

On Learning to Resist Verdicts and Disappearances: Teaching about Gender in Mao's China

Gail Hershatter, University of California Santa Cruz

I have never taught an entire undergraduate course devoted to gender in post-1949 China, although at this point enough material is available in English that someone probably should. PRC gender relations appear in two of my undergraduate syllabi: one entitled *Women in China's Long Twentieth Century* (beginning with two weeks on the late Qing and ending with two weeks on the post-Mao reform period) and the other entitled *Recent Chinese History*, covering the period from the 1940s more or less to the present. In each course, the situation of women and gender relations from 1949 to the present is embedded in a larger narrative.

Each course presents a different challenge. In the women's history course, I find myself working hard to prevent students from rushing to several tempting conclusions about the status and situation of women. In the *Recent China* course, the challenge is to keep gender visible in a syllabus bristling with events that do not explicitly foreground gender but nevertheless—in my opinion—cannot be understood without it. This brief essay suggests several approaches that may be useful in addressing these challenges. The aim here is to encourage students to question an alluring but oversimplified story about the past.

My reflections on the teaching process in this essay are drawn from my most recent teaching experience with the Chinese women's history course, in Spring 2019. This was the first time I had taught the course since the publication of my book *Women and China's Revolutions* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), which attempts to take stock of the substantial body of high-quality research on women in the past two centuries of Chinese history that has been produced since the 1970s. Although I wrote the book precisely because of the need for teaching material, and had assigned draft versions of the text in earlier iterations of the course, teaching one's own work in book form offers particular challenges—not least that students are less than willing to interact critically with a text written by their teacher. Supplemented by primary source narratives (*Daughter of Han*, *Old Madam Yin*, fiction by Qiu Jin, oral histories, news reports, etc.), however, a synthetic account does provide a kind of skeletal framework that students can flesh out.

The student body for this upper-division lecture-and-discussion course included History majors who knew something about Asia, History majors who didn't, Feminist Studies majors usually encountering Chinese history for the first time, and a number of students from STEM disciplines and Economics seeking General Education credit for a humanities course. Like the UC Santa Cruz student body more generally, the class was ethnically diverse. About a quarter were international students from the PRC or Taiwan. Addressing the varied needs of these students, and their varied ability to deal with large amounts of reading and writing, was my major focus in the course.

A course that begins with the late imperial period and moves through the history of revolutions runs the risk of becoming a narrative that reproduces the Communist revolution's story about itself: that it was a progressive move from darkness into light. It doesn't matter how much time I spend talking about the accomplishments of educated women in the Qing, or pushing students not just to denounce footbinding, but to consider why women who bound their daughters' feet regarded themselves as fulfilling a motherly duty, and why daughters understood it as an unquestioned, if painful, part of growing up female. Students head straight for what historian Dorothy Ko has called the "May Fourth story"—a version of the Chinese past developed by radical social critics in the 1910s and 1920s arguing feudal society oppressed, sequestered, and deformed women, and that only modernity (directed by mostly male intellectuals) could free them. The Party-led revolution then becomes the fulfillment of that promise. The 1950 Marriage Law arrives, women step forth from the inner quarters into full political participation, take their places as laborers in fields and factories, and the bad old days recede. This narrative extends into the era of post-Mao reforms, as rural women leave their homes by the thousands to seek work in cities. The aims of state policy and economic arrangements change dramatically, but women march on, away from the feudal past, toward an ever-expanding horizon of activity and progress.

Students from very different backgrounds were attracted to this explanatory matrix. Some students from the PRC buttressed it with sources drawn from popular Chinese-language web sites, or material they had studied in middle school. Feminist Studies students found resonances with accounts of gender disparity in other cultural and historical situations. As for the History majors—well, the attractions of a progress narrative are many, and they too tended to set up before-and-after contrasts in their written assignments.

A second tempting narrative is more skeptical but equally flattening in its effects. It emphasizes the continuing patriarchy of family and state structures in Mao-era China and concludes that the revolution sold women out by neglecting gender to attend to issues of class, or by mobilizing women's labor while paying less attention to their status or material welfare. When the course reaches the reform era, some students see the issue as resolved, economically if not politically, with the enlarging of the market. Others continue straight on into a critique of capitalism and the ways it commodifies and exploits women's labor. If Narrative 1 says, "women had a revolution and it changed their lives in profound ways," Narrative 2 says, "women were present at the revolution and, in important respects, it betrayed them."

Neither of these narratives is without merit. But letting matters rest with either of them, or even with a combination of both, leaves out much of what is interesting and crucial about gender relations and change in the PRC. Let me suggest four

ways we can encourage students to resist these verdicts, and to question whether reaching a simple verdict is an adequate way to confront the past.

First, we need to disaggregate the subject of "women." Which women, where, and when? Urban, rural, old, young, elite, poor, northern, southern, Han, non-Han—each of these terms fractures the unitary category "women," continually forcing us to ask who, and what, we are talking about. Disaggregation also reminds us that revolutions, like other social processes, are uneven, fragmentary, messy, and fragile. "Women" is not the only category that should be scrutinized in this way—"China" itself is another shorthand category begging for disassembly and analysis. But it is useful to keep in mind that introducing women into the historical frame is only a first step in enlarging and refining our understanding of how societies are constituted and how they change over time.

I tried to reinforce attention to difference by having students complete four entries in a research journal at four points during the quarter. Each was to examine the life of an elite and a non-elite woman in a specified time period beginning in 1800 for the first posting and ending in 2000 for the final one, with the student acting as research assistant to an (imaginary) historical novelist. Students were instructed, "Your task is to provide the novelist with a comprehensive set of summary statements (all fully referenced) on the basis of which a fictional character can be created, clothed, fed, occupied, transported, housed, and entertained. Consistency and appropriateness of information will be essential. Accurate references must accompany all details cited.... Describe as much as you can about their material lives, work habits, political beliefs, spiritual practices, and connection with the events of Big History."¹ By and large this assignment was successful in encouraging students to see differences of class and urban/rural location, with some incorporating specific local or regional events into their write-ups. It was less successful at encompassing the range of China's ethnic diversity, not least because the range of scholarship to undergird such an inquiry is still under development.

Second, we need to pay close attention to the temporality of different kinds of change. A new and ambitious Party-state does not arrive on the scene and alter everything. It is important, for instance, to talk about the Marriage Law of 1950—how it echoed the revolutionary writings of the 1920s, was modified by the exigencies of working in rural areas, was embraced by some rural residents and violently resisted by others, and gave rise to divisions within Party about how hard to push it in the context of other state priorities. But it is equally important to look at how marriage practices changed over a much longer time period in Mao's China, amid changes shaped less by the Law than by collective agriculture, modestly increased access to education, media, the changing availability of material goods, and the actions and desires of young people. This kind of analysis helps move us away from positing the state as the only arbiter of social change, while never letting its actions drop from visibility either. It reminds students that just as one cannot fully grasp social change in the United States by reading the Congressional Record or Supreme Court decisions, one cannot subscribe only to a model of "state directs and people respond variously" to understand change in the PRC.

Here, the research journal also proved useful, since students revised all their entries as they went along and added

an assessment of major changes for elite and non-elite women across the time span covered by the course. By asking students to consider how each woman's life differed from that of her mother or her daughter, the assignment required attention to temporality and the unevenness of change. (It also gave rise to the most entertaining, if slightly horrifying, paper of the quarter: one in which sedan chairs, bound feet, concubinage, and the State Family Planning Commission converged at a single point in time to drive several women to contemplate suicide.)

Third, a focus on the changing (and, in some respects, unchanging) content of women's labor provides a unifying theme for a gender course without reducing the story of women's status to a simple verdict of "liberated" or "betrayed." Prior to the founding of the PRC, women's labor in both elite and poor households helped to ensure survival. Although common social norms held that virtuous women were not seen in public, necessity dictated otherwise in many households, as women went out to the fields and market to labor and took to the road as refugees. Even in less desperate situations, sequestered did not mean idle, and the proceeds from women's handicraft production helped to pay taxes and meet household expenses.

Domestic labor, of course, was the unquestioned purview of women during those years. Therefore, the question of what labor women were expected to perform under socialism, and how it was talked about publicly, provides an important index of what changed and how in the PRC. We know that women were exhorted to work in the factories and the fields—work that was now valorized as building socialism rather than stigmatized as a sign of poverty and social vulnerability. Women's labor did, in fact, help to build the industrial sector and transform the countryside, often underwriting a large-scale move by men into more technical or advanced jobs as women took over basic tasks. At the same time, domestic labor and childcare, which were to be socialized in the imminent communist future, remained predominantly the purview of women, requiring that rural women stay awake to spin and weave after working in the collective fields, and that grandmothers perform more domestic work so that mothers could labor outside the home. The reconfigured labor of women helped to underwrite the costs of socialist economic development, and the increased workload of the double day affected the daily lives and aspirations of adult women, shaping what socialism was for them. Attention to women's labor also lays the groundwork for asking similar questions about the post-Mao reforms, where some of these gendered dynamics continue.

Finally, teaching about gender in the PRC requires that we ask how Woman as symbolic subject was understood during the Mao years. During the late Qing and the Republican era, intellectuals agonized about China's vulnerability to imperialism, connecting it to cultural practices that valued men over women and older generations over younger ones. A core promise of the Communist revolution, dating back to the Party's founding in the wake of the May Fourth Movement, was that it would emancipate women and in the process strengthen China. The early People's Republic announced this emancipation as an accomplished task, a sign of the revolution's success: women now had equal political rights and were free to participate alongside men in labor, public meetings, and (during the Cultural Revolution) struggle sessions and the

exodus of young people to the countryside. Middle-aged women were touted as labor models for their farming expertise; groups of unmarried women formed the famed Iron Girl brigades, who specialized in taking on physically challenging tasks in socialist construction.

All of this has been well-described in accounts of the Mao years. What students should be encouraged to think about is this: what was Woman, as socialist citizen and family member, expected to do and be? How did this change over time? When did state authorities highlight gender as an axis of political activity or workplace equality, and when was it taken for granted as an already-solved or uninteresting social issue? How did people's understandings of proper gender roles—or the importance of transgressing them—vary across generations, regions, and class formations? Paying attention to when the figure of Woman is highlighted and by whom, as well as when it fades and why, helps students ask "what work is the category

of gender doing in this situation?" And that is a question that will be useful to them in the study of Mao's China, the reform years that succeeded it, and the world beyond China as well.

Author's note: the reader will undoubtedly observe that I refer to gender at several points, but talk mainly about women. It should go without saying that the study of men and masculinity in the PRC, as subjects of critical inquiry rather than the taken-for-granted subjects of History, bears further investigation.

¹ This assignment was adapted from one developed for a New Zealand history course; see Jeanine Graham, "A Novelist's Background Briefing Paper," *Perspectives on History* (Jan. 2001). [https://www.historians.org/publications-](https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2001/a-novelists-background-briefing-paper)

[and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2001/a-novelists-background-briefing-paper](https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2001/a-novelists-background-briefing-paper).