

## Introduction

# Gender, Agency and Social Change

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The pace and extent of changes in China's economy, society, politics and cultural life in the past 20 years have fostered a spectacular expansion of scholarly interest in gender and gender difference in modern and contemporary China.<sup>1</sup> Across the disciplines of the social sciences and humanities, students now have easy access to research publications on gender differences in practices and expectations of marriage, parenting and family life, education, labour and employment, migration and politics. Indeed, it is through the critical study of gender in social and cultural organization and practice that a good deal of conventional wisdom about the Chinese state, society and economy is coming under review. For example, in this volume, both Shannon May and Ellen Judd suggest that the familiar phenomenon of China's "empty villages," devoid of able-bodied young men and women, is empirically contentious.

This volume is the result of a fortuitous convergence between an editorial suggestion to *The China Quarterly* to run a special issue on gender and an international conference on gender studies in Shanghai in 2009, jointly sponsored by Michigan and Fudan 复旦 Universities. Initially structured around papers presented at the conference, it also brings together work from other scholars to reveal some of the ways in which gender operates across diverse fields of inquiry as one of the main axes of social organization and cultural practice. In its themes and analytical interpretations, it offers examples of some of the new directions recent scholarship on gender in China has taken in recent years. This is no longer principally inspired by the purpose of making women visible or filling in the gaps of a history that is still far from complete, though these aims continue to inflect

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1 Space is too limited to refer to all of them. The following are some of most influential recent works from different disciplines on gender and women in modern and contemporary China (in alphabetical order): Laurel Bossen, *Chinese Women and Rural Development: Sixty Years of Change in Lu Village* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic of China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Christina K. Gilmartin, Gail Hershatler, Lisa Rofel and Tyrene White (eds.), *Engendering China: Women, Gender and the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Tamara Jacka, *Rural Women in Urban China: Gender, Migration, and Social Change* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2005); Ching-Kwan Lee and Ngai Pun, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press & Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2005). For an extremely useful and comprehensive bibliographic survey on publications on women, see Gail Hershatler, *Women in China's Long Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

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all the contributions here. Rather, in continuing the project of “engendering China,” the articles show how addressing different social and subject formations through the analytical lens of gender sheds light on, disturbs and might call into question previous “truths” about Chinese society.

The primary research on which the articles are based is shaped by the distinctive methodologies of anthropology, sociology, history and politics. This volume is more than interdisciplinary, however, for it includes theoretical and methodological insights derived from political activism, notably in the form of Gao Xiaoxian’s work with the Shaanxi Women’s Federation which offers an excellent but all too rare example of how activist interests can inspire intellectual endeavour to the benefit of both. The articles address a range of gendered practices and experiences in socio-economic, political and administrative configurations, family and household organization, education, employment and mobility, and generation. They cover a variety of geographical and political environments, from the impoverished rural “sending” villages of western China to the big and wealthy Yangzi valley city of Nanjing, and from the far north-eastern village of Huangbaiyu 黄柏峪 to the major urban centres of Tianjin and Beijing. They address questions of gender and gendered expectations as lived experience within and across different scales that do not neatly map on to the standard social science tri-partite division of urban, rural and migrant. At the risk of repeating what is now a truism in academic writing of this kind, these differences are necessarily fluid, as the boundaries between them blur and jostle in the dizzying speed of change in China today. Every assertion of the urban/rural distinction is complicated by changing evidence about the effects of the spatial, physical, economic and cultural flows between them. Similarly, assertions of generational difference are sometimes confounded by unexpected evidence of similarities, though never repetitions, across time. Gender differences are complicated in the same way, and for every indication of clearly delineated expectations of men’s and women’s behaviour, social practice demands their constant redefinition. These issues are even more analytically complex when it comes to considering changes across time and space of ideas, unspoken assumptions and beliefs structuring differences in individual choice, access to opportunity and achievement, and social experience. The critical categories of our analyses seek to make sense of but can never do real justice to the rich and messy confusions and complexities of real life. Through their different lenses they give a glimpse of how the changing manifestations and articulations of gender across different practices confound any attempt at a uniform analysis. Nevertheless, certain key themes can be discerned, as described below.

### **Context, Implementation and Scale**

This volume presents two articles on the revolutionary Maoist period, seen from different points on the central-local spectrum: Wang Zheng’s excursion into the flagship revolutionary era women’s periodical *Women of China* and Kimberley

Manning's detailed treatment of how notions of gender equality played out on the ground in the "model brigade" of Mu Guiying 穆桂英 in Gaoshan county in the decade following the mid-1950s. The former addresses the progressive gender aspirations visualized by the central ideological commitments of the revolutionary state between 1949 and 1966, featuring a nearly continuous representation of optimistic and robust rural, minority and military, and/or working-class women in occupations typically the preserve of males. The covers of *Women of China* affirmed women's "confidence and self assurance in their rural labouring class identity" and their "mastery of knowledge, technology and machinery [signifying] a bright future of socialist modernization." The interior content of the periodical, however, presented a quite different gendered reality, focusing on topics the editors understood to be of interest to women: health and hygiene, childcare, domestic know-how and marriage.

How some of the tensions exhibited between the cover and the content of this flagship periodical devoted to women played out at the local level are elaborated in Kimberley Manning's rich description of the Mu Guiying Brigade in Gaoshan county, Jiangsu. In this particular local environment, an unusual cohort of leading female cadres, all very young, realized their own "liberation" in positions such as brigade Party secretary and chief accountant. At the same time, these young women were entrusted with implementing "Marxist maternalist" policies that stressed protecting the rural woman as a good wife and mother – a set of ideas that had been percolating in even progressive circles since the May Fourth Movement.<sup>2</sup> Manning draws out the tensions that were deeply felt by even the most committed and successful of local activists. These "backbones" of the local revolutionary state were publicly judged by the degree to which they could transcend their own gender by doing what was regarded as men's work *better* than men did, without any institutionalized recognition of the family and gendered responsibilities that might impede their performance. More ironic still, they were in the unenviable position of having to realize a "maternalist" programme designed by the central government with Maoist, often coercive, methods of local Party organization. There may well have been fundamental contradictions in terms of the gender goals of the revolutionary state as a whole, but it was at the local scale, and in particular in local environments, that these tensions were particularly keenly felt as lived experience.

While utterly different from Manning's work in time (the present rather than the 1950s) and space (Shaanxi rather than Jiangnan), Gao Xiaoxian's article also deals with the fundamental problem of increasing female participation in local politics and power structures. The projects launched by the Shaanxi Women's Research Institute to increase the numbers of women elected to village

2 Susan Glosser, "'The truths I have learned': nationalism, family reform and male identity in China's new culture movement, 1915–1923," in Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom (eds.), *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities: a Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 120–44.

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committees described by Gao are equally illustrative of the problem of scale, only in this work the question revolves around how to scale up rather than down. Gao shows how in prioritizing capacity building from below, the Women's Research Institute was able to put on programmes for participatory gender training of potential leaders, resulting in a gratifying increase in the number of women standing for and elected to village committee posts in Heyang county. However, when activists attempted to scale up from the county to the province in popularizing what had become known as the "Heyang model," they ran into a sadly predictable set of barriers in the form of institutionalized resistance and indifference. The provincial level of the Women's Federation had little political clout in regular and party-state organizations until the Bureau of Civil and Administrative Affairs came into the process. More women than ever before were elected, but most counties missed their targets, and more worryingly the next round of elections in 2008 saw many of the women who had been previously elected turned out of office. Amongst the reasons for this "backlash" was the profound threat that women office holders presented to male-dominated networks of power and influence at the village level.

#### Agency and the Individual

[Wo]Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past (Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*).

A common theme to virtually all these articles is the question of individual agency and choice. By this is meant the capacity of individuals to make decisions concerning all main aspects of their lives in ways that are neither completely constrained nor completely without reference to social, economic and family circumstances. Many see the process of individualization that increasingly cuts across different regions, generations, genders and the urban-rural divide as a function of marketization and the retreat of the state. However, Yan Yunxiang usefully reminds us that this process began during the early years of the People's Republic with the "untying" (*songbang* 松绑) of the bonds linking the individual and the family or kin group.<sup>3</sup>

Broadly speaking, all these articles reveal how agency is exercised and individual choices are made, often in unexpected ways. Ellen Judd explains the diversity of choices in terms of marriage from a marrying-in point of view in impoverished villages in the far west of China. Here the active choices for securing marriage partners include poor men seeking wives from even less prosperous areas. This could be understood as primarily the exercise of male agency. However, Judd's fieldwork demonstrates that in these instances agency is a two-way street. While some women who marry into the village are clearly distressed, others have not only accommodated but have provided critical introductions enabling

3 Yan Yunxiang, *The Individualization of Chinese Society* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2010).

other young women to move from their localities into the village. In other cases, young men are actively encouraged to marry in uxorilocal marriages as a way of providing their elderly parents with more comfortable later years.

At the other end of the country, in the Changbai Mountain community of Huangbiyu, Shannon May's work illustrates a very different but no less creative set of agencies. Here, young men and young women migrate on a temporary basis to local towns, but for different reasons. The men leave the village to accumulate the bridewealth for their future marriages in the village, while their sisters migrate to spend money on themselves in order to attract an urban husband with a better set of life chances. Intriguingly, the fact that the Cinderella story so rarely transpires in real life seems to be little impediment to the popularity of this particular aspiration.

Within the urban sector, agency emerges in different but complementary forms as well, here examined in topics as varied as urban employment markets, the household economy and family emotional bonds. Kim, Fong *et al.* rely on a mixture of survey data and qualitative interview methodologies to suggest that at least in a wealthy city like Nanjing young adults are encouraged to take the initiative and make autonomous choices in career advancement, even as these choices are fundamentally constrained by widening income and gender inequalities. Even here, though, interview data reveal that individuals who are in exceptionally difficult structural positions, struggling with undesirable jobs at anti-social hours, not only are able to articulate their preferences for better positions but actively make choices and sacrifices to ensure the long-term future of themselves and their children.

Danning Wang's study of the transmission of family property between generations in Tianjin suggests that in urban China at least, the young generation may well choose to exercise its agency by disregarding or de-centring parental expectations of support and care.<sup>4</sup> Harriet Evans points to the choices young urban women articulate as they consider their futures as wives and mothers. Not only do they want to avoid what they perceive to be the mistakes made by their mothers, but they believe that they have the capacity to do so. Whether or not these young women will find themselves in a position to exercise such choices will be determined by circumstances that may not be of their own making, and which in turn may be profoundly conditioned by the weight of the past.

### Legacies from the Past

There are two fundamental ways in which the weight of the past looms in the articles in this volume: through the continuing exercise of state authority and through the resilience of deeply embedded gendered expectations. Within China as well as outside, market triumphalism now so dominates academic,

<sup>4</sup> Shi Lihong, 'Little quilted vests to warm parents' hearts, *The China Quarterly*, No. 198 (2009), pp. 348–63, makes exactly this point with respect to her fieldsite in a north China village.

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media and policy-making agendas that the continued presence of the state is often overlooked. We suggest that not only is the state very much a structuring presence, but it is so in ways that are directly linked to the past, including the Maoist past. Virtually all these articles incorporate narratives in which the state establishes the parameters within which gendered choices are made.

Wang Zheng's and Kimberly Manning's historical retrospectives on gender foreground the importance of the Mao-era state, and establish themes and concerns about gender which continue to resonate in different forms. Gao Xiaoxian shows how old-fashioned propaganda-cum-entertainment methods (especially commissioned local operas, television features and posters) remain part of activists' standard repertoire, interacting in combination with direct support from different levels of the local state as well as transnational networks of funding and knowledge exchange. The context has changed almost beyond recognition, but the enduring problems of women's political under-representation have not. While the Women's Federation cannot currently sell the kinds of images so popular on the cover of *Women in China* in the 1950s and 1960s, the Maoist past has left an ambiguous but significant legacy in its commitment – honoured more in the breach – to women's equality, to the fundamental idea that it was the state's responsibility to effect the kinds of social transformations that would lead to gender equality, and to the specific propaganda methods used to raise awareness and promote positive gender models.

Other contemporary articles in this volume make reference to the less explicit but nevertheless important ways in which the state continues to structure and mediate individual lives and choices. Perhaps the most obvious is the continued existence of the household registration system which in Ellen Judd's analysis "... has softened ... but it still functions to tie rural people to specified rural areas for administrative purposes and remains the locus of remaining and emerging safety-net provisions." It is through the household registration system that the state continues to monitor and implement family planning practices. In the urban sector the state is important in a different way. Kim, Fong *et al.* detail how the local state offers a presumptively secure source of employment and income that lower-waged urban women tend to prefer.

While the increasing diversity of women's lives since the early reform era suggests a radical departure from the "traditional" gender division of labour, the past continues to exercise a strong influence over gendered expectations and arrangements of family and married life. A number of articles show how the *neihwai* 内外 (inner/outer) distinction continues to resound in diverse forms and fields of practice, from villagers' resistance to women's participation in village elections (Gao Xiaoxian), to expectations that women will return to the village to take up their responsibilities as wives and daughters-in-law (Shannon May), and women's roles as domestic managers distinct from the public face of family authority (Danning Wang). It is implied in the regulatory frameworks introduced in the 1950s concerning women's reproductive and maternal welfare (Manning), and even in the gendered associations of intimacy and emotional

expression in the urban family (Evans). The culturally and socially embedded discourse of the *neiwai* binary continues to function as a cognitive framework moulding many aspects of gendered behaviour and practice, complicating critical analysis of the gendered implications of change.

The fundamental source of such expectations lies in the traditionally hierarchical arrangements of the family and kin group, even though here too, historical evidence challenges ascriptions of a clear gender division of labour.<sup>5</sup> The most influential critical accounts of Chinese family and kin relations in recent decades have been those of Maurice Freedman, whose “lineage paradigm” sought to explain the dominant structures of China’s patrilineal system,<sup>6</sup> and Myron Cohen, whose “corporate” model appears in Danning Wang’s article.<sup>7</sup> This familiar model defined the family first and foremost as a unit of economic organization, based on the sharing and allocation of budget and property, including the pooling of resources where necessary in the interests of its members. As a cultural as well as economic unit sustained by rules of patrilineal inheritance, the “pure” form of the corporate family also set out clear gendered and spatialized divisions of labour, social practice and mobility. The male family head (*jiazhang* 家长) was the family’s most important and authoritative representative in public, political and ritual affairs. As Danning Wang points out, however, the mother-in-law or the first wife was invariably the main manager of household matters. This often included responsibility for the day-to-day allocation of the domestic budget and for a series of income-generation activities, giving women potentially considerable power within the household as head of the “uterine family.”<sup>8</sup>

Inasmuch as the corporate model invokes an extended generational network of kin relations, it is arguably now a minor form of the family and kin configurations in China’s changing economy and society. Nevertheless, the economic considerations of the traditional patrilineal kin structure continue to dominate many decisions about marriage and the family, often with interesting and locally specific shifts. Shannon May’s work on the north-east argues that the continuing importance of the son to the patrilineal family farm results not in the “emptying out” of the village but in keeping sons there, in contrast with their unmarried sisters who are urged out to improve their status by becoming “cute” to attract an

- 5 Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *The Inner Quarters: Marriage and the Lives of Chinese Women in the Sung Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Charlotte Furth, *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China’s Medical History, 960–1665* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994); Susan Mann, *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
- 6 Maurice Freedman, *Lineage Organization in Southeastern China* (London: Athlone Press, 1958).
- 7 Myron Cohen, *House United, House Divided: The Chinese Family in Taiwan* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1976).
- 8 Margery Wolf argued long ago that in their status as mothers, particularly of sons, women were able to exercise considerable authority in decisions concerning, for example, the allocation of family property. A woman’s status as creator of her “uterine family” gave her an agency often overlooked in emphases on the patrilineal and patriarchal structure of the family. Margery Wolf, *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* (Stanford, CA: University of California Press, 1972).

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urban mate. Ellen Judd's study of villages in rural Sichuan demonstrates that despite the enormous numbers of young men and women who migrate out in search of work, marriage practices are reverting to a range of earlier forms that became much less prominent during the collective period (such as levirate marriage and sister exchanges), with the new twist that parents now want to keep their daughters close by.

That the past is a source of negotiation and tension becomes apparent in a number of articles that address the attempts by women and men of different ages to forge strategies to deal with the confusions and competitiveness of the market. Danning Wang shows how older women may find themselves working as paid employees much more than they did a couple of decades ago, reducing their material dependency on filial support as they age. On the contrary, they may well work to provide financial assistance to their children to enable them to "survive and flourish in an increasingly harsh and competitive economic environment." The capacity to mobilize economic resources effectively sustains a role as family head as well as manager of household affairs, but the individual older woman who finds herself in this position may well invite social criticism and ostracism for appropriating a role assumed to be the man's. The young migrant women in Huangbaiyu who fail to find an urban husband eventually return home to a rural marriage that may produce potentially devastating frictions including with members of the older generation. However, the cross-generational tensions Wang and May examine also play out in a reworking of "traditional" expectations of filial behaviour, which as Evans suggests now include an unprecedented emphasis on the emotional as well as material support that daughters provide. While the increased attention young women are putting on the emotional quality of their relationships with their mothers enriches their experience of family life, the gendered associations of the capacity for intimacy between family members also sustain expectations that the family's female members be its central core of care and emotional concern.

### **Directions for Future Research**

The articles in this volume encompass a wide diversity of regions, sectors and experiences, but we still found ourselves unable to include a number of important themes. One *lacuna* is the international and NGO context. This changed enormously in 1995 when Beijing hosted the International Women's Forum and a large number of activists and representatives of NGOs all over the world went to China. Some of the details in the articles, notably in Gao Xiaoxian's work on political participation in rural Shaanxi, illustrate the importance of transnational ideas and experiences as the Women's Federation revises its agenda. Gao's experience in India is one small example of the ways in which the new economic, social and political opportunities to which Chinese women have access cannot be apprehended within the national frame alone. Indeed, this volume is



itself in part the outcome of an explicitly international exchange of academic and activist work on women and gender both inside and outside China.

Despite our attempts to include narratives on masculinity as well as gay and lesbian experiences of changing gender attitudes in contemporary China, these are notably absent, in part reflecting how gender in academic studies of China is still largely associated with the study of women. Although recent work on gender as an aspect of men's lives and of same-sex relationships suggests that much more good work will appear in coming years,<sup>9</sup> masculinity has not to date attracted significant attention from social science scholars. The recent introduction of gender as an analytical category in China, the genealogical association between gender and women's activism, and institutional resistance to dealing with the implications of taking gender seriously, as Gao's article demonstrates, have further conspired to marginalize the study of gender from Chinese academic discourse. Zhong Xueping pointed out in an article in *Dushu* 读书 in late 2005 that gender is significant for its absence from the postcolonial and postmodern debates characterizing contemporary scholarly enquiry in China.<sup>10</sup> While there is nothing particularly specific to China about this, the neglect of gender as a useful theoretical tool limits the general or representative claims that social scientists often make about Chinese society.

What does emerge from this volume and the meeting that inspired it is the indispensability of gender as a critical category of analysis because of the insights about China that it offers. As noted at the beginning, the articles here do not conceptualize gender as either a fixed or stable category, or a well-defined domain of study. Though they all focus on women's lives and experiences, gender emerges as an axis of social and subject formation in different spaces, forms and practices, and in singular experiences, all of which are connected to other key domains and identities such as class, rural and urban, migrant and regional. In other words, these essays exemplify a conceptual and theoretical approach to gender not as something that is examined in its own right, a discrete field of inquiry, as it were, but as a changing category of meaning and practice that takes shape through other configurations of social and cultural organization. The result is effectively to remove gender from a simple focus on women's lives, despite their centrality in the articles collected here, to suggest ways in which gender makes a

9 Discussion about masculinity in China has been more prominent in the humanities than the social sciences. See Kam Louie's *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), and Song Geng's *The Fragile Scholar: Power and Masculinity in Chinese Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004). Derek Hird combines ethnographic research with the analysis of media texts and images in "The sexual ambiguities of white-collar masculinity," *Sexuality Research in China*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2009), pp. 107–20, and "Models of masculinity? White collar images at work in contemporary China," in Donald S. Hemelryk, T. Schilbach and I. Cucco (eds.), *Other Stories/Missing Histories: Reflections from the Jiu Year in China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, forthcoming, 2010). Brownell and Wasserstrom's *Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities* remains unique as a volume examining the gendered constitutions of men's as well as women's lives across different times and fields of enquiry.

10 Zhong Xueping, "Hou funü jiefang yu ziwo xiangxiang" ("Post-women's liberation and self reflexivity"), *Dushu* (November 2005), pp. 13–20.

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difference – shedding new insight into Chinese society – through its connection with other dimensions of social and cultural practice.

In this way, as Gail Hershatler has lucidly argued,<sup>11</sup> it permits us to ask new questions about other main categories of inquiry that are the staples of social science research, such as the state and market, domestic and public status, migration and the rural-urban divide, and political representation. This is not, of course, to suggest that all social science research on China has to attend to gender any more than it is to argue that gender is always instrumental in the formation and memory of events. It is to argue, rather, for a broader and more flexible use of gender that intersects with and reshapes other analytical categories, to enrich our unfolding knowledge about China.

11 Hershatler, *Women in China's Long Twentieth Century*, pp. 111–18.