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Review of Women and China's Revolutions

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Hershatter, Gail. *Women and China's Revolutions*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018. ISBN 9781442215696.

Scholarly discourse on feminist culture and movements throughout Chinese history is far from an emergent field, but the approaches encapsulated are rarely satisfactory. Confronted with the complexities of Confucianism, the intersection of regionalism with major historical trends, and a lack of rigorous sources in the early modern period, most works on this subject have either flocked to the confines of political history or focused on individual movements. Gail Hershatter's *Women and China's Revolutions* takes several bold and successful stabs at these issues. Through analyzing the shifting, yet enduring, cultural functions and political symbols that femininity carried throughout most of Chinese history, the book concisely presents the intersectional plights, struggles, and triumphs of feminism from the late Qing Dynasty to the present day.

The first two chapters of the book examine how women's living conditions and social statuses evolved with the Qing empire's decline. These realities were animated by two archetypal women: one living in a bustling industrial town, the other in a rural village. The author located both composite women in the Jiangnan region. China's wealthy southeastern provinces have historically enjoyed agricultural fertility and vibrant trade both internally and through maritime routes. Through her depiction of the urban elite woman, the author ambitiously attempts to outline the shifting delineation of "public" and "private" realms in stable elite households. Through her description of the peasant woman, the author effectively explored the compatibility of the traditional family value of obedience and feminine symbols such as foot binding with the demanding realities of agricultural labor and childrearing. Though cursory in their broad strokes,

depictions of these two women trace the contours of the varying social roles of women as the Qing Dynasty's impending collapse.

In her haste to accentuate her global scope, Hershatter applies a post-modern lens—one that stresses the mutability of social structures when incendiary and revolutionary political messages are involved—in drawing connections between the rhetoric of Western missionaries and the social awakening of Chinese women. It is therefore worth noting that while the buds of informational globalization were extant, the physical and cultural reaches of Western missionaries were nearly negligible outside of the five “treaty ports” that Western powers pried open. This instance of mischaracterization also calls attention to an underutilized critical lens in analyzing Western depictions of modern Chinese history. Owing to China's geographical size and demographical complexity, the resilience of cultural barriers between provinces, cities, and even towns should not be underestimated. Instead of confounding the reader, addressing these barriers can potentially strengthen the book's argument that no movement, no matter how compelling and widespread, can affect all aspects of China for prolonged periods of time.

Having established the chaotic state of feminine identity at the Qing Dynasty's collapse, the book then addresses the roles of women in republican China's burgeoning national identity and scrambled social structures. Turn-of-the-century politicians and intellectuals saw the “woman question” as a cornerstone of state-building and a new Chinese identity. Here, the author not only enumerated the feminist visions of political leaders and reformers, but also commendably introduced nuanced views of these figures by analyzing their political commentaries on women through social lenses. In discussing the dismissal of femininity by Liang Qichao, a revolutionary politician who first expedited the reform and then the downfall of the Qing Dynasty, Hershatter introduces rare records of protestation from Liang's female family

members and teachers. The bulk of historical literature concerning this period is either preoccupied with its political dimensions or prone to tilting towards a “great-man history” approach. Hershatter’s perspective’s combination of political and social lenses strikes a rare balance by analyzing the parallel roles of Chinese women’s political discourse and social caches. That these protestations neither influenced Liang’s worldviews nor survive the historiographical cullings of numerous other scholars renders Hershatter’s work exemplary.

Hershatter expands her exploration of the political role of Republican-era women by examining the government’s ambitious intention and feeble execution in regulating women’s lives and promoting nationalism through girls’ schools. Her analysis of the life of Qiu Jin, a late-Qing nationalist and feminist martyr, is layered with connections between modern Chinese feminism and the social geneses of various knight-errant motifs in Chinese folklore and literature since the Han Dynasty. This lens works to dismantle the older view that due to the resolve of political elites in each successive Chinese dynasty to rewrite history, cultural identities active under each dynasty were as discrete and unique as their political ones. By interweaving the evolving literary depictions of historical tropes over time with shifting political messages attached to each iteration, Hershatter accentuates the pervasive nature of historical memories throughout Chinese history. Thematic and analytical leaps, such as the ones mustered in the Qiu Jin case study, inspire hope in contemporary intersectional explorations of modern Chinese feminism at a time when feminist icons are once again under threat.

One of the most striking contributions this book makes to the intersectional study of Chinese feminism is its characterization of feminine identity in the intense competition between the nascent Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the more established nationalist government. Hershatter takes care to expound upon the intersection between communist adaptations of

feminist tenets and the movement's willingness to suppress certain aspects of women's liberation that run counter to the party's need to centralize and expand. She notes that as a result of this high-pressured environment, politically ambitious women in the CCP were largely dependent on the political performances of their male spouses or lovers (120). When the latter fell from power, the relationship likewise evaporated, sometimes even resulting in the woman being victimized and ostracized after being judged with traditional values of morality and virtue. While such focused examinations of the CCP's various shades of feminism are common among contemporary scholarship, this book stands out by comparing them with feminism in Nationalist-controlled areas. Through conflicts such as the Northern Expedition, a campaign that greatly reinforced the nationalist government's political centralization, women were involved in combat, medical care, espionage, propaganda, and political drives that sought to put an end to polygamy and child marriage. However, as conflicts between communists and nationalists escalated, the latter began to crack down on feminists of all stripes, their paranoia having constructed a bond between feminism and socialism. Hershatter's parallel analyses of Chinese feminism's two fates during the country's formative years outline correlations between political centralization, statehood, and the flexible political messages that feminism in regulatory regimes can take on. This is a valuable system of analysis. With the proliferation of alternative facts and right-wing authoritarianism, issues surrounding feminism and gender identity have become heated ideological battlegrounds. It follows that organized efforts to shape, redirect, and portray these movements, as was the case with the communist-nationalist clashes, can sometimes be interpreted as reflections of overarching balances of political power.

While feminist histories written by victors of the Second World War often focus on the struggles of women freedom fighters in defending their homes, Hershatter also pays attention to

the plights of women who lived in occupied territories such as Manzhouguo, the Japanese puppet state that consisted of China's three northeastern provinces. She delves into the dual identities of women as both victims and perpetrators of Japanese colonial extraction specifically in the sex and drug trades. These snapshots, citing valuable primary oral and written sources, added gradations of analyses to the mutation of cultural values under foreign occupation. They also serve as helpful tools for grappling with the multitude of complexities that the subsequent nationalist and communist governments contended with, thus reinforcing the book's role as a connector of historical chapters and currents of social change.

In the penultimate chapter of her book, Hershatter addresses some of these complexities in pivotal events such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, movements through which the CCP attempted to construct and shape femininity. The historical significance of these movements became more variegated through Hershatter's social lens as she writes, "women' in the period of socialist construction ... were not a homogeneous group. Generation, region, ethnicity, and level of education all helped determine which events of Big History most touched women's lives" (220). These are key touchstones in the exploration of Chinese history because the sheer breadth of realities that each area encapsulates are often underestimated. It is therefore compelling to analyze issues such as marriage, land ownership, midwifery, prostitution, industrialization, and the perennial inequalities between urban and rural women alongside this sensibility. In doing so, the reader is subtly warned of the dangers of generalization, especially with such a deceptively monolithic term as "Chinese history." Through her circumspect and discrete treatment of the above issues, Hershatter demonstrates that as time washes over China, the parts that are left behind should be determined by each group's political, economic, demographic, and social status, not their status as belonging to a so-called Chinese civilization.

The issues that perplexed CCP officials during the turbulent 1960s and 70s persist to the present day. In her final chapter, Hershatter argues that since Deng Xiaoping's "reform and opening" campaign in the late 1970s, Chinese women became increasingly capitalized. By examining trends such as deepening gender inequality and the devolution of farm work onto elderly women, the chapter demonstrates that the forces driving economic history are related to those driving feminist history. Finally, this chapter executes a balanced cross-sectional phenomenon relating to dating, marriage, infidelity, divorce, and the panoply of demographic issues that the one-child policy brought to the fore. As such, this chapter strings together folklore, historical memories, long-standing social tensions, and recurrent patterns of feminist movements under political stress. As Hershatter outlines the confluence of these forces, the reader is brought to the realization that the social reality of contemporary China not only contains immense potentiality for political changes to unfold, but also portends momentous change for Chinese feminism.

Women in China's Revolutions offers a concise, if variegated, overview of broad political trends and social dynamics that both affected and were shaped by the experiences of women in modern China. The dearth of historiography on the experiences of women from rural areas in early modern China renders this work's courageous explorations into them especially valuable and commendable. At the same time, rich and often emotional primary accounts from more recent events evince breadth and depth with equal mastery. In demonstrating women's formative and propellant roles throughout Chinese history, the book serves as a reminder of femininity's consistently dominant role in the formation of cultural identities, as much as traditional historiography may suggest otherwise. In challenging the traditional discretely dynastic approach to feminist movements, Hershatter successfully demonstrated the strengths of a fluid and multi-

variable approach while avoiding the pitfalls of ahistorical generalization. Therefore, though it is designed to be an introductory survey. Its intimate details and complex ideological intersections render this book both an informative and evocative read.

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About the author

Tony Li is a junior at Tufts University majoring in history and international relations. He is currently a visiting scholar at the University of Oxford studying global and East Asian history. As a Laidlaw research scholar, he is examining US-China competition through the lens of Classical Chinese Philosophy.