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the birth of Chinese feminism: essential texts in transnational theory

Edited by Lydia H. Liu, Rebecca E. Karl, and Dorothy Ko, Columbia University Press, New York and Chichester, 2013, 328pp., ISBN: 978-0-231-16290-6, £62.00 (Hbk)/ISBN: 978-0-231-16291-3, £20.50 (Pbk)

The Birth of Chinese Feminism is a translated collection of eight Chinese essays written at the turn of twentieth century, with six by the anarchist feminist He-Yin Zhen, and the other two by her male contemporaries Liang Qichao and Jin Tianhe, respectively. This volume comes with two thought-provoking introductory chapters written by the three co-editors, Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl and Dorothy Ko, who endeavour not only to introduce a new branch—anarchist feminism—into the early development of Chinese feminism, but also to bring a Chinese voice into transnational feminist theories.

He-Yin Zhen (1884–ca. 1920) was the founding editor of an anarchist Chinese feminist journal *Natural Justice* or *Tien Yee* (Tianyi bao) published in Japan from 1907 to 1908. The six of her articles selected and translated in this book cover a wide variety of topics such as women's liberation, labour, revolution and antimilitarism, and epitomise her radical anarchist feminist thoughts. The other two essays, 'On women's education' written by Liang Qichao (1873–1929) and 'The women's bell' written by Jin Tianhe (1873–1947), are classics of Chinese feminism. In contrast to Jin Tianhe and Liang Qichao, who relate women's liberation to social enlightenment and national liberation, and deem that women's liberation can be achieved through political struggles for equal rights and opportunities, He-Yin Zhen argues that liberation in this sense is still realised under the guarantee of the state. She believes that women's liberation can only be achieved through a 'complete social revolution', when the patriarchal state is abolished and housework is publicly shared (p. 183).

In the introduction, two of He-Yin Zhen's concepts, *nannü* and *shengji*, are highlighted by the editors. *Nannü* (男女) indicates man/woman or male/female literally, but is also 'a mostly untranslatable conceptual totality' (p. 10). The editors posit that the category of *nannü* is differentiated from sex as it engages more with the social and historical formulation of gender difference and inequality, and is distinct from gender as it is not only an analytical category, just as gender can be, but is also an object of analysis embodying the totality of gender hierarchy (pp. 13–14). To clarify, *nannü* denotes the interactions of *yin* (the feminine) and *yang* (the masculine), through which *yang* dominates *yin*. Thus, the concept of *nannü* itself is highly gendered and embodies the hierarchical dynamics between men and women. This special feature of *nannü* makes it the object of feminist analysis. In addition, as the editors claim, unlike the intersectionality of gender, class and race proposed by Crenshaw (1989), '*nannü jieji*' (class) (男女阶级) itself is conceptually hierarchical, in which *nannü* is

more basic and significant than class. It is argued that ‘the powerful notion of “*nannü* class”, which sees *nannü* as an originary and primary category in the division and subdivision of social group and as a primary division in the global political economy, cannot otherwise be thought in a juxtaposition of gender, class, and race as distinct, parallel, or even intersecting terms, as is common in the contemporary Anglophone discourses of intersectionality’ (pp. 17–18). In general, the editors believe that *nannü* is ‘philosophically, philologically, and historically more grounded than anything we can possibly illuminate with “gender” as an analytical category or “intersectionality” as method’ (p. 19). *Nannü* is a philosophically abstract concept, but is also socially and historically reproduced by various traditions and institutions.

The second critical concept in He-Yin Zhen’s feminism analysed by the editors is *shengji* (livelihood), which ‘supports the all-encompassing gendered lens with a radical critique of capitalism, modernity, coloniality, the state, and imperial tradition’ (p. 22). The editors compare *shengji* with class and believe that *shengji* is a more comprehensive category associated with labour, social life, private property and class. In fact, He-Yin Zhen regards *shengji* as a major factor leading to the subordination of women, especially in cases of ‘prostitution’, ‘concubinage’, ‘bond servitude’ and ‘hired domestic servants and factory workers’ (p. 82). Hence, she concludes that the analysis of women’s oppression requires more than an economic analysis of women’s dependence on men. It needs a historical and social analysis of the totality of gender relationships and human life.

The editors’ juxtaposing of the Chinese concept *nannü* with Western concepts of gender and sex, *nannü jieji* (*nannü* class) with intersectionality, and *shengji* with class reveals their effort to promote Chinese categories in translational feminism. This might contribute to the development of Chinese feminism within a global feminist arena. It will compel Chinese feminists as well as international feminists to reflect on the employment of the concepts of gender, sex and class in transnational feminist writing. In addition to the contributions advanced by the editors, He-Yin Zhen’s thoughts have other theoretical implications too. For example, in the essay ‘On feminist antimilitarism’, she critically points out why women should be opposed to militarism. The reasons are various. First, it is pointed out that ‘troops are good for nothing but rape, kidnapping, looting, and murder’ (p. 170). Second, some war widows have to become prostitutes in order to sustain a living. In fact, the pain of separation, death and poverty are major effects for women caused by militarism. He-Yin Zhen even believes that ‘the very origin of inequality between men and women lies in militarism’, since male superiority and female inferiority originate in conscription (p. 178). Her positions and elaborations on feminism and militarism may allow us to further reflect on the relationship of feminism and militarism beyond the European context.

Although the book is highly recommended, a minor problem should be noted. While *nannü* is regarded as an untranslatable totality by the editors, it is often translated as ‘men and women’ in the articles. For example, in ‘On the question of women’s liberation’, ‘*nannü* are now educated’ is translated as ‘men and women are both now educated’ (p. 59), and ‘division of power between *nannü*’ is also translated as ‘division of power between men and women’ (p. 66). While this translation can make the text more understandable, it loses the original implication of the gendered hierarchy contained in the concept of *nannü*. However, generally speaking, He-Yin Zhen’s anarchist feminism is conceptually and theoretically inspiring, and will become a reference point for Chinese and transnational feminists.

reference

Crenshaw, K., 1989. Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 140, pp. 139–167.

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