Hsing and Ching Kwan Lee, eds., *Reclaiming Chinese Society: Politics of Redistribution, Recognition, and Representation* (London, forthcoming).

³⁰ Elisabeth Croll, *Changing Identities of Chinese Women: Rhetoric, Experience and Self-Perception in Twentieth-Century China* (Hong Kong, 1995); Gail Hershatter, "The Gender of Memory: Rural Chinese Women and the 1950s," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28, no. 1 (Fall 2002): 43–70.

duct research in China and increased interchange with their Chinese counterparts. As a glance at their footnotes illustrates, Anglophone scholars write with appreciation of Chinese-language scholarship. Nevertheless, they are often more involved in the controversies, insights, and framing devices drawn from Euro-American conversations about gender, sexuality, and feminism than they are with corresponding formations in the Chinese scholarly world. In the English-speaking China field, Scott's essay intervened in an ongoing conversation, one specific to the China field but with a notable resemblance to the conversations described in the other essays in this forum.

IN CHINA, HOWEVER, THE INTRODUCTION OF GENDER arrived in a very different context, marked by a history of semicolonialism, revolutionary Marxism, and the beginnings of a massive social transformation, as the Chinese state, still operating under the direction of the Communist Party, moved into an ever-closer relationship with global capitalism. Feminism in China has had a long history as a radical vision, a term of opprobrium, and a state project, establishing a particular scholarly and political terrain into which "gender" was introduced.

It may be that "gender" has been slow to catch on as an innovative concept in Chinese-language scholarship precisely because it seems deceptively familiar to Chinese historians. Its locally specific prehistory extends well back into the imperial era, when *nan/nü* (man/woman) was recognized by male scholars as a foundational organizing principle of society. Because the Chinese family was understood to be the foundation of the state, and because women were the designated managers of the family, elite male writers historically paid attention to the role of virtuous and diligent women in the family and the importance of managing heterosexual relations. Across the twentieth century, the relationship between women and family, as well as the institution of family itself, was transformed to such an extent that classical texts on *nan/nü* are no longer guides to social practice, although they exert continuing (if uneven) ideological power. Nevertheless, *nan/nü*, understood as a historical Chinese framing of gender, has a long and extensively elaborated textual record, most of it produced by male scholars.

When male intellectuals concerned with building a nation-state began to write about women at the turn of the twentieth century, they were continuing the practice of prescribing women's conduct, this time for an enlarged role in society.³¹ Scholarly interest in women flourished during the high tide of feminism and the New Culture movement of the 1920s and 1930s. Research on prominent women, marriage, sexuality, prostitution, domestic slaves, law, and other topics was produced largely by male scholars critical of "old" culture and social institutions, who understood an enlightened approach to "the woman question" as a marker of modern positionality. Constructing narratives of both "tradition" and "modernity," these scholars produced a historiography of women organized in a binary scheme of "oppressed victim" vs. "liberated modern subject." The empirical emphasis of this period, however, en-

³¹ One famous text of this period is Jin Tianhe's *Nüjie zhong* [The Women's Bell] (1903; repr., Shanghai, 2003), in which the male author laid out a blueprint to create modern women in order to transform China into a strong and prosperous modern civilization.

abled the excavation of many valuable source materials that were not always obtainable by this binary. Some of these works, such as Chen Dongyuan's 1928 *Zhongguo funü shenghuoshi* [A History of the Lives of Chinese Women], later became classics that are frequently cited by scholars inside and beyond China.³²

The early years of the People's Republic produced some literary research on women's writing, including one major 1957 index of works by more than four thousand women writers—a source that later helped to inspire research by many Anglophone scholars.³³ The Mao era (1949–1976), however, when class was the dominant analytical category, saw little scholarship on women, although women workers, peasants, and revolutionaries were prominently represented in cultural production.

Beginning in the late 1970s, women of diverse backgrounds played a major role in reviving and redefining women's history. In late 1979, the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), a mass organization under the leadership of the party, began to compile a history of the Chinese women's movement, a project originally begun in 1961 but halted by subsequent political turmoil.³⁴ Inaugurated with high-level political backing, the women's history project was conducted in a mass campaign style that commanded public resources and publicity.³⁵ This campaign produced seven volumes of source materials on Chinese women's activism since 1900, a volume on the Chinese women's movement by the ACWF, and more than two dozen provincial and municipal volumes of source materials and local histories.³⁶ These works

³² Chen Dongyuan, *Zhongguo funü shenghuo shi* [A History of the Lives of Chinese Women] (Shanghai, 1928).

³³ Hu Wenkai, *Lidai funü zhuzuo kao* [A Survey of Women Writers through the Ages] (1957; repr., Shanghai, 1985).

³⁴ In the wake of the Cultural Revolution, as the CCP began rewriting its own history as a means to reconstitute the party, the ACWF reactivated the project of a history of the Chinese women's movement as an important way to claim women's crucial role in the history of Chinese revolution. The other two mass organizations of the CCP, the Trade Union and the Youth Association, also began history projects on workers' and youth movements respectively.

³⁵ Deng Yingchao, wife of the late premier Zhou Enlai and a senior party leader, lent her strong support to the project. Deng had been a renowned feminist activist in the May Fourth period before she joined the CCP in 1925. Throughout her long Communist career, she promoted women's rights and interests, either overtly or covertly. After the Cultural Revolution, Deng reached the peak of her political career, becoming a member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CCP, vice-president of the National People's Congress, and president of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. An extremely cautious and tactful survivor of party politics, at this point she did not have to camouflage her strong concern for women's interests. Her support helped turn the women's history project into a nationwide campaign within the ACWF system. For a discussion of Deng's role in the early stage of the ACWF, see Wang Zheng, "State Feminism? Gender and Socialist State Formation in Maoist China," *Feminist Studies* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 519–551.

³⁶ The following volumes were edited and written by the Women's Movement History Research Office of the ACWF: *Wusi shiqi funü wenti wenxuan* [Selected Articles on Women's Problems in the May Fourth Era] (Beijing, 1981); *Zhongguo funü yundong lishi ziliao (1921–1927)* [Historical Source Materials of the Chinese Women's Movement (1921–1927)] (Beijing, 1986); *Zhongguo funü yundong lishi ziliao (1840–1918)* [Historical Source Materials of the Chinese Women's Movement (1840–1918)] (Beijing, 1991); *Zhongguo funü yundong lishi ziliao (1927–1937)* [Historical Source Materials of the Chinese Women's Movement (1927–1937)] (Beijing, 1991); *Zhongguo funü yundong lishi ziliao (1937–1945)* [Historical Source Materials of the Chinese Women's Movement (1937–1945)] (Beijing, 1991); *Zhongguo funü yundong lishi ziliao (1945–1949)* [Historical Source Materials of the Chinese Women's Movement (1945–1949)] (Beijing, 1991); and *Zhongguo funü yundongshi* [A History of the Chinese Women's Movement] (Beijing, 1989). The Chinese Women Cadres School of the ACWF also edited two volumes of source materials from 1949 to 1983, *Zhongguo funü yundong wenxuan ziliao huibian* [An Anthology of Source Materials on the Chinese Women's Movement] (Beijing, 1988). The anthology is classified as an internal document, not for public circulation.

focused on the women's movement led by the CCP, celebrating women's contribution to the Communist revolution and demonstrating the strides that Chinese women had made toward liberation. The volumes illuminate the formation of Chinese state feminism, its relationship to the Communist revolution, and the often fraught relationship between class and gender in the revolutionary process.

The ACWF's promotion of women's history signaled the legitimacy of this new direction of historical research to scholars nationwide.³⁷ Between 1978 and 2000, more than a thousand articles on women's history in modern China were published, including accounts of women's diverse activism before the founding of the CCP and beyond the CCP base areas.³⁸ Mary Beth Norton, a U.S. historian who lectured on U.S. women's history in China in 1988, noticed that when Chinese scholars were told that she could talk about any aspect of the history of American women, they would often ask her to speak on modern American feminism. "Clearly, as far as they were concerned, that subject constituted the essence of women's history," she observed.³⁹ This comment reflects the high tide of production of histories of the women's movement in China at the time of Norton's visit.⁴⁰

This focus on women's movement history soon broadened. In the 1980s, historians were eager to look for research topics that would enable them to break away from the constraints of a CCP historiography centered on class struggle, peasant rebellion, and revolution. Social history, cultural history, and women's history thus became new areas of increasing interest. In producing this work, scholars drew upon the earlier practices of historical writing from the 1920s and 1930s, identifying the roots of Mao's absolute power in the "old feudalism." Continuing the 1920s enlightenment agenda became a mainstream intellectual theme. Works originally published in the 1930s were reprinted in the 1980s, and earlier research topics were picked up by a new generation of scholars.⁴¹ For the medieval and late imperial

³⁷ The published works included sections on *nüquan yundong* (the feminist movement) and prominent women activists prior to the ascendance of the CCP. Non-Communist women who had participated in a variety of women's movements were also asked to write their memoirs. Memoir writing more generally became a lively forum for political struggles in the 1980s, when the new CCP leadership began to clear the names of those wrongly accused of political crimes or errors in the Cultural Revolution and previous political campaigns. One important way for people who had been so labeled to fight against marginalization and erasure, or to stake a claim regarding their contribution to the Communist revolution or nationalist movements, was to write memoirs, autobiographies, or biographies. Many women joined this discursive struggle, which had no direct relationship to the ACWF's project.

³⁸ Zheng Yongfu and Lü Meiyi conducted a survey of women's history in the post-Mao era, "Funü shi" [Women's History], which is collected in Zeng Yeying, Huang Chunsheng, and Xu Xiuli, eds., *Wushi nian lai Zhongguo jindai shi yanjiu* [Research on Modern Chinese History in the Past Fifty Years] (Shanghai, 2000), 382–428. Aside from the works by the Women's Federation system, historians also produced several volumes on the history of the women's movement, including Liu Jucai, *Zhongguo jindai funü yundong shi* [A History of the Women's Movement in Modern China] (Beijing, 1989), and Lü Meiyi and Zheng Yongfu, *Zhongguo funü yundong, 1840–1921* [The Chinese Women's Movement, 1840–1921] (Zhengzhou, 1990).

³⁹ Mary Beth Norton, "Women's History and Feminism in China Today: A Report from Peking University," *Journal of Women's History* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 109.

⁴⁰ In an excellent review essay, Hong Kong-based historian Hon-ming Yip notes the continuity of this concentration on the history of women's movements well into the twenty-first century. See Hon-ming Yip, "Funü, xingbie ji qita."

⁴¹ A few male historians started to teach and write about women's history in the early 1980s. One of them, Rong Tiesheng, was a mentor to Lü and Zheng, co-authors of two of the very few histories of women in modern China: Lü Meiyi and Zheng Yongfu, *Zhongguo funü yundong*; and Zheng Yongfu and Lü Meiyi, *Jindai Zhongguo funü shenghuo* [A History of Women's Life in Modern China] (Zhengzhou,

periods, research topics included marriage, family, women's economic role, property rights, women and imperial rule, women's associations, and rituals and social customs relating to women. For the period from 1840 (historians in China date modern China from the Opium War of 1839–1842) to 1949 (the year the People's Republic of China was founded), research topics included women's movements affiliated with the CCP and the Nationalist Party as well as unaffiliated movements; women's journals; women's associations; the anti-footbinding movement; women's education, political participation, economic role, and career advancement; marriage and family; prostitution; attire; and women and religion.⁴²

The surge of academic interest in women's history in the 1980s was not an entirely homegrown phenomenon. Chinese scholars were extremely eager to "join the world" after decades of intellectual isolation. Scientific modernity, exemplified by the West, was advocated as holding the key to dismantling Maoism and building a democratic China. Transnational flows of ideas, people, and money constituted a prominent part of the enormous transformations then getting under way in China. Officials in the Women's Federation system and women academics embraced "women's studies" as a new area of women's activism. Since the term "women's studies" was understood variously as "research on women" (*funü yanjiu*) or "the academic study of women" (*funü xue*), anyone engaged in a research project on women could be seen as doing "women's studies," regardless of her or his specific institutional affiliation or conceptual framework. To many women scholars at universities, the English term "women's studies" connoted a new academic field that had legitimized women as the subject of scientific study in the West, an inspiring new concept that might enable them to create new intellectual and social spaces. Women scholars in Beijing, Shanghai, Zhengzhou, and other cities began to organize forums or salons to discuss feminist scholarship, often joined by feminist scholars from abroad. Courses on women's literature and women's history appeared at several universities, where women scholars also set up centers for research on women.⁴³

In the 1980s, Li Xiaojiang, a literature scholar at Zhengzhou University, played a prominent role in promoting scholarship on women, obtaining funds from the Ford Foundation to host national conferences and organize publications of scholarly works. The English phrase "gendered person" was rendered by Li Xiaojiang as *youxing ren*, "sexed person." Li theorized that the configuration and evolution of a female sex precedes and transcends class in nature: "The two belong to different categories (women belong to a human ontological category, and class belongs to a social historical category)."⁴⁴ This essentialized female sex, often explained in biological

1993). The latter is a pioneering work on the social history of women. The other major work on women in modern China that departs from political history is Luo Suwen, *Nüxing yu jindai Zhongguo shehui* [Women and Modern Chinese Society] (Shanghai, 1996).

⁴² See Hon-ming Yip, "Funü, xingbie ji qita," and Zheng Yongfu and Lü Meiyi, "Funü shi," for detailed discussions of major works on women in modern China. Li Yu-ning and Zhang Yufa, *Jindai Zhongguo nüquan yundong shiliao*, was a major source of material for mainland historians working on the modern period.

⁴³ For a detailed discussion of the rise of research on women in the 1980s, see Wang Zheng, "Research on Women in Contemporary China," in Gail Hershatter et al., eds., *Guide to Women's Studies in China* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999), 1–43.

⁴⁴ Li Xiaojiang, *Xiawa de tansuo* [The Exploration of Eve] (Zhengzhou, 1988), 32.

terms, helped to dislodge Maoist class analysis and enable the emergence of “woman” as a legitimate subject of research. Li edited an interdisciplinary series, including several volumes on Chinese women’s history that examined women and marriage in ancient times, concepts of women in early China, women’s movements before the rise of the CCP, and the transformation of women’s lives in modern China.⁴⁵

Although historians in the post-Mao era have consciously explored new ways of doing history, it is never easy to start anew conceptually.⁴⁶ For historians trained in Chinese “traditional” historiography—that is, empirical research plus Marxist historical materialism—it has been difficult to maintain a critical distance from deeply entrenched concepts such as linear progress, stage theory, scientific truth and objectivity, and the basic laws of historical development.⁴⁷ Historian Yang Nianqun identifies an emphasis on empiricism, a foundational Marxist political economics, and a dominant framework of modernity as conceptual constraints that currently affect many Chinese historians.⁴⁸ Like mainstream historians, women’s history scholars have found it difficult to depart from this dominant paradigm that provided “a model of ‘from oppression to liberation.’”⁴⁹

IT WAS IN THE PROCESS OF PREPARING for the Fourth UN Conference on Women in 1995 that women scholars in China experienced a significant “gender turn,” shifting from the 1980s emphasis on essentialized sex to an enthusiastic exploration of “gender analysis.” International funding agencies such as the Ford Foundation increased

⁴⁵ The series includes the following works on women’s history: Zheng Huisheng, *Shanggu huaxia funü yu hunyin* [Chinese Women and Marriage in Antiquity] (Zhengzhou, 1988); Du Fangqin, *Nüxing guan-nian de yanbian* [Transformations of the Concept of Women] (Zhengzhou, 1988); Lü Meiyi and Zheng Yongfu, *Zhongguo funü yundong*; and Zheng Yongfu and Lü Meiyi, *Jindai Zhongguo funü shenghuo*. In the early 1990s, Li Xiaojiang also started a large oral history project and compiled a four-volume series of women’s life stories collected by women scholars in different parts of China. Li Xiaojiang, ed., *20 shiji Zhongguo: Funü koushu shi congshu* [Twentieth-Century China: A Series of Women’s Oral Histories], vol. 1: *Rang nüren ziji shuohua: Wenhua xunzong* [Let Women Themselves Talk: Cultural Diversity]; vol. 2: *Rang nüren ziji shuohua: Minzu xushi* [Let Women Themselves Talk: Ethnic Stories]; vol. 3: *Rang nüren ziji shuohua: Qinli zhanzheng* [Let Women Themselves Talk: War Experiences]; and vol. 4: *Rang nüren ziji shuohua: Duli de licheng* [Let Women Themselves Talk: The Road to Independence] (Beijing, 2003).

⁴⁶ At a workshop on women’s and gender history in 2000, Gao Shiyu highlighted the continuing intellectual constraints on mainstream Chinese historians: “Empirical historiography as the basis, plus a Marxist and Leninist framework, has formed a fixed paradigm that has become a new norm that historians have followed. If you don’t write history this way, editors will not accept your work, as they will not consider it academic.” Gao Shiyu, “Funü shi: Dui chuantong shixue de jiejian yu chaoyue” [Women’s History: Learning from and Transcending the Traditional Historiography], in Du Fangqin, ed., “Yinru shehui xingbie, shixue fazhan xin qushi” [Introducing Gender: New Trends in Historiography] (unpublished conference proceedings, 2000).

⁴⁷ See debates and discussions at faculty training workshops in 1999 and 2000 recorded in two volumes compiled as unpublished conference proceedings: Cai Yiping, Wang Zheng, and Du Fangqin, eds., “Fu lishi yanjiu yi shehui xingbie” [Engendering the Study of History] (1999); and Du Fangqin, “Yinru shehui xingbie.”

⁴⁸ Yang Nianqun, “Meiguo Zhongguo xue yanjiu de fanshi zhuanbian yu Zhongguo shi yanjiu de xianshi chujing” [The Paradigm Shift in China Studies in the U.S. and the Current State of Chinese History], *Qingshi yanjiu* [Studies in Qing History], no. 4 (November 2000): 65–76.

⁴⁹ Du Fangqin, “Cong shehui xingbie shijiao yanjiu Zhongguo lishi: Geren jingyan” [Studying Chinese History from a Gender Perspective: A Personal Experience], in Du Fangqin, ed., *Funü xue he funü shi de bentu tansuo* [Local Exploration of Women’s Studies and Women’s History] (Tianjin, 2002), 183–199.

their support of Chinese feminists' participation in international conferences, as well as collaborative research and activist projects on women and gender, enabling large numbers of women scholars in China to interact with feminists outside China. At the "Engendering China" conference at Harvard in 1992, a group of renowned PRC scholars met with feminist scholars from the United States, Canada, England, and a number of other nations, as well as Chinese feminist scholars in the U.S.

This first gathering of women scholars from multiple locations, however, did not eliminate conceptual chasms, including the central one of "gender." The U.S. conference organizers were clear about their ambition to engender the field of Chinese studies and, with their empirical research on China, to critique universalizing tendencies in feminist theory. The PRC conference participants had published on a range of topics relating to women, but they were largely unaware of the feminist concept of gender. Prior to this point, the term "gender" may well have been used when English-speaking feminist scholars lectured at Chinese universities. But the Chinese translation of "gender," *xingbie*, either did not catch scholarly attention or generated ambiguous understandings. *Xingbie* is a modern Chinese word for "sex" that appears in household registration pamphlets and on many forms. People think that they know what *xingbie* is. At the conference, not surprisingly, much was lost in translation, beginning with the conference title itself. *Zhongguo zhi xingbie guannian*, as it was rendered in Chinese, meant "The Concept of Sex in China." The meaning of "Engendering China," and by implication the feminist agenda of the conference organizers, were basically opaque to the PRC participants.

The conference, however, brought together two groups of Chinese women scholars interested in feminist scholarship: those based in China and those in diaspora. The latter were members of the Chinese Society for Women's Studies (CSWS), founded in 1989 by PRC women pursuing graduate study in the United States. The two groups of women planned their first collaboration, a two-week workshop in China, in the summer of 1993, at which members of the CSWS called the attention of the participants to the feminist concept "gender," translating the term as *shehui xingbie* (social sex) to highlight its difference from the commonly used term *xingbie* (sex).⁵⁰

The CSWS subsequently produced several volumes introducing feminist scholarship to Chinese readers. Joan Scott's "Gender" was quoted in all three Chinese texts produced by the CSWS in 1995, and one gave a detailed summary of Scott's definition of gender and her arguments.⁵¹ In 1997, a full translation of the essay appeared in a volume of translated feminist texts titled *Women: The Longest Revolution*, selected by Lin Chun, a CSWS member.⁵² In 1998, the CSWS collectively

⁵⁰ This workshop on "Chinese Women and Development—Status, Health, and Employment" was hosted by the Center for Women's Studies at Tianjin Normal University, and was funded by the Ford Foundation. Six members of the CSWS joined more than one hundred women scholars from different parts of China, many of them key players in the emergent field of women's studies or renowned scholars on women's issues.

⁵¹ Sharon K. Hom and Xin Chunying, eds., *English-Chinese Lexicon of Women and Law* (Beijing, 1995); Bao Xiaolan, ed., *Xifang nüxing zhuyi yanjiu pingjie* [An Introduction to Western Feminist Studies] (Beijing, 1995); Wang Zheng, *Nüxing de jueqi: Dangdai Meiguo nüquan yundong* [The Rise of Women: The Contemporary Feminist Movement in the United States] (Beijing, 1995).

⁵² Li Yinhe, Lin Chun, and Tan Shen, eds., *Funü: Zui manchang de geming* [Women: The Longest Revolution] (Beijing, 1997).

produced a volume of translations, *Selected Works on Gender Studies*, which aimed to introduce the interdisciplinary field of women's and gender studies.⁵³ Included in this volume were Gayle Rubin's theorization of the "sex/gender" system and Joan Scott's conceptualization of "difference."

The question of which translated concepts will gain traction is a complicated issue determined by specific local dynamics. Of the many feminist theoretical concepts introduced to China by the CSWS, perhaps Maxine Molyneux's formulation of practical gender interest and strategic gender interest has the widest circulation, because many Chinese feminist scholars have been working on gender and development projects sponsored by international donors.⁵⁴ But this translated feminist concept took on local meaning through its use by a viable feminist movement seeking to intervene in the process of China's development. Equipped with a UN mandate to "mainstream gender" after 1995, feminists within and outside the Women's Federation system organized gender training workshops all over the country, pursuing both strategic and practical gender interests and widely circulating terms such as "mainstream gender," "gender analysis," "gender perspective," and "gender sensitivity" among policymakers, government officials, and participants in development projects.

Since the early 1990s, China has witnessed a drastic paradigm shift: from a dominant class analysis that erased gender relations, to the rise of gender as a legitimate category of analysis and a simultaneous eclipse of class analysis. By the time of the "gender turn," the Chinese Communist Party, with the support of a rising educated elite, had abandoned "class" as a category of analysis in the process of accelerating privatization and a capitalist economy. For feminists in the 1990s, "gender" became an empowering concept that provided them with a tool to critique hierarchical power relations without having to resort to Marxist or Maoist class analysis. Socialist practices and the discourse of equality between men and women, with all its flaws and inadequacies, had powerfully shaped the subjectivity of the urban educated women who constituted the main force of the post-Mao feminist movement. Many were keenly aware of the paucity of analytical tools when confronted with women's problems in a market economy. In this context, embracing "gender" expressed both a feminist attempt to promote the value of social justice against the resurgent ideology of Social Darwinism in the capitalist economy, and a feminist evasion of more sensitive issues such as class in the current context of political control.

Chinese academia has been slow to embrace gender as a useful category of analysis. This academic "backwardness" has been addressed to some extent since 1999, with important initiatives to support women's and gender studies curriculum development by the Ford Foundation, the Henry Luce Foundation, Oxfam, and the Lingnan Foundation.⁵⁵ With these crucial resources, feminist academics inside and

⁵³ Wang Zheng and Du Fangqin, eds., *Shehui xingbie yanjiu xuanyi* [Selected Works on Gender Studies] (Beijing, 1998).

⁵⁴ The concept entered circulation in China through Caroline O. N. Moser's article "Gender Planning in the Third World: Meeting Practical and Strategic Needs," *World Development*, no. 17 (November 1989): 1799–1825, translated in Wang Zheng and Du Fangqin, *Shehui xingbie yanjiu xuanyi*.

⁵⁵ The Ford Foundation's decision to sponsor a large feminist academic project was not made suddenly or in isolation. Feminists inside and outside China had worked closely for years to convince the Ford Foundation of the importance of women's and gender studies curriculum development in China.

outside China have collaborated to run faculty training workshops, publish teaching materials, translate feminist scholarship, create courses on women and gender, organize conferences, and set up graduate programs on gender studies.

While gender has been used as a central category in recent monographs in sociology, literature, education, international relations, anthropology, and public policy, historical studies have been slower to emerge.⁵⁶ Research and publications on contemporary topics are more likely to attract funding from the government and international foundations, and lack of publication funding has meant that historical monographs on women's history are few.⁵⁷ Nor has publishing articles on women's history been easy; most have appeared in minor university journals.⁵⁸

Still, feminist promotion of gender history has begun to make visible inroads in the historical discipline. Feminist historians compiled *Women and Gender in Chinese History*, the first collective attempt by Chinese historians to explore historical subjects from a gender perspective.⁵⁹ In 2004, the academic journal *Shixue lilun yanjiu* [Research on Historiography] created a special forum on women's and gender history, in which interested historians explore ways to apply Western feminist concepts to the study of Chinese history. They often express a sense of perplexity in this exploration, suggestive of the complexities involved in a major paradigm shift in the field of history in China.⁶⁰

The heritage of women's history in China legitimizes women as the subject of historical research without in any way requiring a feminist critical stance. Thus, viewing women's history as a feminist project is not an automatic move for Chinese historians of women's history. As a 2006 article puts it, historians' views of women's history fall roughly into two groups: one holding that any historical research on the subject of women is women's history, and a second arguing that only historical research involving feminist perspectives and positions is women's history.⁶¹ Those in the first group characterize a non-feminist women's history with male scholarly participation as a unique characteristic of Chinese women's history that marks a

The unsuccessful earlier attempts in this regard affected the orientation of the CSWS in the 1990s and made it focus more on activism in gender and development.

⁵⁶ Several important studies on gendered historical topics have been published by scholars from religious studies, anthropology, literature, and sociology. See, for instance, Shui Jingjun and Maria Jaschok, *Zhongguo qingzhen nüsi shi* [A History of Muslim Women's Mosques in China] (Beijing, 2002); Xia Xiaohong, *Wan Qing nüxing yu jindai Zhongguo* [Women in the Late Qing Dynasty and Modern China] (Beijing, 2004); Huang Yufu, *Jingju, Qiao he Zhongguo de xingbie guanxi (1902–1937)* [Chinese Gender Relations as Seen through Qiao in Peking Opera (1902–1937)] (Beijing, 1998).

⁵⁷ Major works on women's history in premodern China include Gao Shiyu, *Tangdai funü* [Women in the Tang Dynasty] (Xian, 1988), and Ding Yizhuang, *Manzu de funü shenghuo yu hunyin zhidu yanjiu* [Manchu Women's Lives and Marriage Institutions] (Beijing, 1999).

⁵⁸ According to Gao Shiyu, a historian of women in medieval China and a former editor of the prestigious journal *Lishi yanjiu* [Historical Research], until 1998 the journal had never published on women's history. From 1998 to 2000, when she was editor, the journal published four articles on women.

⁵⁹ Du Fangqin and Wang Zheng, eds., *Zhongguo lishi zhong de funü yu xingbie* [Women and Gender in Chinese History] (Tianjin, 2004).

⁶⁰ Gao Shiyu, in her discussion titled "Development and Perplexity," maps out major intellectual concerns of Chinese historians facing unfamiliar theories from the West. *Shixue lilun yanjiu* [Research on Historiography], no. 3 (2004): 97–107.

⁶¹ Lin Xiaofang, "Shehui xingbie lilun yu Zhongguo funü shi yanjiu" [Gender Theory and Chinese Women's History], *Gannan shifan xueyuan xuebao* [Journal of Gannan Teachers College], no. 2 (2006): 73–76.

positive difference from Western feminist scholarship by exemplifying a “harmonious” relationship between men and women in China.⁶² The move to identify or retain “Chinese characteristics” expresses a nationalistic desire to resist the onslaught of Western theories and paradigms, and/or a determination to engage in theoretical exploration of unique features of Chinese history that may revise and question Western theories.

The prominent role of men in elaborating the classical gender formation of *nan/nü* and in inaugurating the early-twentieth-century writing of Chinese women’s history must be considered in theorizing gender as a locally useful category of historical analysis. More time and exploration may permit the emergence of a clearer delineation of differences between the historical elaboration of sex/gender in Chinese male scholarly writings on *nan/nü* and the contemporary Western feminist theory of sex/gender. Anglophone historians of premodern China have already begun to pursue this line of inquiry. Their works demonstrate that feminist gender theory *is* novel in suggesting different and critical ways to study an ancient topic in Chinese scholarship—the *nan/nü* relationship.

Because the birth of women’s history in modern China was entangled in nationalist discourse in which women’s liberation figured prominently as a sign of modernity, it is a tricky business to launch a critique of nationalism without compromising the legitimacy of both women’s history and women’s liberation in mainstream discourse. It is exactly in this realm, however, that gender holds significant potential in the field of Chinese history. Global circulation of feminist scholarship could well enable the emergence of a critical examination of the construction of nationalism in modern China by placing male elites under the analytical lens of gender. Critical reflections and explorations of the history of Chinese feminism and its relationship with nationalism have already appeared.⁶³ Gender analysis has the potential to be used by Chinese feminists to redefine and remake both women’s history and women’s liberation, an intellectual project that will challenge still-dominant narratives of modern Chinese history centered on party history, nationalism, and modernity.⁶⁴

An ongoing issue is translation. Past efforts to translate feminist theories did not address the need to provide concrete examples of work in gender history. The recent availability in Chinese of Anglophone historical works that use gender as a key analytical category may facilitate intellectual exploration and development of new his-

⁶² Li Xiaojiang is the most vocal scholarly advocate of this view. Li Xiaojiang, “Wushinian, women zoudao nali?” [How Far Have We Come in Fifty Years?], *Zhejiang xuekan* [Zhejiang Academic Journal] 1 (2000): 59–65; Li Xiaojiang, ed., *Wenhua, jiaoyu yu xingbie* [Culture, Education, and Sex] (Nanjing, 2002).

⁶³ See Wang Zheng, Lydia Liu, and Dorothy Ko, “Cong ‘nǚjie zhong’ dao ‘nanjie zhong’: Nanxing zhuti, guozu zhuyi yu xiandaixing” [From ‘Women’s Bell’ to ‘Men’s Bell’: Male Subjectivity, Nationalism, and Modernity], in *Shehui xingbie* [Gender Studies], vol. 2, ed. Du Fangqin and Wang Zheng (Tianjin, 2004), 32–58; Song Shaopeng, “Minzu zhuyi yu nüquan zhuyi: Jindai minzu guojia guannian de jiangou yu nüxing geti guomin shenfen de quelì” [Nationalism and Feminism: The Construction of the Concept of a Modern Nation-State and the Establishment of the Identity of Female Citizen], in *Shehui xingbie* [Gender Studies], vol. 3, ed. Du Fangqin (Tianjin, 2006), 125–151. A recent special issue of the journal *Gender and History* titled *Translating Feminisms in China*, edited by Dorothy Ko and Wang Zheng, also presents critical examinations of both nationalism and feminism in Chinese history; *Gender and History* 18, no. 3 (November 2006).

⁶⁴ Hon-ming Yip, in “Funü, xingbie ji qita,” astutely assesses both the current state of efforts to develop gender history and the potential of gender history to transform the large field of Chinese history.

toriography on the part of Chinese historians.⁶⁵ Gendered history written in China, however, will have its own contours, and we should expect it not only to pose challenges to mainstream historical practice in China, but also to move beyond and offer critical reflections on the China scholarship already engendered by Joan Scott's work.

⁶⁵ A recent series of translated works on women and gender in the China field, edited by Beijing University literature professor Liu Dong, has helped to make Anglophone feminist historical work more widely available to historians in China. Gender historians at the University of Michigan are collaborating with historians at Fudan University on setting up a Ph.D. program with a focus on gender history.

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