

Other Genders, Other Sexualities: Chinese Differences

*T*he study of Chinese women and gender since the late 1970s and early 1980s has profoundly enriched and complicated gender research and feminist theory. This special issue brings together six essays and one commentary that showcase, from a variety of critical perspectives, the dynamic, transnational nature of gender and feminist research in Chinese studies. Interrogating the totalizing perspectives on Chinese gender studies that typically treat China only in binary opposition to the West, this issue focuses on differences within China, probing the complex history of Chinese sexuality and gender formations.

On June 9–11, 2012, the Nanjing-Brown Joint Program in Gender Studies and the Humanities¹ hosted an international conference on gender and feminist research in Chinese studies. Participating scholars hailed from different parts of the world (mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, the United States, and Europe) and from diverse fields, such as history, literature, philosophy, and the social sciences. All this diversity provoked unprecedented and exciting discussion of the state of gender and feminist research in Chinese studies. The essays included here were selected from

the many innovative, inspiring papers presented at the conference, and they share a general focus on culture or theory.

The six essays span an impressive historical scope (220 BCE to the twenty-first century) and a variety of critical topics. Despite their different approaches, the essays can be roughly divided into three parts. The two essays by Li Xiaojiang and Tani Barlow in the first part address important theoretical issues related to gender studies and feminism: Marxist historical materialism, women's liberation, colonial and commercial modernity, and modern women as a universal event. Although Li's arguments are made from a postsocialist Chinese feminist perspective (particularly in the early 1980s) and Barlow's draw from Chinese commercial advertisements produced mostly in Manchuria under Japan's influence in the early twentieth century (1910s to 1930s), the issues they raise concern feminist theory and gender research all over the world. Dong Limin's and Yu Shiling's essays focus on two important periods in Chinese history that have largely been ignored in academic studies of gender during the past two to three decades: socialist China (1949–76) and early Chinese dynasties (Han and Wei, 202 BCE–265 CE). These essays offer new critical insights into the gender transformations of those two periods as well as later dynasties in Chinese history and the postsocialist era. The last two essays, by Sarah E. Kile and Chengzhou He, center on transgender performance and representation in relation to the market and commercial economy around the Ming-Qing transition (mid- and late seventeenth century) and in contemporary China. The two authors provoke serious questions about current theories of transgender performance that either emphasize individual agency in subverting gender norms or highlight political suppression of heterogeneous gender identity.

Li Xiaojiang has been a central figure in postsocialist Chinese feminism since the early 1980s. Her first important theoretical article, "The Progress of Humanity and Women's Liberation" (1985), was the first serious attempt in socialist China since 1949 to revise Marxist theory on historical development and women's emancipation. Its publication caused quite a stir in China, especially among women officials in the All-China Women's Federation. It was viewed as heresy because it deviated from Marxist theory on women's emancipation. At the same time, as the first enunciation of different voices, Li's article also attracted a group of female scholars, eventually leading to the rise of postsocialist Chinese feminism

independent from the All-China Women's Federation and the state in general (Li 11–12). My essay “Gender and Sexual Differences in 1980s China: Introducing Li Xiaojiang” gives a detailed introduction to Li in the 1980s and to the historical and cultural contexts of her article. Li's “Responding to Tani Barlow: Women's Studies in the 1980s” also addresses the context of her 1983 article.

In “The Progress of Humanity and Women's Liberation,” Li accepts the Marxist view on the origin of women's oppression in human history, namely, the rise of private property ownership and of the institutionalized family, which transformed human history, moving it from the matriarchal to the patriarchal age. She also accepts the five-stage history Marxists have delineated for social development as necessary for the progress of humanity. But Li questions Marxist theory on several major fronts, particularly challenging the theoretical assumption that gender issues can be addressed by transforming the mode of economic production and ending class struggles.

Studies of early twentieth-century Chinese women and feminism have established several important theoretical, historical, and political frameworks: nationalism, Western Enlightenment discourse, late imperial elite culture, anarchism, and Marxism. With increasing awareness of the transnational nature of modern Chinese women and feminism, translation has become an energizing site for research in the field. In her previously published scholarship, Barlow has critically (re)situated her research on early modern Chinese women and feminism in the global context of colonial modernity, exploring the complex formation (via theories and representations) of modern women as a social subject in the Chinese context.² In her essay included in this special issue, “Event, Abyss, Excess: The Event of Women in Chinese Commercial Advertisement, 1910s–1930s,” Barlow reiterates and further develops two important theoretical points: she posits colonial and commercial modernity as the global condition for studying modern women; and she considers modern women emerging in the early twentieth century, despite their heterogeneous qualifications and cultural differences, as a novel but universal subject or landmark. For Barlow, modern women as well as feminism cannot be understood as a natural fact, a philosophical category, an effect of language, or an array of performatively accreted social subjects. Rather, they are historically presented subjects constructed by social sciences as a modern system. Although Barlow bases her major arguments in this essay on Alain Badiou's set theory, she also critically challenges philosophers such as Badiou and

Linda Zerelli, centering her questions on the relationship between historicity, feminism, and the formation of modern social subjects.

“Historicizing Gender: A Study of Chinese Women’s Liberation from 1949 to 1966,” by Dong Limin, represents a recent critical attempt among China scholars to reexamine the socialist legacy in relation to women’s liberation and the role of Western liberal feminism in the study of Chinese gender. In the 1980s, scholars in both China and the United States held critical views of Chinese socialist policy and practice of gender equality, but their points of departure differed. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–76), ultraleftist ideology had penetrated all dimensions of society, and class struggle superseded gender and other important issues. In the 1980s, Chinese intellectuals reacted by launching a sustained, totalistic critique of the Cultural Revolution. The target of this critique was gradually extended to the whole socialist era, including the first Seventeen-Year Period (1949–66), when gender equality and other major socialist policies were made and implemented. At the same time in the United States, denigration of China as a remedy for the 1970s idealization of the Chinese Revolution, combined with the influence of Cold War ideology, produced a monolithically negative image of socialist China (Goldstein, Israel, and Conroy 266). Scholarship on socialist revolution and Chinese women retained the same sweeping view by first asking “Why has socialism not liberated women in China?” (Stacey 5) and then offering a resolute answer: “The socialist revolution in China was a patriarchal revolution”; the only difference was replacing Confucian patriarchy first with a new democratic patriarchy and then with patriarchal socialism (253). Viewed by many Western feminists during the late 1960s and early 1970s as the only successful revolutionary force on earth that had brought gender equality to a traditional society, socialist revolution was re-viewed/revealed in the 1980s as fundamentally patriarchal, a betrayal of its own previous feminist promise, and against women’s interests.

Modern Chinese history has witnessed a repetitive trend of making a total break with the immediate past, now perceived as monolithically repressive. The pattern repeated in 1980s China as the country repudiated the socialist experience. In her essay, Dong Limin addresses the historical problems caused by the breaks, particularly in the area of women’s emancipation. She also points out that Western feminist theories introduced into China in the 1980s and 1990s, which validated an individual subject in opposition to the state ideology and mainstream history, furthered the break with the collective, socialist past. Her main question

is how to form a dialectical approach to history and forge a productive dialogue between then and now, between socialism and feminism, rather than subjecting them to a singular frame or to current needs and consciousness.

Unlike the Western tendency to take sex difference as a fundamental and fixed opposition that is the central organizing principle of a symbolic system, sex and sex-linked symbols in premodern China were largely viewed as secondary to gender. The primacy of gender over sex in Chinese tradition is well established in academia (Brownell and Wasserstrom 26–27). However, because most influential scholarship on traditional Chinese gender and sexuality of the past several decades focuses on imperial China since the Song dynasty (960–1911), when women were increasingly tied to the cult of chastity and domesticity, premodern Chinese gender has been understood more significantly in relation to kinship and family. The root of Chinese gender in cosmology, although generally acknowledged in these studies, has become obscured. Even yin-yang dynamics shows a less mutable relationship in these studies of gender and sexuality.

Yu Shiling's essay, "Yin and Yang in and out of Equilibrium: Women's Revenge and the Construction of Han (202 BCE–220 CE) and Wei (220–265 CE) Culture," goes back to early Chinese history. By focusing on early classical texts, art, historical narrative, and poetry, Yu critically traces the formation of gendered difference as expressed through the dynamic relationship between yin and yang. Her study highlights several significant aspects of the yin and yang relationship that have been generally overlooked in the studies of Chinese gender and women: the importance of the yin and yang equilibrium, central to a flexible configuration of social positions; the equal moral demands from yin and yang subjects; and the prototype of heroic female figures in Chinese tradition.

The early Chinese cosmological configuration of gender allowed for cross-dressing, when men and women stepped out of their regular roles to restore equilibrium. Chinese history contains many female heroic figures who dressed as men in their fulfillment of extraordinary duties. The essays by Sarah E. Kile and Chengzhou He focus on cross-dressing and transgender practices in relation to commercialism and the market economy. In the context of late imperial China, when the rise of the commercial economy and urbanization caused reactive, stricter gender roles (see Ebrey), how should we situate and understand the emergence of cross-dressing performance and the popularity of transgender representations? Did seventeenth-century cross-gender presentation and

representation validate homosexual identity or generate alternative models for women? In “Transgender Performance in Early Modern China,” Kile provides insights into questions like these. By focusing on the work of Li Yu (1611–80), a prolific writer and cultural entrepreneur during the Ming-Qing transition, Kile explores the relationship between the market circulation of silver and the exercise of elite male power and sexual fantasy in a commercial era. Chengzhou He’s essay, “Trespassing, Crisis, and Renewal: Li Yugang and Cross-Dressing Performance,” turns to contemporary China, closely examining the complex, multidimensional effects produced by the cross-dressing singing star Li Yugang. He situates Li’s phenomenon in relation to the commercial market, state policy, Chinese aesthetic tradition and mass media, the international stage, and Western theories on transgender performance, paying particular attention to the ambivalent and sometimes contradictory impacts of Li’s performance. The ambivalent significance associated with Li’s cross-dressing performance calls into question any one-dimensional approach to transgender practice, inviting a more intricate analysis of the dynamic and changing relationship between the global market, politics, theory, and commercial culture.

Taken together, the essays collected in this special issue significantly demonstrate the diverse nature and globally overdetermined history of Chinese gender, sexuality, and their studies. More important, these essays have raised serious questions concerning theory, geopolitics, and history, provoking critical insights and new perspectives for future approaches to differences, culture, and feminist thought.

I would like to thank Chengzhou He, codirector of the Nanjing-Brown Joint Program in Gender Studies and the Humanities, as well as other colleagues at Nanjing University who were essential to the success of the conference and to the early planning of this issue. I am most grateful to my colleagues and friends Edward Gunn, Alexander Des Forges, Louisa Wei, Casey Lee, and Jingyuan Zhang, who responded to my call for translations with enthusiasm, dedication, and excellence.

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Notes

- 1 This special issue was made possible primarily by the Nanjing-Brown Joint Program in Gender Studies and the Humanities. Established in 2008, the joint program serves as a major transnational collaboration between the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences at Nanjing University and three academic units at Brown University: the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women, the Cogut Center for the Humanities, and the East Asian Studies Department.
- 2 See Barlow's *The Question of Women in Chinese Feminism* and "History and the Border."

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