

## Interview with Norman Smith

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**Sikata Banerjee**, University of Victoria, is the author of *Warriors in Politics: Hinduism, Nationalism, Violence, and the Shiv Sena in India* and *Make Me a Man! Masculinity, Hinduism, and Nationalism in India*, as well as articles in *Women and Politics*, *Asian Survey*, *Women's Studies International Forum*, and *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. Her latest project is a book manuscript, *On the Borderlands of Nation, Empire and Gender: Armed Masculinity and Muscular Nationalism in India and Ireland*.

**Norman Smith**, University of Guelph, conducts research in the areas of modern China, women's history, and the Northeast of China (Manchuria). He is the author of *Resisting Manchukuo: Chinese Women Writers and Japanese Occupation* and articles published in *Journal of Women's History*, *Modern China*, *Modern Asian Studies*, and *International History Review*. He is currently completing a manuscript on Chinese narratives of alcohol, opiate, and addiction in the popular culture of the Northeast of China in the early twentieth century, siting them at the intersection of gender ideals, consumer culture, and Japanese imperialism.

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### Introduction

*Resisting Manchukuo* reveals the literary world of Japanese-occupied Manchuria (1931-1945) and examines the lives, careers, and literary legacies of seven prolific Chinese women writing during this period. In his extremely compelling book, Norman Smith provides a nuanced and intersectional analysis of nation, empire, and literary texts. His work is a complex study of the interweaving of gender, race and, to an extent, class, within women's experiences of occupation and the manner in which women utilized their location within an imperial space to resist colonialism. An important aspect of this anti-colonial resistance was also an implicit challenge to patriarchy. One of the intriguing arguments advanced by Professor Smith is the notion that these Chinese women, by writing these texts during Japanese occupation, were tracing an interesting social and literary trajectory between "resistance to" and "collaboration with" imperial presence. Drawing on an inter-disciplinary methodology and theoretical framework, this book makes a great contribution to women's and gender studies.

### Sikata Banerjee

Congratulations on winning the 2009 CWSA/ACEF annual book award for *Resisting Manchukuo: Chinese Women Writers and the Japanese Occupation*. Can you give us a little background on how you were drawn to this particular topic?

### Norman Smith

Thank you, Professor Banerjee. I do thank the CWSA for this exceptional honour. I am really grateful for the recognition for *Resisting Manchukuo* and for this opportunity to discuss my research.

I began this project about ten years ago in a graduate seminar on modern Chinese history at the University of British Columbia. I wanted to learn about Chinese

women's experiences in the Northeast of China, or Manchuria, during the Japanese occupation in the 1930s and 1940s. The area is as large as France and Germany combined, and then had a population of about 30 million. But despite the size of the area and its population, and the length of the occupation, there were few scholarly studies on the colonial period and most of them did not discuss women. Even Ronald Suleski's authoritative bibliography, *The Modernization of Manchuria*, does not have a single entry especially pertaining to women and their experiences. As well, most works were primarily focused on Japanese- and government-issued sources, not materials produced by the vast majority of the population - the Chinese. Officials in the colonial state of Manchukuo explicitly advocated a multi-ethnic modernity project, and I wanted to know what gendered and Chinese dimensions there were to it.

Some years before, in 1992, I had participated in a Simon Fraser University field school in Changchun, which had been the capital of Manchukuo. So I returned there, determined to find whatever materials I could. I had limited success in that first research trip, as workers in the archives and libraries were less than thrilled with the topic of Japanese occupation and my intended women-centred focus probably compounded their distaste. Without their cooperation, working in those institutions proved quite fruitless. Undeterred, I turned to book stores and markets, and ultimately found two 1940s state of the field articles on the most popular women writers, providing me the names of the women who would eventually become the focus of the book: Dan Di, Lan Ling, Mei Niang, Wu Ying, Yang Xu, Zhu Ti, and Zuo Di.

I returned to Vancouver, where an internet search of the University of Toronto library turned up a copy of Mei Niang's collected works, which had been published in 1998 - in Brampton! The editor of that volume, the author's daughter Liu Qing, then lived in Mississauga. When I contacted her, it turned out that Mei Niang had just gone back to Beijing after a visit to Canada. So off I went

to China, again, and eventually met four of the surviving women. Interviewing them, and going through the incredibly difficult task of locating as many of their writings as I could, really brought the project to life for me. That process also underlined the complex nature of their legacies, which had not only been hidden from view for decades but the materials they had produced were widely dispersed and some materials still remain missing.

When I returned to China that second time for this research, I was cheered on by the Vice-Chair of the Changchun Women's Federation, Chang Guizhi, and librarians Liu Huijuan and Zhao Shuqin, all of whom were excited at the prospect of these local women's works being brought to light again. I was also treated very generously by scholars, such as Pan Wu, who welcomed me into the field and shared precious materials and time. Many of them were surprised that this project was being taken on by a Canadian man. But the project proved irresistible to me - as I delved further into their lives and careers, their complicated stories became ever more compelling. I must say that my Canadian background served me well, both in terms of the welcome I received in China and in my attempt to understand Manchukuo's colonial context. I am not sure whether being a man was a help or a hindrance, but it certainly added a curiosity factor to the project, as my gender influenced how some viewed the work. At times I was aware that some people felt that I was wasting my time on a project of little worth. A few even asked: Why waste valuable time on a study of women in a historical period mired in shame in a backwater like the Northeast? Why was I not studying the men writers who faced even more difficulties? Would it not be more appropriate for a woman to work on this woman question? Can a man really grasp a woman question? That is a question I constantly grapple with. At other times I felt that being a man added legitimacy to the project - that if a man were studying the topic, then this woman question had to be important. My untiring search for their

writings, for example, was not only tolerated by library staff, but I suspect on some level it was also expected. Through it all, I was convinced that I was doing something that needed to be done, so I just kept at it.

### **Sikata Banerjee**

When you read the works by the seven women authors, what were some of your favourite themes? Did you have a favourite author? If so, who and why?

### **Norman Smith**

Those early state of the field articles that I found described in broad strokes the critical nature of the writers' work, but I wondered about the extent to which they could really have written critically within and about a regime that was infamous for its violence; Manchukuo has even been described by the Japanese historian Yamamuro Shin'ichi as an "Auschwitz state." To engage in open criticism of the society was to invite terrible consequences yet that is precisely what the group of writers did, both individually and collectively.

The first works I read were by Mei Niang. The passionately critical tone of her stories, especially *Xie* (Crabs) and "Yu" (Fish), stoked my interest in the writers because I had not anticipated such forthright rejection of the patriarchy and imperialism that lay at the foundations of Manchukuo society. *Xie* depicts the occupation-era decline of a wealthy Chinese family living in the capital of Manchukuo while "Yu" describes a woman's rejection of the men in her life and their attempts to control her. Mei Niang is certainly the most published of the writers, and *Xie* was even awarded a literary prize as novel of the year for the Japanese empire in 1944. The others were all very gifted as well. Dan Di's vivid and sometimes terrifying depictions of struggles in the ethnically diverse population provided dark social commentary that challenged me to think even more deeply about the writers' objectives and how they were able to achieve them. Of the more entertaining works, one of my favourites, Zhu Ti's short story "Da

*Heilongjiang de youyu*" (Melancholy of the Black Dragon River), employs a stream of consciousness technique as a woman recounts an inter-ethnic relationship in thought provoking ways, through metaphors of water and borders in the frontier land. Lan Ling's poetic descriptions of life in the northern and western regions of the area were equally enjoyable. And the real-life experiences of Yang Xu in the entertainment industry provided me with yet another entree to their times; she was famous for having recorded the national anthem as well as for her "wild horse character," on which she often mused and that became fodder for social commentators in popular media.

The writers produced an incredibly rich variety of materials with different formats, individual styles and priorities. Despite their differences, though, each of them sought to "expose reality" in her own way so I felt that a monograph on them as a group could illuminate a common yet diverse legacy, shedding light on their particular experiences as Chinese women living under Japanese colonial rule. In *Resisting Manchukuo*, I divide discussion of their work into two main categories: first, their attacks on patriarchy and, second, their depictions of colonial society. In terms of patriarchy, I demonstrate how the writers in their work critiqued constructs of "patience and endurance," love, marriage and childbirth, and sex - each of which were key features of the "good wife, wise mother" ideal that officialdom sought to promote. While the ideal was obedient, submissive married women, these writers vigorously criticised women's unequal relationships with men and the patriarchal structures that influenced their development. I also reveal how the writers' descriptions of Manchukuo society are dominated by darkness, pessimism, disorder, and destitution. The literature's negativity openly challenges what officials trumpeted as the "paradise land" of Japan's imperial project, Manchukuo.

### **Sikata Banerjee**

In chapter two, there is a postcard in which

Manchuria is depicted as a woman dancing in the arms of the Russian empire (represented by a masculine) figure. This feminization of a colonial possession to indicate weakness, need for protection, and a lack of martial strength is quite a common trope in many imperial histories. Did the Japanese empire continue this feminization of Manchuria, and if so, what is in your opinion of the dynamic between these authors and this gendered process?

### **Norman Smith**

That postcard from the early 1900s is representative of a genre of art in which Manchuria, and later the colonial state of Manchukuo, is regularly depicted either as a woman or a child, most often with Japan as the parent or otherwise dominant male figure. This trope of local weakness and the need for protection was perpetuated in Japanese-produced materials and state structures; the emperor of Manchukuo, better known as the last Qing dynasty emperor Pu Yi, was even accorded a subordinate position within the Japanese imperial family, thus publicly formalising that hierarchy at the highest level of society. Louise Young has written of Japanese enthusiasm for their state's imperial project in Manchuria. Many Japanese believed that it was only right for their military to be in Manchuria after the great expense in terms of life and resources borne by Japan in regional wars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As that line of thinking went, the Japanese empire had a responsibility to liberate and protect militarily weaker neighbouring societies from the grip of European and American dominance; to secure "Asia for the Asians." While in theory that may have sounded positive, in reality the Manchukuo regime was dominated by a harsh military presence, ostensibly to protect the region's vast resources and "virgin" lands against the inroads of militarists, communists, fascists, and bandits - the very narratives that you point to in other imperial histories. Japanese imperialists learnt from their rivals in short order and didn't waste any time in engaging

with the same tropes and grand narratives. But, at the same time, that feminization could also symbolize strengths that might be attained through ideal womanhood; Japanese women, for example, were encouraged to become "continental brides" or "continental mothers" to provide sustenance to the colonizing mission through their "patience and endurance."

The writers' lives and careers also attest to the complicated dynamic between the colonized and the colonizers. They were all at least partly educated in Manchukuo and therefore experienced from within, at quite a young age, Japan's colonial project. Two of them, Mei Niang and Dan Di, even pursued advanced studies in Japan. Both of them returned to the mainland emboldened by their experiences and determined to continue their careers, all the while beholden to Japanese bosses, censors, and critics who could end their careers at any time. In Manchukuo, they all forged public, extra-domestic careers that enabled them to criticise contemporary society while Japanese intellectuals and officials either supported their work, ignored it, or dismissed it as "women's writings." In fact, Zhu Ti and her husband Li Zhengzhong later argued that official misogyny enabled the women to forge their careers precisely because officialdom did not recognise their value. Regardless of how they were viewed by the Japanese colonial regime, though, the post-liberation Chinese communist regime viewed men and women writers as relatively equal, and subsequently most of them suffered decades of persecution for their colonial-era careers, regardless of the critical tone of their writings. Although the writers believed that they had done nothing wrong, or at least nothing worse than the other 30 million people living in Manchukuo, their war-time association with the Japanese was taken as proof of 'traitorous' behaviour and they and their families suffered enormously.

### **Sikata Banerjee**

The Japanese Manchukuo regime embraced and advocated a conventionally domesticated woman as the anchor of society. These seven

authors challenged this feminine image. Yet, they were more or less lauded. How can this be reconciled? Were there any socio-economic changes in female educational and labour force participation that led to this type of backlash?

### **Norman Smith**

As in other societies of the time, especially Manchukuo's allies, Japan, Germany, and Vichy France, but also its enemies, such as the Republic of China, women were expected to marry, bear children, and manage the domestic sphere. In fact, Manchukuo was idealised by its supporters as a place where "men will have their rights and the women their home." Yet women were also expected to fulfil more "modern" roles of working outside of the home when necessary for the state or the men in their lives. Prasenjit Duara has labelled this a form of "tradition-within-modernity." The Manchukuo regime did indeed promote the ideal of the "good wife, wise mother," but such a person was expected to be self-sacrificing and willing to engage in extra-domestic responsibilities, especially as the war escalated. Women were encouraged to attend schools, which taught literacy and vocational skills, while a few institutions, especially the ones attended by these women, allowed for more scholarly pursuits. These writers employed their colonial educations to pursue high-profile careers yet for all their accomplishments officialdom appeared to have simply dismissed them as women whose significance rarely extended beyond the bounds of the "woman question" and who were therefore seen to be of little consequence to the military regime. The women worked as writers, editors, and teachers. All became wives and mothers despite their critiques of marriage, and on their own terms. The critical stances that dominate their writings informed and reflected the ways in which they lived their lives and perceived themselves as Chinese women in, and subjects of, a Japanese colonial regime.

While discussing Manchukuo with the survivors, a word that constantly arose was

*fuza* - complicated. Manchukuo was a multi-ethnic colonial state driven by a "modernity" project that was riven with contradictions. In terms of cultural production, there were intellectuals and officials who supported the writers, while others viewed them and their work as irrelevant or of only limited value, to other women perhaps. So while cultural functionaries sought to quell criticism of the state, Chinese men writers who engaged in such critiques were threatened, jailed, driven to exile, or killed. Yet these women writers were for the most part only targeted for persecution in the last year of colonial rule. Their treatment allowed for the creation of a vibrant yet long-forgotten Chinese anti-patriarchal, anti-colonial literature formed within the Japanese colonial context.

For me, this project has been deeply rewarding because of the unexpected paths it took me on, the people I met, and the fact that it reinforced for me the importance of women-centred research even as the discipline of Women's Studies faces increasing challenges in these times. I really am grateful to the CWSA for confirming in this public way that the project was important, after all.

### **Sikata Banerjee**

Thank you for your compelling and persuasive responses. One last question. What are some topics you are exploring for future research? Will they build on this work and/or explore other historical themes from a gendered perspective?

### **Norman Smith**

My current research builds upon *Resisting Manchukuo* by examining shifting notions of alcohol and opiate use in early twentieth century Northeast China. As in other times and places, drug consumption and prohibition were linked with constructs of gender (especially ideals of womanhood) and modernity. My new project focuses on advertising, medical reportage, and other forms of media to analyse, for example, linkages between consumption and modern

women's professions, such as work in the opium industry. I also examine rehabilitation treatments, which reflected contemporary gender ideals and more general notions of healthful modern living, but which have subsequently been dismissed as inconsequential. To date, drug history in China has centred primarily on opiates, especially in terms of imperialist politics and economics. My work follows on Zheng Yangwen's more social-oriented work on opiates and their wider existences. I also focus on alcohol, a subject that has only recently begun to spur interest in China. My work will contribute to that field through explicitly women-centred and gendered analyses. Whether in advertisements promoting alcohol consumption or medicines combating its poisons, or in accounts of the latest rehabilitation treatments, constructs of "man" and "woman" contributed to how individuals viewed themselves, their health, and the state of local society and the nation. I look forward to contributing in this new way to understandings of the Northeast's history - a subject that promises to get even more complicated yet clearer with sustained focus on the "woman question" and gender ideals.