

Lydia H. Liu, Rebecca E. Karl and Dorothy Ko, eds. *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. ISBN 978-0-231-16290-6. 328 pp.

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The relationship between source materials and their theoretical articulations, as well as the larger relevance of particular case studies, remains an important challenge to any researcher of comparative literary and cultural studies. Liu, Karl and Ko's edited volume, *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory*, operates ambitiously on the level of transnational theory by examining, in the English language, a largely overlooked figure in the history of Chinese feminist thought, He-Yin Zhen (何殷震).

Importantly, *The Birth of Chinese Feminism* bridges the theoretical, the historical, and the textual and builds its theoretical contributions on solid foundations of comparative literary and cultural analyses. The introduction to the book, ambitiously titled "Toward A Transnational Feminist Theory," sets up the theoretical framework and attempts to articulate the larger theoretical contributions of the book. First, the editors argue that for He-Yin, the compound word *nannü* (男女) is "first and foremost political because its function is not only to generate social identities but also to create forms of power and domination based on that distinction." In relation to *nannü* there is the problem of *shengji* (生计). He-Yin emphasizes that women's control over their laboring bodies forms the necessary condition for the liberation of all mankind (Liu 21-3). The editors attempt to use the dual concepts of *nannü* and *shengji* to engage feminist and radical theorists around the world in a much needed conversation on transnational feminist theory and practices, and in turn, problematize the liberal narrative of the origins of Chinese feminism.

The editors then lay out the historical context of He-Yin's theoretical articulations in the next chapter, subtitled "Chinese Feminist Worlds at the Turn of the Twentieth Century." They first point out the insufficiency of what they describe as the liberal position in defining feminism and then attempt to use "worlds of thinking" rather than notion of influence to articulate He-Yin's original contribution in the context of a transnational feminist historical moment (Liu 27-8). The editors argue that He-Yin's attack on Confucianism was responding to and embedded in newer discourses ranging from liberalism, statism, anarchism, and socialism. The editors conclude the historical context chapter by revisiting the two all-important analytical categories *nannü* and *shengji* and articulating yet again their goal to complicate received narrative about the origins of Chinese feminism by juxtaposing He-Yin's feminist and anarchist radicalism with two prominent male liberals.

The main body of the book consists of six translations from He-Yin, all from 1907. The first piece, "On the Question of Women's Liberation," articulates a radical anarchist feminist position through a series of critiques on Confucian China's prohibition of women's sexual transgression, on the bondages existing in Euro-American "free marriage," as well as on Chinese men's pursuit of self-distinction in the name of women's liberation (Liu 57-60). Even in the case of Norway, where a few women occupy political offices, He-Yin argues, it does little to bring benefits to the general population. This leads her to an anarchist communist and radical feminist position of establishing common property (*gongchan* 共产) and working towards the eventual abolition of government (Liu 70).

In the second piece, "On the Question of Women's Labor," He-Yin argues that "the system of slavery does not originate in the class system; rather, it originates in the problem of livelihood (*shengji wenti* 生计问题) (Liu 74). In footnote 6 on page 76, the editors attempt to clarify the argument He-Yin is making by emphasizing the analytical distinction she draws between "class" (*jieji* 阶级) and "livelihood" (*shengji*). He-Yin cites a wide range of sources in this piece on women's labor, from Japanese scholar Tazoe Tetsuji's book *Economic Evolution* to the American labor secretary at the time to drive home the argument that the reasons for women's unequal labor conditions are unequal distribution of property as well as the crime of capitalists. By referencing Japanese women laborers' strikes and a survey of New York women, she con-

cludes that the reason behind women's difficulties in life is nothing but the unequal distribution of wealth and advocates again the implementation of a system of communalized property so as to ensure that everyone would labor equally.

The third piece, "Economic Revolution and Women's Revolution," cites novels, stories, and operas, including *The Lady from the Sea*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Joan Haste* as sources to explain the phenomenon of property-marriage in comparative terms. In addition, He-Yin argues that marriage has "evolved into a system of mutual prostitution on the parts of both men and women" in Euro-America (Liu 97). She insists that a woman's revolution must go hand in hand with an economic revolution, and that one needs to overthrow the system of private property and abandon all currencies.

The fourth piece, "On the Revenge of Women," is composed of two parts. In "Part I: Instrument of Men's Rule Over Women," He-Yin argues for the overthrow of all despotic regimes, and that only when governments are out of the way can men and women really be equal. One of the main instruments of men's rule over women, according to her, is the patrilineal family name inscribed in a person's sense of identity and belonging (hence the editors' choice of translating her name as He-Yin, a combination of her paternal and maternal family names, as she preferred herself). Other instruments for inscribing gender inequality include writing, social institutions such as marriage and funerary rites, and the whole system of classical learning. In this piece, He-Yin is extremely critical of Ban Zhao's *Admonitions for Daughters*, and regards Ban "a slave of men," and "an archtraitor to women" (Liu 145), although her critique of Ban is still ultimately a critique of the crimes of Confucian teachings.

Part II of "On the Revenge of Women," entitled "Atrocities of Men Against Women," outlines women's sufferings ranging from the rights they were deprived of to women suffering death by cloistering and by corporeal punishment. According to He-Yin, the most salient three rights women were often deprived of are the right to bear arms and command armies, the right to hold political power, and the right to be educated (Liu 147). He-Yin concludes that men should reflect on their atrocities against women and that all despotic rulers and their allies are the enemies of women.

The fifth piece, "On Feminist Antimilitarism," is an interesting antidote to reader assumptions given He-Yin's rather militant statements in some of the previous pieces, including a call to "kill all capitalists" (Liu 82). In this piece, she uses case studies in Europe, America, and Japan to suggest that antimilitarism would be a great victory for weak nations, the common people, and women.

The final piece selected for translation and inclusion by the editors, "The Feminist Manifesto," cites situations in India, Japan, Europe and America as examples of women's unequal status worldwide. He-Yin focuses on inequality in marriage, in particular, in status difference between husband and wife, as well as in work and responsibility, and in the system of rites. She articulates the role of social customs and education in molding "men" (*nǎnxìng* 男性) and "women" (*nǚxìng* 女性) (Liu 184). To this reviewer, her articulations are in dialogue as well as foreshadowing feminist philosophies and theories on gender, family, private property, and the state, from Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Taylor Mill and John Stuart Mill, Friedrich Engels, Simone de Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone, and Judith Butler, among others, offering rich comparative possibilities for serious students and scholars of transnational feminisms.

In addition to the six pieces translated from He-Yin's writings in 1907, the editors included two pieces from established male liberal intellectuals contemporary to her, one "On Women's Education" (论女学) by Liang Qichao (梁启超) from 1897, the other "The Women's Bell" (女界钟) by Jin Tianhe (金天翮) from 1903. Their intention is to demonstrate the inadequacies of approaching Chinese feminism narrowly from the male liberal perspective. The editors do have a point in that male liberal and nationalist intellectuals like Liang and Jin treat women's issues as part of the nationalist endeavor, in particular, their instrumentalization of women as educators for future citizens of the nation. Still, reading Liang's and Jin's pieces side by side with He-Yin's, one must first acknowledge their profound impact on her writings. In particular, Liang states four reasons for the promotion of women's education, and one of them raises the issue of livelihood, or *shengji* (Liu 192). How did He-Yin's radical feminist theoriza-

tion function in the context of the “worlds of thinking” before, contemporary to, and after her publishing her essays in 1907?

More importantly, I share Tani Barlow’s view that the simple juxtaposition between He-Yin the female anarchist feminist and Liang and Jin, the male liberal nationalists, does not address the intersection between gender and politics (Barlow, MCLC). It would have been more informative had the volume included a feminist polemic from a male anarchist or a female theorist from the liberal tradition.

On a related issue of complicating the picture of the cultural and political milieu in which He-Yin operates, it would have been more productive had the editors further woven her words and actions with that of her contemporaries into an intricate thought network, in the introduction and the chapter on historical context. The current volume leaves the impression that it is a story about an individual heroine, functioning in relative isolation. The reviewer understands the editors’ desire to excavate He-Yin from oblivion and bring new light to her achievement. However, by overlooking her social network, the case for her singular achievement becomes less rather than more convincing. The image accompanying the editors’ introduction to He-Yin is indicative of such an approach (Liu 50). The caption does not introduce the other members of the group in the picture, symptomatic of the book’s attempt to spotlight He-Yin at the expense of others around her.

In addition, it would have been productive had the editors delved into the linguistic issues involved in He-Yin’s sources in more depth. She cites newspaper accounts, survey results and novels from Euro-America and Japan frequently. Are all her sources in Japanese? How is her Japanese? How is her English? A related issue has to do with the book’s attention or lack thereof to secondary sources in both Chinese and English. Readers of the book could benefit from a survey of existing scholarship on He-Yin in the Chinese language, as well as additional references to English-language scholarship. For example, it could have been fruitful to reference the extensive chapter on Qiu Jin from Wilt L. Idema and Beata Grant’s volume *The Red Brush* in the historical context chapter (Idema 767-808).

All in all, *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory* sets a new standard for doing comparative literary and cultural studies in the China field and beyond. The three editors and many translators involved in this project made an exemplary case for collaborative work in comparative studies and transnational theorizing. The volume should be read widely by students and scholars of Chinese feminism in particular and transnational feminism in general, and will provoke discussion and debate on not only the relationship between literature, history, and theory, but also comparative and transnational theorizing of particular historical and cultural traditions.

Works Cited:

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