

## Book Review

# Gender Dynamics, Feminist Activism and Social Transformation in China

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With *Gender Dynamics, Feminist Activism and Social Transformation in China*, editors Wu Guoguang, Feng Yuan, and Helen Lansdowne bring together a comprehensive range of entries that highlight women's roles in changing Chinese society, particularly the political and economic dynamics, over the twentieth century and into the current era. Integrating insights from feminist scholars of political science, legal studies, education, social work, sociology, and activists who work for women's rights in the People's Republic of China, this collection is a great example of how academic dialogue can contribute to pressing gender issues and public debate. The nuanced analysis of women's experiences as active agents and the historical positioning of Chinese feminist actions paves the way for more collaboration between academia and activism.

Wu and Lansdowne's introduction sets out the volume's ambition to bridge the scholarship on women's and gender studies on China with research on China's transformation. They highlight a lack of analysis of macro factors in the former and the gender perspective in the latter.

'How do Chinese women act as initiators, mobilisers, and driving forces of social transformation, while women's fate, gender relationships, and feminist values have also been shaped and reshaped during such struggles in China?' is the central question asked in this volume. In this inquiry, the authors are first concerned with women's struggles and strategies in China in order to gain rights, instead of framing women's efforts as part of the social engineering project of modernity or state-building. This priority of women's activism in social movements is outstanding among the existing scholarship in which privileges terms such as state feminism or NGO feminism.

To provide a historical lens on understanding the fate of 'Chinese women', the chapters cover the following four aspects, 1) the shifting political, social, cultural, and ideological sources of feminism from the Mao period to post-reform China; 2) pressing economic issues in social transformations; 3) women's gender and sexual consciousness and its expressions; 4) achievement of feminist actions led by NGOs and digital engagement.

As a researcher who uses an anthropological approach to study gender issues in China, I found the chapters (chapter five and six) that start with material on self-reflection and the lived experience of rural elder women, who are usually excluded from 'feminist communities,' uniquely revealing in comparison with similar studies on feminist activism and social transformation in China.

Also, as Zhou highlights, the scholarship on the gendering of labour in the socialist state during the Mao period has been superseded by critics who mainly target the impact of global capitalism and neoliberalism on migrant women. This discontinuity in the scholarship neglects the continuity of the gender-based exploitation towards women in current state enterprises. Zhou's analysis not only illustrates the narrow conceptualisation of feminist

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activism in both academia and practice but also points out the importance of achieving cross-generational solidarity.

By the same token, Guo and Lv's chapter focuses on the structural disadvantages faced by those who remain in the countryside and rely on land for their livelihood. They highlight the critique put forth by those concerned with the impact of neoliberalism on migrant workers, emphasizing the absence of attention given to these issues. On a related note, Sophia Woodman (chapter 3) and Feng Xu (chapter 4) trace the international network of feminism and its influence on Chinese women's organizations. They explore the connection between the discourse of human rights or liberal feminism and the rhetoric employed by Chinese women in their public engagement today. Through their analysis, they illustrate the political, economic, and cultural resources of Chinese feminist movements, drawing comparisons and noting differences between women's NGOs and other forms of activism. These insights partially explain why the NGO sector in China has been significantly affected by the Western #MeToo movement and the challenges encountered in connecting gender-related activism with other forms of activism targeting various social injustices.

In their conclusion, Wu Guoguang and Feng Yuan offer intellectual and practical reflections, pointing out directions for further research and public engagement. First, they highlight the Maoist hypocrisy of women's liberation, which is evident in the discrepancy between the rhetoric/ideology and the institutional realities. Secondly, the editors describe what women face in today's China as 'from state repression to state-market oppression.' This is a valid and important point, challenging the emerging Maoist feminism that appraises the Maoist legacy on gender issues in order to criticise China's market transition.

For me, a minor disappointment is the lack of reflection on male-dominated institutions, the sequential patriarchal structure in the NGO sector, and collective action for non-gender related issues. Further research on the contentions between women's NGOs and other activist organisations can further contribute to this exploration. However, this volume seems certain to be a thought-provoking collection for researchers and students interested in how the state and the market shaped feminist activism. Furthermore, it serves as a catalyst for new research on gender issues in the context of the social transformations taking place in contemporary China.

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