
The Chinese enlightenment period that the title of this book refers to does hold much of interest for the study of gender dynamics. The movement for enlightenment, however, began at least a decade earlier than the May Fourth period (1919) and this excellent book therefore gains little from being signposted as a May Fourth book. It is much more than that.

Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories is the story of five women who pioneered women's involvement in public, military, and institutional life in the years following on from the May Fourth and into the period when the nationalists were gaining in strength and the Communists eventually came to power. The book also reveals the enormity of the task before those working in the field of Chinese gender studies and Chinese women's history, because it shows clearly that history and biography have been manipulated and constructed to suit the agenda of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

If this manipulation took place across the board, then Chinese women were more likely to be marginalised than their male compatriots. It is from this point that Wang
Zhang takes up the story. From her work, we see that it is increasingly pointless to look at the CCP's official histories and biographies. Women and their status in society were on the political and social agenda when the Communists began their campaigns in the 1920s and 1930s, but their status, and, more importantly, their place in the official histories, was sacrificed for the sake of national unity. Whether it was ever put back on the agenda has been the subject of recent scholarly endeavours on Chinese women and their status in society up to the present day. This is valuable also, then, for providing a model of the dynamics of gender before the Communists came to power.

The project of revealing Chinese people's lives through oral narratives had begun approximately ten years earlier with the translation into English of Zhang Xinxin and Sang Ye's *Chinese Lives: An Oral History of Contemporary China* (1986). Since then, there has been a rapid burgeoning of personal reminiscences from Mainland China. We are particularly privileged to now have this collection of personal narratives, described by the author herself as a "memorial written by the women themselves," that arises from a genre of writings classified in the People's Republic of China as "restricted material for internal use only" (*neibu*) and therefore inaccessible to non-Chinese researchers.

One of the five Chinese career women whose life stories are brought to us in the book is Wang Yiwei (1905-1993), editor in chief of the 1920s-1930s journal *Women's Voice* (*Nusheng*). Wang spent most of her life working for the promotion and good of women, following the line of the national salvation movement - a movement set up by the underground Communists in the 1930s. She did not, however, become a member of the Communist Party, a factor along with other interpersonal tensions, that was to result in her being left out of official Party eulogies. Determined to have her life deeds and those of her colleagues in the early women's movement recorded, in 1990 Wang commissioned, paid for, and had inscribed, a fitting epitaph for her own tombstone. The following extract gives some idea of the sentiments that lay behind the expenditure and effort in preparing her own epitaph: "a fragrant orchid grows in the valley. Here rests in peace Wang Yiwei...a remarkable person. Growing up in a chaotic world [she was active in]...promoting women's liberation, and never yielding to men" (237).

The poignant recounting of the writing of her own epitaph reveals the determination of one woman to tell her story in the face of official marginalisation. It also provides a fitting analogy for this remarkable collection of life stories brought to us by a writer determined to get the history of Chinese women straight. The narrators whose stories make up this collection all belonged to a new social category of modern women who emerged from the 1920s onwards in the urban and coastal centres of China. This was the "career woman," a term for, and a category of women that was to provoke heated debates amongst those educated Chinese wanting to advance the interests of China after, first, the fall of the dynasty in 1911 and then the initial faltering attempts to establish a republic. In the narratives that make up this collection, and in the author's skilful and perceptive analysis of them, we have a recording of life stories that are at times almost too personal, and too painful to read. And yet these women, and their stories, were marginalised or lost in the political and historical record of the CCP, because they did not fit either of the CCP models for women - the Maoist heroine or the victimised feudal woman. As the
ruling party in China since 1949, the CCP instilled a hegemonic line of social reorganisation which left no room for women as individual as those whose stories fill these pages. Under the Maoist dictate all would be equal in the Communist state. The idea of the all-embracing dajia (literally "big family") left no room for the social or collective memory of individual heroines such as we meet on these pages.

The pages are packed with detail, with each narrative contextualised in Guomindang (GMD: The Nationalist Party) and CCP history. Because the women were all career women, we also become privy to the workings of the institutions and organisations they spent much of their lives serving. These included military units, educational institutions, legal institutions, as well as those humanitarian groups and quasi-religious organisations with which they came into contact. It was within these groups that the tensions resulting from expectations of gendered behaviour, all framed within the sometimes converging, sometimes conflicting, political strands of communism and nationalism, were frequently being tested. In addition to these institutional details, each of the five narratives is complemented with an interpretative essay that fleshes out the main themes of the story, and these often come as a small relief from the intensity and understated emotions of the narratives before. When it comes to the narratives themselves, we are left with a sense of the overwhelming enormity of the details of their lives. These are stories of political campaigns, battles, love, marriage, lovers, babies, death, and, most of all, we are left with a sense of their own personalities.

Structurally, the book is organised into two discrete sections, a factor that distracts somewhat from the strength of the personal stories. The first part of the book proposes to establish the publishing and writing environment that the narrators were part of. The author has inserted a lengthy and detail packed chapter on the Shanghai Ladies Journal (Fund zazhi) to illustrate one of the methods of popularising the new feminism that arose after the May Fourth Movement in 1919. Most of the articles in the journal were written by men, and many of its readers were men. This long tradition in China of men posing as women in literature is one of several instances where the author could have drawn on and brought a gendered analysis to her discussion. Similarly, the reasons for a greater emphasis of contributions by women being sought after the reform of the Ladies Journal in 1921 is not fully explored.

As a piece of oral history one gets the sense that the author, to her credit, has not been excessively mannered in editing and rearranging the stories, which can result in too tidy a narrative. An example of this is the "career revolutionary" Huang Dinghui's telling of her extraordinary life, which included a total of seventeen years in prison. On Women's Day in 1927 Huang organised a rally of 100,000 women and at night she married one of her many, and persistent suitors, Wang Xiyan, who was to die in battle a few months after the birth of their baby. We get a sense of the story unfolding as Huang remembers it, one event sparking off another, instead of a neat progression in time.

Wang's *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment* appears four years after Christina Gilmartin's *Engendering the Chinese Revolution: Radical Women, Communist Politics, and Mass Movements in the 1920s*. The latter work brought new questions and understandings in relation to gender dynamics in radical political studies. How far has
Wang's work moved beyond Gilmartin's in drawing out new questions or understandings of gender relations and dynamics? This is perhaps the area where the author has too light a touch - inevitable in a work of such scope, with its heavily footnoted commentaries, the texts of the personal narratives, as well as the substantial section on publishing activities. Despite these comments, the text under review offers a storehouse of source material for China specialists, oral historians, and those working in women's studies and the humanities. As a contribution to the field of gender studies the book offers a perspective on the influence of totalitarian political regimes on gender relations. It shows how public memory and the nature of heroic narratives in certain regimes become male defined. Men wrote as women in the Ladies Journal, but the patriarchal CCP hierarchy also wrote women out of the historical record of the CCP. As it stands, with its several layers of narratives that run throughout the book, Women in the Chinese Enlightenment points the way to enormous possibilities in the field of the study of gender in Chinese society.

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