

# Kitabhana

A Discussion with Marilyn Booth, Abosede George, and Mary E. John

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## The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory

Edited by Lydia H. Liu, Rebecca E. Karl, and Dorothy Ko

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### Introduction: A Global Intellectual History of Feminism

In her [He-Yin Zhen's] analysis, whereas the form of the injustice could and did shift, the logic of injustice was historically reinscribed and, in that sense, continuous. Defining “woman” through and embedding her into endlessly reproduced historicized social relations, thence to reconceptualize the past and the present in a historical mode, was the principle through which He-Yin Zhen perceived her contemporary world and conceived her own analytical and activist pursuits (10).

He-Yin Zhen (ca. 1884–1920?) belonged to a group of Chinese revolutionaries in exile who went to Tokyo in 1907, where they founded the short-lived though deeply influential journal *Tianyi* (*Natural Justice*), in existence only between 1907 and 1908. By then, our revolutionaries had been exposed to a number of ideologies that propagated social equality—from mission Christianity, to liberalism, socialism, anarchism, and Marxism. *The Birth of Chinese Feminism* (hereafter *BCF*) is concerned with the distinctive manner in which He-Yin's essays in *Natural Justice*, now largely forgotten, reprised the “woman question” by historicizing gendered power and making it central to a reconsideration of the value-form.

*BCF* is the result of an intellectual collaboration that is all too rare in the academy: the introduction to and translation of the text is the result of extended conversations among three highly regarded scholars, one of Chinese literary theory (Lydia Liu), and two of disciplinary history (Rebecca Karl and Dorothy Ko). By drawing attention to He-Yin's luminous text, the editors invite us to rethink foundational categories of feminist thought and the forms of emancipation imagined by it. It allows us to see the ways He-Yin's text understands feminism as a global project that was radically reconceptualized in the years leading up to the interwar period outside Europe and America. The forgotten history of He-Yin's text thus recalls other, more expansively conceived worlds of thought and debate that challenged the mental and territorial compartmentalization that nationalisms the world over produced.

Our contributors to this Kitabhana address *BCF* as an inaugural text for two reasons: first, for the manner in which the author-editors have framed and conceptualized the distinctive nature of He-Yin's interventions; and second, for the text's ability to address histories of modern gendering in non-Western locales, thus generating a global consideration of the social and political interventions that staged gender as a problem of both embodiment and inequality. Three key aspects of He-Yin's text gesture to the enormity of her conceptual undertaking and motivate our contributors' detailed and incisive engagements with

this text from their own location as scholars with a range of specific concerns: the historicity of gender; problems of translation and transvaluation; and political histories of colonial and semicolonial transition. Our intention in bringing He-Yin Zhen into conversation with the parts of the world with which this journal is concerned thus is to highlight the conceptual and contextual labor required for a truly global feminist intellectual history.

### The Problem of Developmentalism for a (Chinese) History of Gender

Her effort to make the category of gender relevant to Chinese conditions is a remarkable aspect of He-Yin's writings. Because sexual difference did not map onto socialized gender roles in Confucian thought, the category *nannu* (woman/man, female/male) was itself an invention and part of the "translingual inventions of neologism and supersigns in He-Yin Zhen's own time when the Chinese language, yet to be codified into its modern form, was open to exposures to foreign languages" (12). The notable point here is that even as sex/gender was linguistically conceived, it was simultaneously marked as a condition of social inadequacy with a biological basis: that is, naming gender was contiguous with a specific understanding of gender subordination.

*BCF* points to He-Yin Zhen's nimbleness in resisting this fixing of gender by instead marking *nannu* as a sign and symptom of historicized relations of injustice. That is to say, even as the term *nannu* made visible a deeper set of intellectual engagements with the theorization of inequality, the term could be used to rethink modes of distinction within a Confucian context as unjust and subordinating. Thus the editors of *BCF* note that the adequacy of the word to experience is not at issue so much as the ways that He-Yin Zhen's interventions were distinctive at a moment of word-making that accompanied the historical dislocation ensuing from the overthrow of the Manchu Qing dynasty. The term *nannu* allowed He-Yin Zhen to engage in a criticism of injustice and subordination in the Chinese *longue durée*, but it also challenged a biological conception of sex as the basis of socially constructed gender: "[He-Yin] coined the concept of *nannu jieji*, or 'nannu class,' with which to analyze and critique such a highly integrated and elaborated hierarchi-

cal system as the Chinese patriarchal family" (17). Thus we might say that the gap between *nannu* and gender was theoretically productive not despite but because of its historical contingency.

### Feminist Politics: The Materiality of Gender versus Its Predication on Sexual Difference

The introduction to *BCF* acknowledges the enormous import of Marxist thought (in all its variety) for enabling the association of *nannu* with a capacious, historicized understanding of unfreedom. Unlike nationalists and elite feminists who predicated a demand for rights and equality on female education, or on women's contribution to household ("care") labor, He-Yin Zhen argued that *nannu* took concrete shape in *shengji* (livelihood), a manifestation of the deeply inequitable processes on which the social order was based. In this light, gender inequity becomes the modal form for understanding all forms of inequality, rather than the cognate of a particular form of (sexual) subordination, such as modern patriarchy or the Confucian family. For this reason, He-Yin Zhen was critical of arguments regarding institutional demands for equality, seeing such arguments as themselves bound up in a practice of misrecognition. Unlike male (and some female) anticolonialists for whom gender equity was to be guaranteed by a state based on the principle of popular sovereignty, He-Yin Zhen was deeply suspicious of the "liberal idea of freedom that subordinated women's emancipation to the general logic of the state" (23). He-Yin's feminist commitments were thus articulated in the effort to politicize all domains of life and to think of activism as a kind of labor that required the interruption of the normative order.

Given He-Yin's obvious engagement with Marx's conception of abstract labor—and his understanding of the proletariat as the political subject produced through the antagonism between labor and capital—it is worth noting He-Yin's divergence from a position that associated a critique of alienated labor with specific forms of politics, for example, the strike or working-class militancy. Instead, the editors of *BCF* argue that He-Yin Zhen addressed labor as an organic, human activity, one that was not yet conceived as harboring within it "a fundamental antagonism, an instrumentalization, or a historical abjection" (25). Like her reconcep-

tulization of *nannu*, He-Yin Zhen conceived livelihood, rather than labor, as a creative process that could be returned to human activity and world making. “For He-Yin Zhen, then, the point is to explore how the commodification of women’s bodies over the long course of Chinese (and human) history has effectively crushed the possibility for any reimagining of the futurity of labor as genuinely free and autonomous” (25).

### Connection, Crisis, and Capitalist Modernity

He-Yin Zhen’s social theory was enabled by the specific context of political crisis and revolution that marked China’s transition into the twentieth century, but it was also keyed to a moment of political possibility on a global scale. Like the simultaneity of the Haitian and French Revolutions of the eighteenth century, with the former’s radical potential foreclosed by the centrality of the French Revolution to the modern theorization of equality and citizenship, it is easy to forget that the activism leading up to the Republican era (which was quickly followed by Maoism) *preceded* the Russian Revolution of 1917. Indeed, the “Marxism” to which He-Yin Zhen was exposed was in an experimental phase. As such, it contained anarchist and statist possibilities, included socialists with diverse intellectual and political allegiances, was marked by explorations of free love and sexual desire, and was always in conversation with other political ideologies, especially anticolonialism. Circuits of scholarly exchange, not to mention political exile in Japan, enabled the *Tianyi* group to understand the local problems toward which it aimed its intellectual interventions as symptoms of a global predicament.

He-Yin’s conception of the social was thus a direct response to a period of political crisis and revolutionary possibility marked by global economic integration, the inclusion of peasants in global markets as subsistence agriculture gave way to commodity production, the significant erasure of female labor from peasant production, and the increase in concubinage. The new connections made possible by capitalist modernity offered the chance to rethink earlier paradigms of gender re-

spectability and social hierarchy. Indeed, He-Yin appears to have been as adamant about the consistent linkage between sexual and social reproduction as she was about the need for new forms of sociality. While elite feminists claimed a family resemblance between the critique of patriarchy and the struggle for national self-determination, which was supposed to expand political space for the “woman question,” He-Yin Zhen appears to have arrived at a unique understanding of the relationship of gendered labor and patriarchy, which allowed her to conceive a feminist materialism that was before its time in its rigorous imagination of radical equality.

But the story does not end here. The editors take note of the extended collaboration between He-Yin Zhen and her husband, Liu Shipai. Not only did they cowrite a number of essays, it was also the case that many of He-Yin Zhen’s essays were mistakenly attributed to him. It is said that He-Yin Zhen entered an order of Buddhist nuns after the death of her husband and that she died of a “broken heart and psychic disorder” (51). One rumor has it that she would kowtow and wail in front of Peking University, where her husband had taught. To be sure, this was in keeping with a set of ritualized mourning practices with cultural legibility.<sup>1</sup> But these actions can just as easily be inserted into yet another narrative, that of fiery, modern love underlined by longing and melancholy. Perhaps He-Yin Zhen’s final acts are of a piece with her constant struggle to think the new through the available and with her insistence that we remain vigilant about the continuities between the old and the new in the face of their apparent disjuncture. The performativity of her grief—was it personal, or political?—announced the difficulty of remaking sexed sociality. But it also poses the question of how we read, what we see, and how we listen to critical thought when it announces itself in unlikely forms and places the world over.

—Anupama Rao

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1. I am grateful to Emily Sun for having alerted me to the polyvalence of He-Yin’s actions, and for inviting me to consider their discordant meanings for our present.