



China Perspectives

2009/1 | 2009

Chinese Society Confronted with AIDS

Louise Edwards, Gender, Politics, and Democracy: Women's Suffrage in China

Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2008, xii, 334 pp.

Arif Dirlik



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/4786>

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2009

Number of pages: 102-105

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Arif Dirlik, « Louise Edwards, Gender, Politics, and Democracy: Women's Suffrage in China », *China Perspectives* [Online], 2009/1 | 2009, Online since 01 April 2009, connection on 28 October 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/4786>

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- 1 Gender, Politics, and Democracy offers an account of Chinese women's struggles for political suffrage from around the turn of the twentieth century to the eve of the Communist victory in 1949. Edwards argues that the term "canzheng," suggesting political participation in general, was understood by female political activists in the first half of the twentieth century in the more concrete sense of "suffrage," "centring on the twin rights to vote and to stand for election associated with the full political franchise of full citizens"(17). The book's focus on the public political activities of women represents a refreshing change from the preoccupation with sexuality and the private life, especially among US scholars, that often says more about the concerns of contemporary American feminists than about their Chinese subjects. Indeed, a basic argument of the study is that the call for women's suffrage sought to force a shift in the consciousness of both men and women from a privatising understanding of women's virtue in terms of sexual chastity to a public sense of virtue, hitherto monopolised by men, which measured worth according to public norms ability and accomplishment, especially education.
- 2 The account is guided by three premises. First, while the "suffragists" were only part of a broader women's movement, and restricted in their aims and constituency, they were historically significant both for what they represented and what they achieved. The domination of the women's movement by radicals from the 1920s, and in hindsight consciousness with the victory of Communism, has consigned the suffragists to historiographical obscurity as a marginal elite group of women largely irrelevant to mainstream concerns with issues of social reform and transformation. While the suffrage movement had developed a limited mass following by the 1920s, the leadership came from the ranks of elite professional women, mostly from wealthy backgrounds

and foreign educated, which rendered the movement suspect in the eyes of radicals. And while these leaders spoke to social issues in a limited way, the movement remained focused throughout on women's right to suffrage, raising questions about the role private ambition played in their activism. Edwards argues, nevertheless, that while progressive men also took a significant role in the promotion of women's rights, the women who pursued the cause of suffrage provide important evidence of women's agency in achieving women's goals. Equally, if not more importantly, in the priority they gave to political rights, the suffragists were instrumental in fostering a consciousness of women as not just a social but also a political category with distinct collective interests of their own. This also rendered them a component of women's political movements globally.

- 3 Edwards argues, secondly, that while the suffragists were also nationalists, this should not detract from their feminism in a reductionist privileging of nationalism, which is a pervasive problem in the historiography of modern China. Nationalism may have been a driving force of Chinese politics, but it was itself a site of contestation and interpretation in conflicting visions of China. She rightly points out that nationalism carried a different meaning at different times and for different constituencies. "As the women's suffrage movement...explored gendered notions of political citizenship," she writes, "they invoked these ever-fluctuating conceptions of nationalism and national benefit as it suited their political goals" (5). Rather than political opportunism, we might add, the deployment of nationalism in feminist causes is best grasped in terms of a feminist standpoint that, similarly to other political positions, perceived nationalism in terms of particular group interests and political visions.
- 4 Finally, and most importantly, the suffragist movement was driven by a simultaneous affirmation of equality and difference between men and women. Equality arguments were nourished by assertions of equality among all human beings, the demands of modern civilisation, and evidence of women's participation in the struggle for national independence and nation-building. They served to challenge the denial to women of their qualifications for political participation, as well as to demand equal access to education, property, and divorce. "Difference arguments" pointed to the fundamental part women played in public causes, not only in public roles but also in their private roles as wives and mothers. These arguments were utilised in the assertion of women's collective interests, as well as in the securing of guaranteed quotas for women in political institutions. As with the flexible deployment of nationalism, this "pragmatic" approach to issues of women's equality underscores Edwards' departure from feminist scholarship that has questioned the feminism of the Chinese women's movement in the name of a "pure feminism."
- 5 The study pursues these themes chronologically from the Republican revolution of the late Qing through the social upheavals of the 1920s, Kuomintang rule in the 1930s, and the Civil War period following World War II. While the arguments for suffrage assumed new dimensions in response to changing circumstances and with the inclusion of new generations, the movement remained distinguished by its focus on politics, its militant activism, and a remarkable continuity in leadership. The fact that the same names appear from generation to generation -- in some cases, such as the medical educator Dr. Wu Zhimei, throughout the Republican period -- serves as *prima facie* evidence of the commitment of the movement's leaders to their cause, as well as their adaptability to changing circumstances.

- 6 Edwards is an able guide, deftly sketching out the political developments in each period, and leading the reader through the organisational and intellectual responses on the part of the women's movement. Women in the late Qing participated in the nationalist movement, even in auxiliary military activities, but they asserted their presence in calls for the rights of "women citizens" (nü guomin). The political identity formed during this period served them well in the early Republic when they continued their ideological agitation and organisational activities for political inclusion, even storming the parliament in Nanjing for its refusal to eliminate from the electoral laws discrimination on the basis of sex. At the same time, they promoted greater access to education for women, both to foster women's political consciousness, and to enfranchise them by meeting the educational and wealth criteria that at the time determined political participation.
- 7 With the disintegration of the central government following Yuan Shikai's death in 1916, the focus of the women's movement turned to provincial-level activity in Hunan, Guangdong, and other locations, where women registered some success as sympathetic political leaders responded to their demands for an end to discrimination based on sex. But the important development of these years came with the May Fourth period and the revolutionary movement of the 1920s, which placed women's liberation on the national agenda. This period also brought an expansion in the political consciousness of women with social and ideological radicalisation in the Kuomintang, and the recruitment of a new generation of women into the newly established Communist Party. Edwards observes that these developments brought a new awareness of class to women activists who hitherto had conceived of franchise rights as "equality between men and women of the educated and privileged classes. Yet the increasing awareness of class furthered the development of the conception that women were unified as a group because of their collective disadvantage relative to men." (28)
- 8 The latter, however, may have been more of an abstraction than Edwards is willing to admit. With the new consciousness came increased attention to social issues such as the rights of working women and concubinage. At the same time, however, these issues proved divisive, as the woman's movement now had to confront the contradictory strategies implied by class vs. gender analysis. The issue of concubinage was even more threatening to women who hitherto had sought in virtuous behaviour proof of their qualification for political participation. These divisions were exacerbated by the Kuomintang-Communist split in 1927, and the subsequent surge of conservatism in the Kuomintang, which proposed to return women to their traditional roles as "good wives and wise mothers" (185). The conservative backlash was a setback for the women's movement, but in Edwards' telling it was also used by women to their political advantage in asserting that their difference as wives and mothers entitled them to special recognition. The Kuomintang itself was committed politically to an egalitarian system. Despite the conservative turn in the mid-1930s, it legislated equality between men and women in matters of divorce and property rights, and the Constitution it promulgated in 1936 recognised the right to vote and be elected for all citizens above a certain age, regardless of educational and wealth requirements. Women were able to take advantage of the new political equality to argue for special quotas for women as a disadvantaged group, equal to but different from men. Their demands were met in the 1946 amendment to the national constitution, on the eve of the Communist victory over the Kuomintang. In her concluding pages, Edwards wonders if this was actually a

“hollow” victory for women. While the women’s movement seemed to have achieved the goals it had pursued for nearly four decades, the majority of Chinese women “remained divorced from these ideas and activities” (231). It remained for the new Communist government, committed to social transformation, to bring these other women into the political process.

- 9 Had this question been raised and confronted earlier, the study might have engaged problems in the women’s movement more rigorously than it does. While Edwards’ sympathy for the political struggles of elite professional women enables her to rescue the suffrage movement from historiographical obscurity, it also leads her to gloss over problems that emerge in the tensions in her narrative. The study consistently refers to participants in the women’s movement as “feminists” without considering the difficulties presented by that term, which is no more transparent than other terms such as class or nation. It does not take a “pure” or “fundamentalist” approach to question whether or not an elite women’s movement devoted to securing political participation for a restricted group of women might indeed be considered a feminist movement. While a radical definition of feminism as a commitment to the transformation of the political, social, ideological, and cultural structures of patriarchy may be too restrictive at a time when the likes of Sarah Palin, Hilary Clinton, and Condoleezza Rice have risen to power as establishment figures, and there are Chinese women who identify themselves as Confucian, it is still necessary to wonder how far the term can be stretched without losing its meaning -- a problem for any political concept.
- 10 Edwards’ use of the term, moreover, leads to the obscuring of significant differences among Chinese women, both socially and politically, even though some of these differences are quite apparent in the narrative. I have already alluded to one such instance in the author’s reference to awareness of class as an expansion of the consciousness of women as a collectivity, when it is quite obvious that the issue of class also divided women in the movement. There is more than a hint of ideological projection in the reference in the same context to “working-class or peasant sisters” when the suffragists were barely aware of the existence of those “sisters” who lived in a world apart from theirs -- as the book acknowledges in the conclusion. The study is clearly intended to rescue the women’s movement in China from its appropriation for revolutionary historiography, but it insists in its discussion of the 1920s on treating the Communist and professional “bourgeois” movements as if they were part and parcel of the same struggle. On the other hand, there is little discussion of the differences among the suffragists themselves, except the rare acknowledgement of disagreements occasioned by the question of admitting concubines into their ranks, and references to conservative women in the Kuomintang in the concluding part of the study. Regardless of their roles in the establishment, Sarah Palin, Hilary Clinton, and Condoleezza Rice represent different politics of the establishment, and Gloria Steinem knows the difference! More extended critical engagement of such differences might have revealed deeper fissures in the women’s movement in China than the author might have desired, but it is no less necessary for understanding problems in the women’s movement than confronting divisions within the Communist movement or other political movements.
- 11 Finally, the author might have inquired further into one of the fundamental premises that inform the argument: the possibility of equality in difference. It is possible that women used these arguments opportunistically, or for contingent tactical purposes. It

is also possible that they used them with full conviction. In either case, there remains a question of what they might tell us about the suffragists, perhaps more in the latter than in the former case. It seems somewhat disingenuous for elite women to have portrayed themselves as a disadvantaged group deserving of quotas much as ethnic minorities and overseas Chinese (212), which would suggest that they were not beyond tactical opportunism in their pursuit of political participation and power. On the other hand, if the women activists did indeed believe that they were naturally endowed with certain characteristics that distinguished them from men, as conservative men had argued all along, would that suggest that while they struggled for political equality, they simultaneously reinforced the foundations of patriarchy? In other words, how do we distinguish women's movements politically? Are "Confucian women" the logical outcome of a movement that sought equality for women but remained wedded to the familistic and cultural assumptions of the society it sought to change -- much the same as a Sarah Palin may be viewed as one offshoot (and an increasingly infectious offshoot) of women's movements in the United States? The question is larger than the Chinese women's movements, and for that very reason it is necessary to uncovering its contradictions.

AUTHOR

ARIF DIRLIK

Professor of Chinese Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong