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Re-Envisioning Gender in China: (De)Legitimizing Gazes

Foreword

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Foreword

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Almost half a century has passed since Anglophone feminist scholars began to write about women in China's twentieth-century revolutions (Young 1973; Wolf and Witke 1975; Davin 1976; Croll 1978). Their inquiry quickly expanded beyond iconic images of women unbinding their feet, taking up the pen or the spear, and sallying forth to claim their place in a revolutionary modernity. Calling into question the late Qing/May Fourth images of Chinese women as sequestered and ignorant, scholars have examined the history of educated women and restored accounts of women's visible and invisible labour to late imperial and Republican history. They have explored the symbolic work that gender performed in passionate discussions about China's place in a world of predatory imperialist powers. They have posed questions about the Communist Party's conceptualisation of gender equality and the effects of Mao-era socialist construction on gendered life. And they have attempted to broaden their research beyond the events of high politics, asking how the understanding of social change would shift if viewed through the analytic lens of gender. These questions have generated a large body of scholarship, greatly enriched in recent decades by the work of gender scholars writing in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the Chinese mainland. All the while, China has been changing in a fast-moving and unevenly enacted process of economic reform, inspiring new questions and explorations across the disciplines of history, anthropology, sociology, literary and visual studies, politics, and of course gender studies.

And yet, stubborn silences endure, some of them perhaps permanently. It remains difficult to grasp what happened when the everyday of gendered labour and social relations met the circulation of norms and imperatives for what women should do and be. How did a practice such as footbinding, once a part of the everyday, become a shameful form of child abuse, not just in the writings of intellectuals but in the memories of footbound women? How did the Maoist exhortation that "women can hold up half the sky" come to be a personally meaningful statement, a component of some women's sense of self? How, and for whom, did the changing symbolic language of gender come to infuse women's consciousness of their own capabilities, of what they might be expected to become or be admired for becoming, and how did this process affect individual and social identifications and desires?

Addressing such questions is not only a matter of asking where gender lodged in individual psyches. We must also ask where gendered norms circulated in communities and how their locally perceived possibilities might have enlarged and changed over time. We cannot get at this process of change just by looking at state pronouncements, or observing who is doing what kind of labour, or describing how the physical space of the everyday changed. How did people performing labour understand its meaning and its significance for them? How did that labour help them, and us, make better sense of who they are? What did all these revolutions – including the thoroughgoing social rearrangements of the reform era – mean to the people and communities they touched? How did the daily actions of those people in turn change circulating discourses about gender?

As an ensemble, the papers collected in this special issue expand this inquiry beyond the realms of labour and revolution, both reflecting recent scholarly developments and propelling them further. First, they bring changing notions of sexuality and sexual behaviour into the discussion of gendered norms, whether exploring changing definitions of obscenity (Geng) or enduring valorisation of male self-restraint and control (Geng; Hird). They remind us that sexology, science, and notions of virtue could combine and recombine while continuing to maintain and even strengthen received social understandings of gender difference.

Second, the papers turn their focus from women to men and masculinity: no longer as the unmarked and taken-for-granted subjects of history, but as specifically gendered formations that have changed in marked ways from the early twentieth century to the present. The work of novelist, race-car driver, filmmaker, and all-round bad boy Han Han (韩寒) provides one version of masculinity, in which mobility, adventure, and self-discovery are the domain of men (Hunt). Chinese professional men working in London provide another version, which Derek Hird has dubbed the "Confucian sublime": men who are responsible, self-controlled, committed to moral self-cultivation, and entitled to a position of authority in a patriarchal hierarchy. In both versions of masculinity, women recede from public view, except for an occasional appearance as silent arm-candy. These explorations of masculinity suggest that the project of male self-fashioning seems to entail at least as much individual and social anxiety as creating the New Woman or the Modern Girl did in the Republican era.

Finally, these essays all incorporate the premise that over the past century and more, gender has been renegotiated in a relentlessly changing transnational context. New knowledge about sex in the 1920s was an amalgam of imported sexology with fluctuating local understandings of *qing* (情, sentiment/passion/feeling) and *xing* (性, sex/human nature) (Geng). In the very recent past, London-based Chinese professionals have crafted masculine selves in an ambivalent relationship to their white British counterparts, drawing upon the idealised notion of a classical Chinese gentleman (*junzi* 君子) as well as the family values espoused by Xi Jinping (Hird). Han Han's carefully cultivated public persona derives resonance equally from Chinese knight-errant/outlaws and the Marlboro man (Hunt). And in a cosmopolitan Shanghai co-working space frequented by expat and local professionals, Aurélia Ishitsuka observes the creation of gendered identities inflected by nationality, class, and urban/rural origin. There Chinese women occupy a range of positions in support of the health-conscious, physically fit would-be captains of industry. Chinese women professionals provide logistical arrangements and translation services, while daily social activities are organised by the workspace's community team of young educated women. In the background, middle-aged rural migrant women in understated uniforms empty the trash and refill the coffee machines. In each of these essays, the boundaries of China and Chineseness are capacious, porous, and in need of constant maintenance and attention, with gendered behaviour

furnishing an important means to establish and rework distinctions.

The papers in this special issue move back and forth between the gendered labour of the everyday and the circulation of powerful gendered symbols. They remind us to take seriously one of the guiding maxims of feminist scholarship: that gender is relational, and that it must be mapped in its connections to bodies and desires, to the nation, to transnational circuits of capital, and to the lingering aftermath of imperialism and colonial modernity. In that mapping we can find clues to how gender itself is continually being reformulated and questioned.

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