

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

REVIEW ESSAY

New Views on the Woman Question

Ann Waltner, University of Minnesota

Marcia Yonemoto. *The Problem of Women in Early Modern Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016. 304 pp. \$70 (cloth, e-book).

Wang Zheng. *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1964*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017. 400 pp. \$85 (cloth); \$35 (paper, e-book).

The Problem of Women in Early Modern Japan and *Finding Women in the State* are in many ways quite different: they cover different geographic areas and different time periods; they use different sources and ask different questions. But it is productive to think about them in tandem, to see what kind of questions they do raise and to think about the ways “the woman question” is posed in these two contexts—early modern Japan and early Maoist China, respectively. Both books are interested in the question of what looking at history through a feminist lens does to our view of that history; both are interested in dismantling a hegemonic narrative that provides a diminished vision of women as historical subjects. And both of them point out ways in which neither the “problem of women” (Yonemoto) nor the problem of finding women in the state (Wang) has been resolved. I will begin by talking about each book separately and then offer some general conclusions.

Marcia Yonemoto’s *The Problem of Women in Early Modern Japan* is a terrific book. How does the author articulate the problem of women in early modern Japan? Yonemoto writes that because Tokugawa women “represented private interest and the potential for disorder to which that interest might give rise,” they had to be surveilled and controlled (2). The degree to

which the surveillance of women was a lively issue is shown by the fact that more than two thousand individual titles of instructional books for women dating from the Tokugawa era are still extant (6). These texts, along with writings by Tokugawa women (and writings by male family members about them) form the core of Yonemoto's book. The book is structured by "life course," the stages of a woman's life. It begins with childhood (in chapters on filial piety and self-cultivation) and proceeds through motherhood, succession, and retirement. Yonemoto is also sensitive to change over time—the opportunities and challenges facing women in the mid-Tokugawa were very different than in the early Tokugawa. The findings in the book that will be most surprising to people not well versed in Tokugawa women's history are the degree to which women exerted autonomy, despite being under surveillance (5), and the ways in which marriage, especially among commoners, "rather than being a singular, lifelong experience, was often a process of trial and error, of making and remaking unions in order to ensure family continuity, secure social mobility, and, when possible, achieve a sense of personal achievement or satisfaction" (94). Yonemoto also argues that, unlike Meiji activists, writers during the early modern period "perceived that women themselves might provide solutions, not only for women's problems, but also for larger social, economic and political problems that subsumed gender difference" (5).

Yonemoto's argument proceeds through examples (from the instructional texts) and anecdotes (from the diaries and other narratives that were written by and about women). The book is richly illustrated with images from instructional manuals. I was particularly taken with an illustration of a woman teaching a child to write, guiding the hands of the girl as she writes *kana* (syllabic Japanese script). Similar versions of the illustration appear in *Hōgyoku hyakunin isshu* (Jewel-treasures of the hundred poems, 1721) and *Onna kuku no koe* (Ninety-nine voices for women, 1787). The latter text mixes mathematical instruction and moral injunctions, as well as aphorisms such as "Learning to write is like pushing a cart uphill—if you only make a small effort, you will have to start again from the beginning" (61–63, quotation on 63).

At a number of points, Yonemoto indicates ways in which discourses about female virtue in Japan were constructed fundamentally differently than in China. She suggests that while Chinese tales of female self-sacrifice were concerned with chastity and the conjugal bond, in Japan "it was the filial bond that was elemental, and could be breached only by death" (27). The

contrasts with China point to ways in which Confucian ethics played out differently in the two cultures, as well as suggesting avenues for further comparison.

The problem of motherhood in the Tokugawa is made more complex because population growth flattened out in the early eighteenth century (123). Yonemoto adopts historical sociologist Ochiai Emiko's phrase "reproductive revolution" to describe the dynamics of this change. The "reproductive revolution" is accompanied by a new tone in instructional handbooks as they pertain to reproduction. In the instructional manuals of the early Tokugawa, too few or too many children were both seen as problems for a family. But by the early nineteenth century, pro-natalist texts had begun to circulate. In addition to illustrations that show the fetus as a developing child, the early nineteenth-century texts contain specific strictures against both abortion and infanticide (137). Yonemoto cites the work of Ochiai Emiko and historian Fabian Drixler, which shows that an upsurge in births in the early nineteenth century coincided with the circulation of these texts (138).

The Problem of Women is vividly written and beautifully illustrated. Were it to be published in paperback at a reasonable price, it would make a good resource for classes in Japanese history and comparative women's history.

Wang Zheng has written another terrific book, a big book that answers many questions and gives rise to many more. Wang, a historian, is, of course, fundamentally interested in the past. But her interest in the past is deeply conditioned by her interest in, and concern with, the present. I begin my discussion of her book with her own final sentence: "Without a conscious and vigilant feminist critique and the systematic removal of the foundations of male dominance, any revolution, including a socialist one, sooner or later ends up reproducing unequal power relations and male dominance" (264). In some ways, the book aims to reconstruct an era, from 1949 to 1964, when women could be found in the state, and when women participated in the articulation of their roles in the state. How does Wang define the state? She does not have a single definition: she is interested in dismantling notions of a hegemonic state power. She questions the "assumption of the total dominance of a socialist state patriarchy" (2). Early on in the book, she states that her aim is to "recognize women's agency but also to reconceptualize state power" (2). She is interested in the negotiations that result in power, and she finds there to be a feminist presence in those negotiations until 1964.

The book has two major sections—one deals with the All-China Women’s Federation, an umbrella organization encompassing all women’s organizations established in 1949, and the other deals with feminists in the Chinese film industry, both concentrating on the period from 1949 to 1964. The All-China Women’s Federation and films might seem an unlikely pairing, but it is a productive one. Wang is interested in the phenomenon of a socialist feminist consciousness, and films were a powerful way of creating such a consciousness.

Wang writes that her own generation of educated urban women was more or less unaware of the Women’s Federation, because, as she writes, urban women were not its constituents (21). In her discussion of the Women’s Federation, she describes the organization’s adoption of a “politics of concealment” (17). She argues that the rhetoric of self-effacement that members of the Women’s Federation utilized was strategic. She credits the organization with making women into state subjects and argues that “such state subjects, like the socialist state formation, were not made entirely according to a masculinist script,” but rather were subject to many contestations between class and gender (49).

One of the most engaging chapters of the book deals with the journal *Women of China*, published (under several different names) from 1939 until it was shut down in 1966; it resumed publication again after the Cultural Revolution. Wang argues that the covers of the journal (figures 5–15) demonstrate a genuine socialist feminist consciousness, while its contents often discussed major government decrees, which were often not feminist at all (112). A major crisis erupted in 1964: the journal ran two forums on “life and outlook on marriage” that came under strong attack in an article in *Red Flag*, the theoretical journal of the Chinese Communist Party, entitled “How Shall We Deal with the Woman Question?” The essay attacking the magazine concluded by saying that *Women of China* often used issues such as “‘family happiness’ to divert women’s attention, destroying laboring women’s socialist consciousness, damaging their revolutionary will, and making them degenerate into the direction of capitalism and revisionism” (117). Wang argues that this was the moment at which feminist attempts to transform gender relations was suppressed (134). Her sources for this lively chapter include not only the documents themselves but interviews with the women who were central players at the time.

In the chapters on film, Wang concentrates on Chen Bo’er, a socialist film star, and the (male) feminist author Xia Yan. Her discussion of the film *New Year’s Sacrifice* is particularly astute in the way it shows the transformation of the original story by Lu Xun (which aimed to lay

bare the cruelties of society) into a film that, through small plot changes and a voice-over at the end, places the cruelties of society in the past and celebrates the new socialist society.

Wang Zheng is attentive to language—she is careful to define what she means by feminism (whose Chinese equivalents have always been contested in China) (2–5), and she reminds her English readers that, in the particular contexts in which she is writing, feudalism referred to repressive gender norms and practices (40–41). Her analysis is carried forward by her close reading of all of the various kinds of texts she uses.

But the world comes crashing down in 1964—in the crisis over *Women of China* and in the simultaneous downfall of Xia Yan and rise of Jiang Qing. Wang argues that these two events would justify marking 1964 as the beginning of the Cultural Revolution.

In a subsequent chapter on the so-called Iron Girls, Wang talks about the public memory of socialism in contemporary China and the reinscription of normative gender roles. A poignant moment near the end of the book occurs when Wang Zheng takes several current issues of the journal *Women of China* to Shi Yumei, the former art editor of the journal. The cover images are quite glamorous (figure 29)—of the 228 covers of the journal published between 1999 and 2008, 164 feature entertainers, and the rest feature entrepreneurs. According to Wang, Shi was devastated, and asked, “Can this represent Chinese women? How many Chinese women look like this?... They should not use the title *Women of China*” (254). Wang is not devoid of hope for feminism in China; she sees a younger generation of feminists, who write not for print journals but on the Internet and in social media, as potentially pointing the way to a more feminist future.

Both authors are interested in showing the ways in which women worked to shape their own lives, often in situations where the rules for life shaping were not of their own making. Both of them document how women found agency in quiet ways. Wang Zheng argues that the Women’s Federation used a “politics of concealment” to forward its mission at a time when confrontation would have been futile. They are not silent; they are strategic. The women that Yonemoto describes (and the manuals that prescribe their behavior) also argue for a kind of strategy of concealment, though Yonemoto does not use the phrase.

It would be a misreading of these rich and complex texts to say that they are fundamentally about the family and the state—women in both texts exist both within and outside the realm of the family. (Indeed, one might say that therein lies the problem of women—where is a woman to be located?) One could perhaps say that both of these texts are about problems of the

domestic and the ways in which the domestic intersects with the state, or, to put it more generally, with the public. In the *Analects*, 13:18, the duke of Ye brags to Confucius that he comes from a community that is so righteous that if a man stole a sheep, his son would testify against him. Confucius replies that in his community, righteousness is viewed somewhat differently—a father would shield his son and a son would shield his father. Although neither of our authors cites this passage, it seems to me to be an important statement about the potential conflict between family and state: the emotional and moral duties required by the domestic have the potential to create conflict with the state. And this is a conflict that is articulated and embedded in the *Analects* itself. The conflict between the domestic and the state is not restricted to women, but it may be framed as a “woman problem.” I raise this here because both books are haunted by the specter of Confucianism and Confucian family ethics.

But both books are also haunted by the present. Each ends with a coda suggesting that the problems raised in the books by Yonemoto and Wang are still a long way from being resolved; indeed, in some ways the authors suggest that things for women are worse now than they were in the past. Wang writes about male Chinese writers urging Chinese women to stay home, learning from Japanese women “to return home and sacrifice themselves to the nation” (252). Yonemoto cites contemporary tax and household registration policies in Japan that make “the modern state a vehicle for the maintenance not only of patrilinealism but of patriarchy as well” (222). Yonemoto tells us that Japan ranked number 101 out of 145 countries in the World Economic Forum’s 2015 Gender Gap Report (219). A quick check of the report shows that China ranked 91 and the United States ranked 28. That is grim enough. But the numbers for all three countries were worse in 2016—Japan ranked 111, China 99, and the United States fell to number 45. (The 2015 report is available at <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2015/> and the 2016 report is available at <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2016/>.) It seems as if we must continue to look for ways to find women in all of these states, and to find new and clearer ways of articulating a new “woman question,” encompassing gender equity, LGBT rights, and access to reproductive health care in a way that makes these issues visible to, and urgent to, the state. And we need to be sure that the efforts of feminists in the past are not erased. That would be a beginning, in the United States as well as in China and Japan.

Ann Waltner is professor of History at the University of Minnesota.