

Book Review

Routledge Handbook of East Asian Gender Studies

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An increasing academic interest in gender relations and women's rights movements in East Asia have challenged the Eurocentric approach to social sciences and cultural studies in this region. Positioning itself against the perspective of Area Studies, the *Routledge Handbook of East Asian Gender Studies* presents diverse empirical engagements and theoretical debates across a range of geopolitical and disciplinary localities. Consisting of twenty-five chapters, this book is divided into seven thematic sections. This review will prioritise the overarching issues throughout the volume, along with the distinctive contribution of each chapter.

Gender, as a force generating and in turn maintained by social organising in diverse forms, has its own history in East Asia and yet it has become complicated by the processes of 'modernisation' involved with global capital and postcolonial nationalist movements. Resonating with the emerging decolonial interventions in modernity/coloniality where modern gender and sexual knowledge have been identified to be problematic, in their introductory chapter Liu and Yamashita are explicit about their 'mixed feelings' towards the modernisation of East Asian societies, which should not be simply seen as a passive receiver of westernisation, particularly in terms of knowledge production and socioeconomic development.

On the one hand, social and feminist researchers in or from East Asia have been encountering an epistemological problem concerning 'translating' local and regional issues to satisfy the academic hegemony of Anglo-American gender studies, and relatedly, an ethical account regarding how to liberate gendered and sexualised East Asians from an orientalist view. On the other hand, this and many other chapters highlight that the rapid economic growth and independence does not necessarily promote gender equality.

These considerations are well situated in the first section on 'Theorising gender relations in East Asia', in dialogues with western and between Asian theorists. Doing so facilitates an inquiry into gender construction in these societies to go beyond the universal/particular binary. For example, Ochiai's chapter contends that referring to East Asian societies simply as 'Confucian societies' not only overlooks the varied interactions between gender and social classes and between politico-ideological structures and everyday practices, but also conflates the diverse fashions of kinship and familial system that are in place.

Ochiai draws on both historical and materialist approaches to contextualising the developments of and changes in gender relations in Japan and beyond (including Southeast Asia). Ochiai shows that it is important to identify how the modes of production and the travelling of kinship ideologies (especially Confucianism) affect local arrangements of gender relations, which can be mapped out as a 'geography of Asian patriarchy' (p. 16). As follows, her notion of the 'traditionalisation of modernity' (p. 18) challenges the assumption based on a lineal progressivism,

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which takes the import of the modern contract of patriarchy and patrilineality as more original and traditional than the egalitarian culture existing earlier. Such a historiographic interrogation assists us to reconsider the strategies and tactics deployed for nationalistic identity politics, and this is much discussed in other chapters too.

Complementary to the empirically-informed approach, Jackson's chapter also takes a conceptual approach to understanding the modernity of gender relations and sexualities, based on which she advocates an 'open theorising' (p. 39) that attends to the four dimensions of the social: 'social structure and institutions', 'practices and interaction', 'meanings', and 'selfhood, identity and agency'. She also confirms that male-dominant gender relations were quite a recent product of modernisation, through state-endorsed policies and institutionalisation processes.

Also highlighting the importance of historicisation, the second section on 'Variety in women's and feminist movements in East Asia' opens with Chung's chapter. Citing the contradictions between various women's rights organisations – divided mainly between generations who have experienced different social contexts – there are often tensions between progressive and derogative laws on gender equality. Reflecting on conscious wording of 'feminisms' in a plural form for her chapter title, Ueno considers feminist groups' ambivalence towards western women's rights agenda; in Japan, for example, patriarchy has been reinforced through the introduction of the western path towards modernity, and yet, so have feminist discourses and activism.

These chapters contextualise how women's rights movements have emerged and demonstrated their significance in exposing the always already-gendered aspects of political institutions and everyday interactions. Cho, Ma, and Kam's chapter, focusing on feminist activism in Hong Kong, remarks on the tensions between women's rights groups and male-dominated social movement communities, as one of the topical phenomena commonly shared across locations. They argue that, considering the recent political climate in Hong Kong, the feminist struggle is a 'constitutive part of the overall democratic struggle at the time when space for political freedom and democracy is diminishing' (p. 104). Comparatively, Hu's chapter identifies that, in China, feminism has always had to be tied to the political needs, serving the building or reconstructing of a particular Chinese nation/state at different turning points in history.

The fifth section concerns 'Politics of gendered cultural representation' and I discuss it now because of themes it shares with the first section. In each society, there exist diverse types of femininity and masculinity and womanhood and manhood; hence, pursuing sameness becomes problematic. As Bao's chapter identifies, 'instead of improving women's social status through actively constructing women's subjectivity, the Maoist discourse on gender equality 'erases' women's (and men's) gender and subsumes gender under the category of class' (p. 287), making gender representation in Chinese cinema intertwined with the 'national imaginations of modernity' (p. 297).

Echoing Bao's chapter, Wang's chapter concerning gender representations in Taiwan cinema also illustrates the tactic of using women 'to revisit the national past, to critique the national present and to project the national future' (p. 302), which, indeed, has prevailed in new cinemas in most Asian societies. Pang's chapter considers the imageries of bordering and crossing into Hong Kong-Mainland Cinema, which, respectively, signifies the masculinised state power to control the people vis-à-vis the alternative, feminine imaginations of gender and sexuality.

Reading Kitamura's chapter on media representation in Japan together with Section Three on 'Gendered work, care and migration', we can see how gender is a multifaceted construct that affects and is affected by all dimensions of politics and therefore policies. For instance, Ogawa's chapter – exemplifying with the regional care chain between Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and beyond – examines the nexuses between care labour and movement/mobility and conceptualises the 'feminisation of migration'.

Taking these ideas global, Chen's chapter subsequently explores labour markets on the local and global levels, which are not only gendered but also reproduce the hierarchy between sexes and classes, in general, and between ages and familial roles, particularly in East Asia. Also attending to the stigmatisation and omission of the women's labour force, Zhang's chapter on female rural-urban migrants provides a very comprehensive review of related studies of women's experiences in internal migration, a particularly interesting phenomenon in China considering its unparalleled scale, intensity, and social impact.

Coincidentally, many chapters identify that much work done and facilitated by women has been greatly devalued, through misrecognising the professional skills that care and sex work entail. For instance, Yamane's chapter on the 'quasi-market' regime of care work presents a case regarding the inclination towards privatising care labour in Japan. Meanwhile, Hong's chapter on the development of work-life balance in Korea is concerned with the fact that policies and their implementation are never neutral as declared.

All of the case studies mentioned above are related to Section Four on 'Tradition and transition of family and intergenerational relationships' – a gendered lifecourse is involved with one's accessibility to support resources. Jankowiak's introduction to the family values in China reminds us that each society consists of a variety of cultural practices and subjectivities that cannot be reduced to a particular ideology. Similarly, Yi and Chang's chapter on family and gender in Taiwan finds that, 'substantial gender equality is yet to be accomplished, particularly in the private sphere' (p. 231).

In this regard, Song's chapter concerning the transformation of the family structure in South Korea and Tamiya's chapter attending to the links between gender and poverty, using lone mother households in Japan as an example, are both empirically rich. Yet, it is also noteworthy that, although these chapters offer a gender perspective on different social issues, they seem to consider only the power dynamics between men and women – which, on the one hand, reinforce the gender binarism in this region, and on the other, miss the opportunities to critically intervene in problematising and destabilising the meaning of 'gender' *per se*.

This is a large book, which may contain some creative tensions between the various approaches to gender and gender equality, and this shows exactly how a discipline called gender studies should *sound*: heteroglossia. This is especially interesting when we look at the sixth section on 'Shifting yet surviving ideals and practice of masculinity'. Take Hirayama's chapter regarding 'self-sufficient men' in Japan as an example. It contains one of the most surprising arguments in this book, which challenges a dominant academic and popular discourse. The image of self-made men, through omitting men's dependence on women, sustains 'unequal gender relations by enabling men to covertly take advantage of women's unpaid labour' (p. 334).

Hird's chapter on masculinities in China considers the interlinks between gender performance and socio-political development, in which, for instance, in postmillennial China, 'male honour' as a key component of masculinities has been 'expressed through wealth and concepts such as 'face', 'ability' and 'responsibility', rather than 'righteousness' or slavish devotion to China's political leader' (p. 362), as in the past. Guiohk Lee's chapter looking at how men are portrayed in Korean news magazines reflects that, in the context of rapid industrialisation, drastic changes in performing masculinity have occurred.

Indeed, the chapters committed to the studies of men and masculinities are a great addition and indeed an ineluctable complement to the other that focus on women's experiences. These cases reveal that 'manhood' and 'womanhood' are actually interacting upon and constituting each other, and that the former can never be realised without the latter. Relatedly, also an exciting inclusion is the seventh section on 'State, Militarism and Gender', because the relationships between these three categories have rarely been discussed based on East Asian social contexts and by East Asian researchers.

Na-Young Lee's chapter explores a controversial case regarding the women's movement against US military prostitution in South Korea; she analyses the way in which women's bodies are 'nationalised', as a tool to achieve state goals – through instrumentalising their sexual and care labour, which becomes more acute in times of conflict and recession.

Similar to other anticolonial independence and national liberation movements in Asia, using women's pain for nationalistic movements gives very limited space for discussions over how patriarchy has contributed to recolonising women of a lower class. Recalling the chapters on cinematic narratives of femininity, we can see that women are often regarded as embodying a national shame that needs to be forgotten, and this can be observed from the representation of women in post-war films.

This critical statement, followed by Okano's chapter on the reconciliation process of the 'comfort women' issue in Japan, concludes this book powerfully with an advocacy for democracy based on the ethics of care. Okano refers to Carol Gilligan's theory of care ethics to argue that care ethics can be useful for promoting non-violent democracy since they are 'attentive to the fundamental vulnerability of human beings and their difficulties and various needs in healing the wounds from the past' (p. 403).

The normative theory concerning the ethics of care is actually complementary to the first two theoretical chapters, which take an empirical approach. Put together, they provide a better picture that captures the dynamic transformation of gender relations in East Asia and propose a feminist interpretation of the pursuit of restorative justice. Such a critical intervention gives us an alternative way of rethinking democracy and gender justice. In this light, the authors of almost all of the chapters continually remind us of the importance of self-reflexivity as a researcher and an advocate. However, as far as I am concerned, facing squarely the ambivalence, and sometimes contradictions with regard to studying gender relations in East Asian societies is an undersold contribution of this book.

Presenting rich case studies, the *Handbook* shows a great ambition to explore the different aspects of gender relations and illuminates the complexity of the context in which gender has been constructed and performed. Yet, at times these analyses seem irrelevant to a feminist commitment to challenging the man/woman binary and related heterosexist assumptions. This leads us to rethink the relationship between 'gender', as an analytical category, and feminist politics. On the whole, this anthology is still a timely contribution to remapping the gender and sexual geographies in East Asia, which are also linked to the global history especially in relation to struggles with modernisation and democratisation.

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