

China's West: Media, gender, and China's repositioning in the modern world order

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Summary

The turn of the twentieth century indicates the beginning of China's transformation from the Empire to the Republic that was to a large extent influenced by newly emerged position and perception by the educated elite that China is only one of many marginalized actors at the modern world stage. After China lost the control over its most important tributary states, the 1895 Treaty of Shimonoseki, in Shogo Suzuki's words, signalled "the final collapse of the East Asian international order", forcing China to become engaged more fully with European International Society.¹

European International Society had different modes of interaction which informed European states' relations with other European states and with non-European polities. Suzuki follows Edward Keene and reminds us of the dualistic nature of European International Society. He writes that:

...in the context of the late nineteenth century when China and Japan encountered and were incorporated into the Society, there existed a firm belief in the superiority of European 'civilization' and a concomitant belief that the European states had a moral duty to spread the blessings of European civilization, by force and outright colonization if necessary. This gave the mode of interaction which applied to 'barbarous' non-European polities a decidedly coercive, expansionist character.²

¹ Shogo Suzuki, *Civilization and Empire: China and Japan's Encounter with European International Society*, London and New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 10.

² Suzuki, pp. 1-2. See also Edward Keene, *Beyond Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism, and Order in World Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

The One Hundred Days Reforms (1898) staged multifaceted attempts by the Qing court and concerned elites to enable China to function in a more powerful and dignified way within the geo-political and symbolic hierarchies of the modern/izing world. When in this new, hostile international community China got addressed as a semi-civilized semi-colonial member and treated accordingly, as part of their grand plan to bring China back from the political and civilizational semi-periphery to the centre, concerned male literati proposed that Chinese women, long-standing markers of Chinese civilizational dominance and accomplishments, should be changed.³

A group of educated Chinese women closely related to the male reformers used the historical moment of the Wuxu reforms to step into the socio-political arena of late-Qing China. They did so by actively engaging in the establishment and operation of three women-oriented reformist projects – the association *Nüxue hui* (*The Society for Women's Learning*), the journal *Nüxue bao* (*Chinese Girls' Progress*) and the *Girls' School* (*Nüxue tang*). This paper analyzes the texts published in the new-style journal *Nüxue bao* and the ways in which the female members of late-Qing Chinese elite introduced and manipulated the meanings of “the West” to the growing male and female readership of modern Chinese press. “The West” addressed by this paper connotes the west as the authors of the published texts themselves used it in their writings.

As this paper shows, the texts of *Nüxue bao* presented a distinctively gender-specific imaginings of how to put China in the more dignified and egalitarian relation to the threatening power of the West and the modern world order it imposed. Importantly, but largely overlooked, the published texts display the on-going process of gender-specific mapping of the modern/izing and increasingly global/izing world which did not only include commonly observed China-West dynamics. As I demonstrate, the journal's contributors appropriated the logic of equation between a woman and a state's power and had used the figure of both Western and non-Western foreign woman as a means for repositioning themselves and China more favourably in the newly-emerging symbolic and geopolitical global hierarchies

A main strategy for dealing with the consternating reconfiguration of the relations between Chinese Empire and the modern/izing world, as I argue, was the creation of a non-

³ For the role that Chinese women played in the constructions of China's civilizational superiority see, for instance, Dorothy Ko, 'The Shifting Meanings of Footbinding in Seventeenth-Century China', *Journal of Women's History* 8, 4, 1997, pp. 8-27, and Emma Jinhua Teng, 'A Brief Record of the Eastern Ocean by Ding Shaoyi (fl. 1847)', in Susan Mann and Yu-yin Cheng, eds., *Under Confucian Eyes: Writings on Gender in Chinese History*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2001, pp. 253-61.

linear vision of time in which the progress was to be achieved through the revival of gender-specific practices and institutions of the Three dynasties – legendary dynasties from the deep China’s past. Significantly, this non-linear temporal scheme was joined by an attempt to acknowledge the strengths of the West and Japan as resulting from an uninterrupted evolution of originally Chinese civilizational accomplishments. That is, the texts of the journal informed the readers that civilization – embodied in the women’s education - originated in China, travelled westward; continued to be enriched in the west while neglected in China itself; and has, at present, been invited by the Chinese female intellectual elite to be reintroduced to China via the mediation of Japan. This unique mode of arguing for the suitability of the modern women’s education may be yet another way of conceptualizing and reinvigorating the idea of “the Chinese origin of the western learning” (*xixue zhongyuan*).

Lu Xun, often considered to be “the father of modern Chinese literature”, is cited saying that “throughout the ages, the Chinese have had only two ways of looking at foreigners, up to them as superior beings or down on them as wild animals. They have never been able [...] to consider them as people like themselves”.⁴ Nevertheless, in the articles of *Nixue bao* that I examined, the West embodied in the figure of a woman was not “hated as an imperialist aggressor and admired for its mastery”.⁵ Rather, what was facilitated by previously mentioned non-linear version of time joined with the notion of *xixue zhongyuan* was a discourse that brought together (women of) China and the West, glorifying both groups of women at the same time and on the same grounds. The texts opened with the praised examples from the Chinese past; and/or followed by anxiety over late-Qing crisis expressed through criticism of the present state of Chinese women and suggestions for the change supported by examples of foreign women. In the case of the Western showcases, women were used as legitimizing examples that the power of the state will grow if the proposed social changes were applied, with the social changes not being represented as new and foreign but rather neglected and in need of revival. Japanese women were addressed with a mix of condescending and complimentary tones: by referring to Japan as a small country “of only three islands” that learns from the West, but learns well. Korean women, as an embodiment of the exemplary China’s tributary warns about the pace of changes that were underway in China’s vicinity. Indian and Persian women are

⁴ Fox Butterfield, *China: Alive in the Bitter Sea*, New York: Times Books, 1982, p. 24.

⁵ Hutters, ‘Bringing the World Home’, pp. 2-3.

addressed in terms of their detrimental treatment and concealment, pronouncing a colonial discourse on civilizational, religious and cultural hierarchies that China appropriated.

The new world of women discussed in this paper was emerging in the minds of female members of the neo/Confucian Chinese elite who were caught in a destabilized position of cultural and civilizational superiority on the one hand, and in an imposed position of the semi-colonized semi-civilized member of the international community on the other. It was indeed created under the historically-unprecedented power ascribed to and exercised by the West. Writing about the beginning of the twentieth century and the way that Chinese women in women's journals "looked to American women for inspiration", Carol C. Chin argues that "they saw social and cultural aspects of American women's lives as sources of power – both to strengthen the nation and to gain equality as a matter of right".⁶ This paper calls for more careful claims about the ways in which China and Chinese women viewed themselves in relation to the modern West and the global/izing world when entering the modern international stage. As this paper have shown, the broader discourses in which the mappings of the global/izing world were embedded suggest more complex understanding of the West and the relation to its power than the term "inspiration" can convey.

⁶ Carol C. Chin, 'Translating the New Woman: Chinese Feminist View the West, 1905-15', in Dorothy Ko and Wang Zheng, eds., *Translating Feminisms in China*, Malden, Oxford and Carlton: Blackwell, 2007, p. 43.