

On Feminism and China: Foot-binding as an Aesthetic, History and Dialogue

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Editors' Note: In her 2007 keynote address at the ASIANetwork Conference, Dorothy Ko made reference to the writings of Lin Chun on foot-binding. Professor Lin has kindly allowed us to reprint one of her short pieces on feminism and revisionist history in the issue of the *Exchange* to encourage further dialogue on the subject. This article was originally published under the title "Wither Feminism: A Note on China (foot-binding as an aesthetic, history and dialogue)" in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 26, 4, Summer, 2001, p. 1281. (Our thanks to Lin Chun and the University of Chicago Press for their permission to reprint this article.)

In analysing women's liberation, the Chinese case distinguishes itself not only from the heterogeneous West but also from Asia (arguably even more diverse), the

to recognize women as equals with men and to protect their legitimate interests places an inbuilt limitation on an antagonistic "civil society" emerging from feminist ac-

albeit in conversations with one another, while negotiating terms and meanings gleaned from outside influences.



Scene from the revolutionary ballet, "The Red Detachment of Women," depicting a women's military unit in battle with landlords and Nationalist forces in the first civil war (1927-1937).

developing underdeveloped world generally, and the postcommunist countries as well. It is unique because China has had an epic and long-fought revolution for national and social liberation in which changing women's place in society was high on the agenda. As women benefited so much from that revolution and immersed themselves (especially the educated) so deeply in its ideology of gender equality, their preoccupation was, and perhaps for the most part still is, with the promises that the postrevolutionary state made to fulfill certain normative expectations.

That such a state is seen as having the constitutional, legal, and moral obligations

tivism. Instead, even those engaged in the autonomous spheres in China today tend to perceive their intellectual and organizational works as acts of self-defense not against the state but rather against its retreat or betrayal in the face of market expansion. They ask

Against the Revisionist View of "Women's Liberation"

To insist on the distinctiveness of Chinese experiences is not to totalize or essentialize or particularize them. Nor is it to neglect latent gaps, misrecognitions, conflicting significations, and gendered partialities of the collective identity, "Chinese women." It is, rather, to counter a recent revisionist trend in scholarship and politics that makes "women's liberation" under socialism seem nothing more than an ideological metanarrative of the past, to be ridiculed, discarded, and replaced. One among these revisionist theses is the alleged discovery of "female agency" in Chinese traditional culture, a thesis that glamorizes and celebrates foot-

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for pro-women government commitment and social policies to be upheld. If this disturbs any global feminist standards, it is a problem for those standards, not for the local actors who make their own judgment,

binding while deriding the modernist attacks on it during the iconoclastic May Fourth era. An article published in the widely circulated journal *Dushu* (Reading) uses an earlier nativist satire to

argue that women themselves voluntarily desired the beauty of small feet right into the first decades of the twentieth century, despite the elite, male-dominated discourse



Female militia member leads discussion in rural study session. (1969)

of liberation and equality that assailed the practice.¹

Another thesis that the nationalist and communist causes crushed female subjectivity is already commonplace. It sharply separates women's liberation from national liberation, as though the independence of an oppressed people and the transformation of the ancien regime had nothing to do with, or even were adverse to, the well-being of women. This argument takes a variety of forms, from exploring the predicament of women participants in the revolution to glorifying the "liberal feminists" marginalized by party politics and ideologies.² The extensively discussed case of the writer Xiao Hong is exemplary. Her concern for the "eternal" questions of childbirth, death, and sexuality in relation to women is presented as the political tragedy of a feminist pioneer who was isolated from fellow intellectuals preoccupied with the nationalist course and discourse in the 1930s.³

A third, familiar charge contains critiques—some plausible and some not—of socialist mobilization of women, which is seen as imposed by the Communist Party-state's program and merely instrumental for state goals.

There is some important truth in each of these critical claims. There existed a minor but splendid tradition of women striving for freedom in imperial China (deriving from the insight of postcolonial theory that "traditional women" cannot be indiscriminately dismissed as mere victims deprived of subjectivity and agency—but who would deny this?). The modern revolution did not overcome male chauvinism in its power structure and consciousness, and its brutal neglect of women's suffering and sacrifice in the revolutionary war years was truly tragic. The Maoist equality-through-sameness project, or the epistemology of women's preferential treatment in the People's Republic of China, which was premised on perceived female "physiological weaknesses" were flawed.

Nevertheless, it is simply and indisputably evident for the great majority of

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the female population in China that Confucianism was patriarchal, colonialism was repressive, and the anti-imperialist and anti-"feudal" revolution was therefore justified and liberating (feudalism is a term borrowed from European historiography in the Chinese Marxist terminology to signify landlordism and the "old society"). By the same token, socialism was protective and empowering with regard to encouraging women's public participation and transforming family relations. Whatever is valid and stimulating in the deconstructivist elaborations, in the end the effort of replacing the "metanarrative" of women's liberation in China can hardly succeed if only

because there really is a historical "master trajectory." That trajectory should no doubt be critically (re)grasped and might be interpreted differently. Yet, the emerging alternative narratives are often no less hegemonic in ambition and ideological in generalization, in spite of the fragmentation and incoherence inevitable in their analyses.

The obvious question is, rather, why women's liberation as part and parcel of the Chinese revolution and Chinese socialism should become a feminist target. Strategically speaking, what do the feminist project in general and women in China in particular gain, or indeed lose, from such revisionist assaults, given the fact that a solid scholarship has been built up on both sides of the story?⁴

Revisionist feminism, consciously or not, is only part of a larger trend, the by-product of the defeat of Soviet communism by the cold war and capitalist globalization. It also echoes the transnational enterprise of rewriting revolution from the French and the Russian down to the Chinese.⁵ The Chinese revolution, however, is a vulnerable case for revisionist purposes because it was, notwithstanding grave limitations, simultaneously a revolution by, of, and for women. It is such an irony that the opposition (effective if not intentional) to the revolutionary and socialist project of liberating women has a source in radical third-world cultural studies.

Inside China, however, these connections are not quite visible for two reasons. One is that much of the available intellectual energy is currently devoted to debating neoliberal doctrines and the country's developmental direction, pushing other issues into the shadow of the transitional predicaments of the political economy. The other, relatedly, is the resistance by women scholars and activists to regression in public policies, which blocks the way of abstract theorizing unconcerned about the actual situation.

China's liberal intellectuals, inspired by the paradigms of capitalist democracy (the U.S. model) or capitalist authoritarianism (the Singapore model) and financially and culturally sustained by a rising bourgeois order, have become globalization's willing agents. Indeed, the nominal socialist state itself has surrendered to international big businesses without a fight over the World Trade Organization and many other contentious grounds.

What is most remarkable in the scene, not surprisingly, is that the rightward drift of intellectual circles in China has affected their female members the least. A possible political implication here would be that a women's movement gathers momentum where reforms are failing women (along with workers and farmers), as evidenced by high unemployment, poor labor conditions, lack of protection for rural migrants, the commercialization (and traditionalization according to artificial "Oriental taste") of femininity, and ultimately the erasure of the problem of gender inequality.



"Whatever men comrades can do, women comrades can do."
"Iron Girls" at work on the Red Flag Canal in the mid-1960s.

Non-Revisionist Feminist Analysis

From a nonrevisionist feminist point of view, women's liberation in China, as in any other country, should be thoroughly historicized to avoid ahistorical moral traps. The greatest mistake of postsocialism would be a denunciation of the hard-won achievements for women through the communist revolution and socialist modernization. Among these achievements, the best-known examples are massive female participation in socially organized activities, equal pay for equal work as a legal and managerial principle, educational parity between the sexes as a social commitment and policy goal, freedom in marriage, the development of public health provisions and child-care service, and government and community intervention in the private sphere against violence and discrimination.

Gender equality as a "public notion of justice" is especially vital in that it continues to legitimize the causes for women in the face of widening gaps between laws and reality, between promises and enforcement measures, between hopes and setbacks. On the other hand, it would also be self-defeating should women in China today allow themselves to be caught in a passive nostalgia for the past. For what must be rejected in that past is also obvious. The "equality of poverty" among male and female second-class citizens in the countryside is one example; the stifling of individuality and personal freedom in a polity that lacks a democratic citizenship

for both women and men is another. Postreform liberalization, however costly it may be, has opened up important spaces

and opportunities for women to advance their unfinished liberation project within and outside of state institutions.

This new phase of women's struggle may begin with a redefinition of the "social" under the double pressure of postsocialism and globalization. The social realm would involve a protective and redistributive state role as well as rationally regulated market transactions but neither statist nor market dictation, which could be ensured only by socially empowered voices and forces. The embeddedness of both public power from above and participation from below defines such a realm, where women's rights are fought through community support, public deliberation, and grassroots movements, and gender norms and values are exposed, contested, and transformed.

A focus on social defense would also help strategic reformulations at multiple, including personal, levels for women to confront themselves with fundamental questions posed in the demographic-ecological sphere (overpopulation, sex-ratio imbalance, environmental pollution, etc.) and the political-economic and cultural ones (democratization, protests against polarization and corruption, adjusting life cycle and workstyle, etc.). But then the "woman question" would transcend its gender boundary to encompass the "human condition." Feminism, like socialism, is intrinsically internationalist; yet it should be realized

that postsocialism, premised on its socialist legacies favorable for women and workers as well as on its postcapitalist possibilities, can be a check on globalization while guarding the local social. The social dimension is thus an antithesis of both (international) academic and (Chinese) official revisionism.

Endnotes

¹"In fact," Yang Xingmei writes, "in principle, to modify particular parts of one's body in order to fit the aesthetic standards of society ... ought to be a fundamental right of the individual" So foot-binding, said to involve women's choice and agency, becomes a "basic human right" (1999, 17). For a critical response, see Xiao 2000. Incredibly misguided as it is for most readers in China both historically and theoretically, this view has found some astonishing echoes among scholars in the West. For example, Ko 1994 sees women's oppression in traditional China as a fictitious political myth.

²Wang 2000 is a fascinating oral history of a handful of such women. For a review, see Ye 2000.

³For a powerful discussion, see Liu 1994.

⁴Among many examples, for a sample critique of China's "socialist patriarchy," see Stacey 1983; for a more recent, sound account of women in the communist revolution, see Gilmartin 1995.

⁵Such rewriting, of course, can be carried out in different manners from careful scrutiny to blind dismissal. Concerning the Chinese revolution, see Escherick 1995 for a thoughtful and provocative reevaluation; and Mirsky 1999.

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