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## THEMATIC REVIEW

### The State of Chinese Women's History

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**Tiantian Zheng, *Red Lights: The Lives of Sex Workers in Postsocialist China* (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 2009), pp. 308. ISBN 978 0816659036.**

**Joan Judge, *The Precious Raft of History: The Past, the West, and the Woman Question in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 416. ISBN 978 0804755894.**

**Louise Edwards, *Gender, Politics, and Democracy: Women's Suffrage in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), pp. 352. ISBN 978 0804756884.**

**Antonia Finnane, *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 320. ISBN 978 1850658603.**

**Susan Mann, *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 342. ISBN 978 0520250901.**

A century ago, in 1907–08, the Chinese anarcho-feminist He Zhen wrote a series of critical essays about her contemporary world. Published in the journal she co-edited with her husband in Tokyo, *Tianyi bao* (Natural Justice), He Zhen's critiques encompassed a spatial and temporal totality through which she understood all hitherto existing social relations. Unlike almost all of her contemporaries, Chinese and foreign, He Zhen's totalising but historically specific analysis eschewed any privileging of 'the West' or Japan over China; of China's present over its past or vice versa; or of particularly accomplished women of the past over their supposedly more benighted sisters of the present. Indeed, one major point of He Zhen's critiques was to elucidate how 'woman' as a trans-historical global category, not of subjective identity but of unequal social relations, had been constituted through scholarship, ritual, law, social and labour practices over time, in China as elsewhere. An intimately related point was to lament that categorical constitution in her multiple historicised guises. Making little distinction between China's imperial (pre-nineteenth century) past and the situation characterising her more globally integrated imperialist-capitalist present, He Zhen argued that these formed a continuous historicity of inherent and inexorable injustice.

Not a naturalised figure but rather a product of historical social relations, 'woman' – rendered by He Zhen in various incommensurable but related semantic forms – was a political ontology, an endlessly reproduced principle of politicised social practice *in* and *through* time. Defining 'woman' through and embedding her into these endlessly reproduced historicised social relations, thence to re-conceive history and the present, were He Zhen's analytical and activist goals.<sup>1</sup>

In her totalising ambitions, He Zhen was certainly unique. Yet, her concerns are quintessentially those of the 'new woman' of modern China. Aspects of these concerns are taken up in the books under review here. The topics range widely: sex work in contemporary north-eastern China (Zheng); the lives of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century talented women (*cainu*) in the Lower Yangzi region (Mann); turn-of-the-twentieth-century perspectives on virtue, talent and heroism of the first generation of consciously feminist Chinese (Judge); clothing and fashion in Chinese society over the most recent two centuries (Finane); and the pursuits of suffragettes in the 1910s–1930s Republican period (Edwards). Each of the books has the advantage of engaging a carefully delineated set of issues in the academic study of Chinese women's and gender history. Combined, they provide a multi-sided account of the transformations in historical experience and social conditions of women's lives in China over the past two centuries. Each study, however, has the disadvantage of abstracting, to one degree or the next, her object of analysis from wider theoretical considerations. Combined, they shed rather less light on theoretical issues than one might have hoped. While the studies situate themselves in notionally wider terms and wish to derive larger conclusions from a contained (if often impressive) empirical base, the avoidance of explicit theorising about what makes broader terms of analysis both necessary and important (aside from the old canard of historical inclusiveness) undermines the expansive gestures. In all of the cases, this avoidance reinforces an already-existing occupational temptation to exceptionalise Chinese history and Chinese women, rather than serving either to integrate the particularities of their histories into larger theoretical and systemic considerations or to use Chinese gender history to reflect on broader theoretical and historical problematics. In this sense, as marvellous as many of the studies are in their own terms, to my mind their ambitions are still too small.

### The 'talented woman' and the 'new woman'

By the early twentieth century in China, the often-fraught social ideal of the 'talented woman' (*cainu*) was being thoroughly dismantled by an emerging type of woman and man, who found in the poetic output and deep family involvements of such women a lack of public engagement that contained undesirable social values from which the new generation now wished to distance themselves. The rejection of the *cainu* and her rapid replacement (over a couple of decades) by the 'new woman' in the early twentieth century have become a recent focus of Chinese gender studies.<sup>2</sup> According to these analyses, the dismissal of the talented woman – characterised as dabblers and dilettantes, whose writings at best could be considered 'ditties on the wind and moon' (Mann, p. 197) – demonstrates that practices of modern Chinese womanhood emerged not merely from an emulation of 'Western' or Japanese standards, but from an internal reaction against the ways in which elite women had hitherto fashioned themselves in textually ideal and socially practical terms.

These studies have shown that what is new about the 'new woman' is certainly not female literacy, as 'talented women' were highly literate and, like their modern sisters, emerged from educated families; by the same token, home management and educational roles in the family do not mark the new woman as new, because the management and educational efforts of 'talented women' were often a major reason why their marital and natal families attained and retained political and social power as well as financial solvency through bureaucratic success. It is also not the new woman's appearance in print that makes her new, as the poetic and epistolary output of 'talented women' was widely published from at least the end of the Ming dynasty (sixteenth to seventeenth centuries) onwards. Even if not sociologically new, then, there is something ineluctably different about the turn-of-the-twentieth-century woman. Many of the studies reviewed here grapple with this issue and I return to it shortly. First, I would note that few scholars of the 'new woman' ask in any detail about the 'talented woman', at most noting that she was a foil against whom the 'new woman' could position herself. It is clear that many of the new women came from families where talented women had been nurtured, yet the vehemence of the modern rejection cannot be ascribed merely to generational conflict or inevitable historical progress. Rather, there was an apparent conceptual rupture.

Susan Mann's book sheds significant light on this question. Mann's study begins from, and ends with, the modern rejection of the *cainu* in the late nineteenth century. However, unlike those who focus on the new woman, Mann's focus is fully on the talented woman and what her realm of possibility could have been in China's nineteenth century. Her work illumines both the narrowness of the new woman's views of her predecessors as well as a crucial period of transition in Chinese history. On the latter point, as Mann writes, "'women" as figures of controversy or as subjects of historical change were almost invisible' (p. 196) in the nineteenth century, in large part because China was under assault from imperialist-capitalist powers and wracked by internal rebellions, and these large-scale processes have long overshadowed intimate histories. Making women less invisible in this particular century of upheaval can thus be said to be a major aim of Mann's project.<sup>3</sup> Yet, there is more at stake.

Mann's book narrates – in highly readable semi-fictional reconstructive passages that alternate with 'objective' historical analysis, ending with an epilogue – the possible logic of three talented women's lives. She accesses these lives through poetry (in its various forms, a valued female mode of writing until the early twentieth-century rejection), memoirs, colophons, prefaces, gazetteers, occasional writings and other textual sources written by men and women. Setting herself the task of reading through and into the silences left by the scarce direct historical record, Mann's study projects both a veteran historian's certainty about the importance of her topic and a veteran historian's honesty about the necessity for creativity and imagination in its fashioning. Indeed, without too much stretching (albeit through impressive research), Mann can reconstruct the objective material conditions, the family successes and genealogies, and other public circumstances of her women. But how to gauge what their emotional lives might have been or how they might have thought about things – such as footbinding and illness, among others – that were pervasive in their lives but not conventional topics for poetic expression or written memoration? One could quibble with some of Mann's interpretive choices in this regard – why must she interpret the silences as forms of resistance to social and imperial norms? Why are historical Chinese women endowed

with sensibilities and emotional structures so transparently derived from Mann's own social milieu and moment? By the same token, her dialogic structure permits each reader to evaluate the 'history' against her 'narrativisation'.

The women on whom Mann focuses descended from or were connected by marriage to the Zhang family of Changzhou, a famed centre of learning in the Ming and Qing dynasties and the home of the huge Zhang clan who, over centuries, engaged in educating their boys and girls for bureaucratic and family success, for imperial and local literary and social pre-eminence. This particular branch of the Zhang family was economically and reproductively fragile, but nevertheless robust in their textual and social presence. Their women were particularly outstanding. Mann's storytelling reveals the complexity of three women's lives in overlapping generations, during which they sometimes lived in the same family compound and at other times were separated. Throughout, they not only remained engaged in each others' lives and troubles, but wherever they resided, the Zhang women were mainstays of their families – natal and marital – and central to the perpetuation of the honour, virtue and learning of themselves, and of their extended male and female kin. Revising or refining many enduring preconceptions about elite Chinese women's lives – by refuting that their cloistering was intellectually debilitating; their natal families were left behind after marriage; their 'womanly work' was incidental to family finances; their interests were circumscribed and resolutely apolitical; their literacy was frivolous; their talents were under-appreciated by their male kin; and so on – Mann brilliantly conveys how these women negotiated the difficulties thrown in their paths. Their poetic and other achievements in this regard are memorably rendered by Mann, who gives ample narrative space to the forms in which they expressed themselves, the modalities through which they coped with personal and larger travails, and the ways in which they conformed to and stretched ritual ideals to enable their individual and collective pursuits. That these women soon sank into obscurity is not due to their failures or frivolities, but rather to the rapid change in historical circumstances that made their pursuits and their strivings utterly obsolete.

The book has many strengths, not least its readability and revisionist tendency. Yet one major question begged is why biography – the life story – should be treated as more than a storytelling device. Mann's biographical strategy is crucial to her project of making women visible in the nineteenth century: after all, where do women dwell at this point in history other than in their own lives? Yet, Mann's choice of narrative strategy also derives from her stated desire to emulate the ancient Chinese historian Sima Qian's mode of writing, by juxtaposing exemplary stories (semi-fictionalised) with analytical passages set off from the text by the heading 'the historian says', where the two modes are meant to blend in a mutually reflective albeit often contradictory way. By the same token, it is also the case (as Mann is surely aware) that biography has become a major mode of thinking and writing pre-modern and modern Chinese women's history. Thus, in an unarticulated sense, Mann's narrative choice enters into a historiographical debate and series of conventions, as it implicitly deals with the fraught issue of the relationship between fiction, narrative and history.

I am a historian concerned with bringing Chinese history out of its self-imposed exceptionalism through connective theorising. In this spirit, I wish Mann had reflected upon the problem of biography as history more explicitly. Rather than embed her method in the Chinese particularities of Sima Qian alone (elegant as that is), it would

have been helpful if she had also brought the theoretical question about historical methodology into fuller contemporary relief: for example, how does the overt blending of fiction and history allow us to ask questions about modes of history writing and analysis more generally? And, what are the limitations of biography as history, or of women's history as biography, or of narrative as biographical? Mann's considerable erudition and skill could have been usefully employed in helping puzzle through these general problems from the fascinating particular perspective of the Zhang women's lives.

Joan Judge's book chronologically begins where Mann's book ends. Exhaustively researched in Chinese and Japanese sources, Judge's book concerns the initial moment at the turn of the twentieth century when the 'talented woman' was attacked and discourses of the 'new woman' came to dominate. Methodologically different from Mann – while Mann's approach is literary, Judge's is social science – Judge nevertheless depends to a large extent on the biographical as the historical. Organising her book both vertically (by topic) and horizontally (by what she glosses as 'chronotopes'), Judge foregrounds three areas of debate about women at the end of the Qing period: virtue, talent and heroism. As she demonstrates, these values played a large role in the biographical renderings of the public significance of women's lives, past and present; formerly accepted as the values by which women should live (however debated the content), by the turn of the century these values were subjected – as were women – to a new scrutiny. Different sets of social ideals soon took hold of the imaginations of turn-of-the-century women and their male supporters, often in sharp contradistinction to the values of the talented woman but sometimes still drawing on those values, albeit endowing them with different significance.

Judge's account of these debates is enfolded into the new set of practices emerging for the modern woman. For example, in promoting education, the social ideal of talented women's literacy was refashioned as both a public *and* a family good, while the location and content of education were shifted from boudoirs and poetry to classrooms and prose; meanwhile, female activity in the natal or marital family was repurposed as a virtuous motherly duty to raise a newly articulated (male) national citizenry. At the same time, stirring stories of female heroines of yore, such as Hua Mulan, were juxtaposed to stories of heroines from Europe, such as Joan of Arc, to create a global equivalence of heroic women spanning time and space. The cross-currents in discourse of the time were transformative, and all the advocacies were articulated in the overlapping real time of a little more than a decade (1898–1911). As Judge shows, by the end of the period, the main topics and valence of discussion had utterly changed.

Judge must present these overlaps in coherent narrative form. This clearly confronted her with an organisational challenge: how to tell the story of fraught debate, while giving various antithetical positions their due? Or to rephrase, how to tell the story of socio-conceptual transformation without hewing to the very linear inevitability for which most nationalist histories are known and that Judge particularly wishes to subvert? Or yet more abstractly, how to write a synchronic history in diachronic time? Judge acknowledges and attempts to tackle these methodological and theoretical problems. Unfortunately, her solution is neither very effective nor very elegant. On the one hand, her chronotopic typologising – whereby she separates her various commentators into four categories loosely based on their sense of historical temporality, labelling them eternalists, meliorists, archeomodernists and presentists – yields a fair amount

of clunky writing. More important, such typologising, true to its social-scientific structuralist derivation, creates a static picture of this extraordinarily tumultuous moment in Chinese and global history. These problems are compounded by her decision to figure history as biography.

The latter point first: at one level, the biographies of women usually revolve around examples of virtue (including chastity), talent (including literacy) and heroism (including gender-bending behaviour) as these are overtly articulated. Thus choosing these as the focus of debate on women seems warranted. And yet, Judge does not address the ways in which her choice of biography as history forces the choice of virtue, talent and heroism as the overriding topics of women's history. That is, there is circularity in the choice (of biography as history / of biographical data as historical topic) that requires clarification. On one level, the texts as texts – with particular emerging genre claims (including the illustrations), with particular semantics (linguistic and visual), and so on – are ignored, other than through their prior dispersal into the pre-determined chronotopic categories. Yet, on a more elemental level, why is biography the best lens through which to view the history of this moment? (One can certainly understand Mann's choice in this regard, but Judge's requires more explanation.) How does biography start to shift with more subjective and political narrative forms emerging at this time? (Attention to textuality would yield some insights here, I would venture.) How might this narrative reformulation be tied to the interpellation of Chinese women as subjects of political transformation, not only in China but in comparative global context? In other words, while Judge provides an abundance of information, she could have offered more analytical insight into what is driving this compressed moment of incredible upheaval.

A literary-historical theory of chronotopes could have helped Judge arrive at a dialogic understanding of the mutual constitution in and through time and space of different discourses. By contrast, her application of the most social-scientific version of the chronotopic theory deadens this possibility. The social-scientific version directs the historian to pre-construct models of time, as if a sense of temporality were *a priori* in all historical experience and narrative. (This is where the naturalisation of biography as life time reinforces a normative notion of historical time as a form of chronology.) This modelling of time turns what could be a dynamic question in history – how do time and temporality get conceptually and experientially transformed at a particular historical conjuncture? – into the given premise of the historical analysis itself. In other words, instead of asking how an emergent awareness of a shifting temporal-spatial matrix allows historical actors to come to some analytic or even visceral sense about the relationship between chronology and their own lives, Judge takes this sense as the given premise and models her interlocutors according to her pre-determined categories. The former perspective turns time/temporality/temporalisation into the problem rather than the answer, while permitting the historian to enter into the historical by taking the difference between time and space as a sign of a particular historical process in a particular time and place.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, Judge (and the chronotope as an applied social-scientific theory) renders time and space both normative and monologic. This choice not only robs the Chinese historical moment of its dynamism, but it prevents the particularity of the Chinese moment from becoming a perspective through which to reflect on the concrete forms of temporalisation inaugurated by the temporal-spatial matrix of a modern chronotopic sensibility.

Shifting from debates to action, Louise Edwards's book on suffragettes in Republican China offers further information about how the 'new woman' attempted to consolidate her social position after the turn of the twentieth century by taking up the repeated efforts of several waves of Chinese women who fought for female voting rights. These women's task was compounded in difficulty because, after the deposing of the Qing dynasty in 1912 (a process to which many early suffragettes substantially contributed), there was neither a stable central state nor national government, nor any agreed election procedures or electorate criteria. Edwards's work illumines how suffragists, in face of these obvious obstacles, turned their focus to provincial-level governments to press their demand not only for the vote, but to be explicitly included in the constitutional designations 'citizen' (*guomin*) and 'person' (*ren*). Confronting every type of opposition – verbal, violent and visceral – women in many provinces over many years persisted in their pursuits and, as opportunities to geographically widen the struggle were created, women devotedly joined the fray.

What comes across in this book is that the women engaged in these struggles were both admirable and adamant. However, aside from this biographical aspect, Edwards presents no reflection on what the status of politics, the state or governance might have been in China during this period (and these are the volatile years during which these issues were most debated and confronted). Instead, the book presents a blow-by-blow account of the various ups and downs in the suffragists' campaigns in various places and times. Often assigning the women's failures to 'Chinese culture' or other such hoary notions (we should recognise, as Edwards sometimes does, that women the world over had trouble convincing wealthy men in the political sphere to share power with either them or with poorer folk, and that many of the 'cultural' reasons cited in China were broadly mobilised and thus cannot be said to be specific to China), Edwards's book is light on analysis. Indeed, a very basic historically analytical question – why did some women activists focus on the state sphere while others focused their energies elsewhere? – remains unasked. This makes it impossible to evaluate Edwards's story in the context of a broader notion of feminism or politics, either in China or globally.

To be sure, suffrage movements the world over were an important means by which women pressed their claims to the public sphere. Chinese suffragettes shared in this global moment of commonality. However, China was not a fully sovereign nation-state – there were many pockets of imperialist-colonial territorial concessions and large swaths of the economy given over by treaty rights to various foreign powers. Moreover, the nature of China's post-dynastic polity was a far from settled affair. In this sense, whether or not these suffrage campaigns contributed anything to the refinement of what was called 'politics' or governance in China is anyone's guess. If one were so inclined, however, one could piece together from Edwards's account some fragments of an answer: property and educational thresholds for participation in politics were specified via the challenge posed by suffragettes; this contributed to the practical and conceptual configuration of some components of Republicanism and citizenship in the post-dynastic context; and all of this – plus much more – led eventually to downward and upward pressures to redefine politics and feminism altogether, either as a preserve of the elite (the Nationalists) or as a mass participatory party-led socio-political revolutionary pursuit (the Communists).

Edwards does not frame the issue in this or any cognate fashion that might take up a more critical historical position. Rather, in conflating the problem of 'rights' with

voting, she confines the feminism and politics of the period to the one narrow sphere of the state. On the one hand, this permits a comparative dimension: if feminism and politics are about suffrage, and suffrage and politics are about modern practices of citizenship, and if suffrage movements were active all over the world, then we can compare them and come up with some measure of China's modernity. And yet, given that suffrage movements the world over challenged all states *as states*, if comparison is to be the mode through which China is de-exceptionalised, one would have to focus more clearly on the theoretical problem of the state, politics and governance. Rather than that, however, Edwards concludes at the very end that the story of Chinese suffragettes boils down to the 'political opportunity structures wherein the political context that women suffragists work within becomes a crucial factor in understanding their varying degrees of success relative to other national struggles' (p. 238). This is, at best, a pedestrian observation. For, on the other hand, without any serious effort to think through the conceptual problems of feminism and the state-political in the history of a place such as China in the modern world, Edwards's book is little more than a plea to include Chinese women in a pre-designed category of historical inquiry uncritically called 'suffrage movements'. Yet inclusiveness, as generations of gender and women's historians have long since clarified, is never sufficient to change the story.

### **Bodies, clothing and sex**

One of the major conceptual ruptures of the 'new woman' era was the emergence and rapid spread of an explicit change in the concept of bodies. Initially articulated in the language of 'natural feet' (as contrasted to bound feet), the robust body soon became a desired mode of performing citizenship, expressing nationalist vigour and competitiveness, bringing labour outside the family into the sprouting industrial workshops and urban service centres, and of attracting the correct kind of attention (from men and advertising) through proper adornment.<sup>5</sup> This seismic historical shift – from the ideal of cloistered women to the acceptance and necessity of women in public places – demonstrates how far the twentieth-century 'new woman' had come from Mann's nineteenth-century 'talented woman'. Along with and indeed fuelling the concern for bodies, then, came an increasingly commodified interest in clothing and sex. Antonia Finnane and Zheng Tiantian take up, in their own ways, these critical issues.

On first encounter, reading Antonia Finnane's book on changing clothes in China feels like a guilty pleasure derived from perusing a stack of fashion magazines when one ought to be doing something more 'productive'. The lushness of the pages and the sheer number of wonderful illustrations, the heft and weight of the book, the fluidity of the narrative: all contribute to a deeply enjoyable experience. Who knew that academic presses – Columbia in this case – were willing to produce such decadent products? Part of the pleasure of reading is that Finnane's approach to China's changing clothes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is simply to argue that Chinese women's and men's clothes changed. This, it appears, is a bold contention, as much of the prior work in this area of research has maintained that Chinese clothing remained mostly static until quite recently. Even China's most famous modern writer on daily matters, Eileen Chang, argued in the 1930s that Chinese clothing changes were merely a matter of a seam here or an ornament there. Finnane shows conclusively that this is all wrong. Yet she also maintains that the changes she documents amount to something called 'fashion', which is more problematic.



But first, I want to appreciate that Finnane takes the reader on a massively researched tour – material and organisational – of how clothes (as well as hair styles, footwear and other selected accoutrements of appearance) have been discussed, depicted, detailed and illustrated in a wide variety of published works over at least two centuries. The range of sources is impressive and it is hard to imagine anyone doing much more in terms of thoroughness. Finnane's early chapters demonstrate that certain styles associated with later clothing derived not only from the Ming period but also from Yangzhou, then a centre of both decadence and learning (and not far from Mann's centre of attention, Changzhou). As she also shows, changing styles in China – in the Ming as well as the Qing and beyond – have, unlike in Europe, revolved around the fabric and colour of clothing rather than their cut and fit. This made it appear to European observers – and to Eileen Chang, apparently – like nothing much ever changed.

After this introductory portion, the bulk of the book is concerned with the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries (mostly the latter). Retaining her breezy descriptive voice, Finnane's historical narrative is in its broad strokes unobjectionable: the intensification of clothing changes in the recent century and a half has much to do with the increased pace of urbanisation and its links to consumption and production through industrialisation and imperialist-colonial commerce (the latter aspect is relatively slighted). Having been set in motion and enhanced by the explosion of print media as well as photography and subsequently cinema, clothing styles change more quickly, more widely and in consonance with larger-level processes. As militarisation becomes a key component to modern citizenship, men's clothes came to emulate military uniforms (as did women's clothing for a time); as male hair (the queue) is cut and female feet are unbound, varieties of hairstyles flourish and shoe styles become primarily mass-produced leather products (rather than the hand-made varieties of the immediate past); as parading through the streets either in the guise of a 'new (or modern) woman' on the arm of a 'new man', or as a student participating in political demonstrations become frequent modes of being in public, styles associated with each type of figure become elaborated and popularised. The technologies of popularisation – knitting machines, sewing machines, workshops, advertising, ready-made clothing shops and department stores, and so on – become more accessible to a certain class of urban resident. Clothing exhibitions and fashion shows are launched, ideal body shapes are promoted – whether robust athletic or delicate and feminine – and a certain standardisation of desire is fostered as an ideal. This all metamorphoses with the advent of Communism, although certain style elements continue to be elaborated and discussed even through the most revolutionary decades of Maoism. And since Mao's death, clothing styles have proliferated, become mass-produced and are being internationalised.

Alongside the wonderfully detailed historical narrative, the analytical points remain murky. This murkiness begins as Finnane introduces what she calls an emerging 'consciousness about dress, the body and identity' (p. 64) in the mid-Qing period. Injecting these concerns into her account – and particularly for a time when there were still sumptuary laws – normalises and renders ahistorical the contemporary claims for the psychologised function of fashion by placing these claims anachronistically into the past and treating them as truth. Moreover, despite her enormous wealth of sources, Finnane cannot actually show that there is a link between consciousness and identity

via clothing and body image in China's past (or present); she can only speculate about such a connection. Indeed, having dropped this into the account, Finnane goes no further with it as an analytical point, taking it as the premise from which to narrate the rest of the story. Her neglect of the aesthetic aspects of clothing – what might make it into 'fashion' in some sense – drains the historical problem of its analytical possibilities.

This then leads to the more important problem for her argument: does all of the changing clothing add up to 'fashion'? As she acknowledges, much depends on what one means by the term, yet it is here that the volume of Finnane's evidence makes the modesty of her ambition and her conclusions disappointing. For, it appears that the overarching point of the book is to claim that, if we take fashion as something Europeans say they have had for a long time because of a relationship established in the modern period between consumers, social taste and changing styles, then China too can be said to have had fashion (and perhaps even earlier than Europeans). In this usage, fashion remains a descriptive term rather than emerging as a conceptual-theoretical category of historical life. That is, to theorise fashion as a concept, one does have to break apart the synonymy of 'changing clothes' (as an empirical observation) and 'fashion'. Indeed, without such theorising, one is forced to ask: what are the stakes for Finnane in arguing that China had fashion? It seems merely to be to establish equivalence between China and 'the West'. This answer, however, is entirely inadequate to the promise of the book.

According to most modern social theorists – Veblen, Simmel, Benjamin or others – fashion is never merely about clothes or appearance, but rather is both representative and symbolic of the temporality of modernity as an ideology of the ever-new, that is however never really new. For Walter Benjamin in particular, fashion is a register of time, and is inextricably linked to a conception of historical time that opens up the inherently political nature of modern temporality. What would this kind of theorising about 'fashion' – as a historically produced ideological or aesthetic form; as an index of temporality and desire; as a response or reaction to marketised mass production – in China look like? It would not be to write a social history of changing clothes – however fun and fascinating this history proves to be in Finnane's hands. It would require considerably more conceptual rigour and analytical clarity, where body, consciousness and identity were not smuggled in as markers of concepts, but rather were situated as historical analytics. In this sense, then, while Finnane's thoroughness shows conclusively that China's clothes changed, she does not come close to providing an account of 'fashion' in China.

Built out of great empirical work, Zheng Tiantian's account of women caught in China's vast economic upheavals of the 1990s at first promises much. Zheng guides the reader on a tour of karaoke/sex clubs in China's far north-west (Dalian), a tour she herself bravely undertook as an anthropological researcher and participant observer. How Zheng gains access to, and protection from, raids on these bars and women – through government officials who are also clients of the establishments – is as interesting as it is disturbing. As Zheng makes clear, the women working in these clubs are overwhelmingly from rural China, escaping into the city from dead-end lives in dead-end places, hoping to enhance their life chances and perhaps permanently to leave the social rank of 'peasant' behind. Zheng's accounts of the women she meets during her stints in the various karaoke bars – whether high-class emporia, mid-level entertainment centres or low-class dives – are deeply sympathetic and moving. Many of these women clearly had no idea what they were to encounter as they left their

sheltered homes, and many of them have managed to cope with the scrambling of economic values and social priorities in post-Mao China by becoming pragmatic about their own prospects and their own possibilities. Whether this turns them into ‘brokers of modernity’ (p. 5) or, as Zheng wishes to claim, renders their efforts a symptom of ‘entrepreneurial masculinity’ (p. 9) is, however, another story altogether.

While Zheng’s accounts of the women are strong, her analysis of what they may signify is often weak. In this sense, the tragedy of this book is two-fold. The first and most immediate is that Zheng’s interlocutors are forced to deal with the shrapnel of economic and local-state-level disintegration in a situation where those charged with oversight are precisely the perpetrators and facilitators of the injustices themselves. This problem – spectacularly if only episodically illustrated through this book – requires more analytical skill and subtlety than Zheng can muster. This leads to the second tragedy of the book, which is that Zheng embeds the difficulties of post-Mao Chinese women’s lives into every gender and historical cliché available. All of this is accompanied by inadequate analysis. For example, in setting up her major analysis of post-Mao Dalian economics as a masculinist reaction against Maoism, Zheng writes: ‘Although Dalian was politically liberated by the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] in 1949, the economy went sluggish and Dalian men felt marginalised and emasculated’ (p. 48). Here and thereafter, we are asked to believe that because of the purported emasculation – which lasted for forty years – when it became possible for men to be men again (in the 1990s), they flocked to karaoke bars and sex clubs where they could enact their true masculine desires to dominate women. Not content to link this only to Maoism, Zheng also connects the fervour of the contemporary repudiation of emasculation to Dalian’s previous existence as a Japanese colony (in the 1930s and 1940s). This gives her a supposed double layer of historicity through which to explain the current situation, whereby ‘emerging businessmen’ are allowed to ‘redefine their masculinity’ by frequenting karaoke bars and sexually possessing women (p. 55), albeit now unfettered by CCP or Japanese threats. This kind of analytic effort unfortunately cheapens the women whose lives Zheng so desperately wishes to make visible and audible.

This is one of the only books we have that attempts to go into the lives of Chinese women engaged in what is euphemistically called ‘entertainment’. We have several wonderful studies of female migrant factory workers in the past two decades – Pun Ngai, C. K. Lee, Yan Hairong, among others – but there is practically nothing on women labouring in the service industries in contemporary China, other than a few articles on nannies. Zheng’s book can be said to open a new field of study. In its promise and inadequacies it thus leaves plenty of analytical space for others to enter the discussion. Clearly, it takes a steely character to endure what Zheng apparently did in order to do her research; for being so intrepid, I applaud her. However, it might have been useful to let the experiences settle – as did Ann Alison after she worked as a barmaid in Tokyo – before embarking on the writing and the task of analysing. Perhaps this would have allowed the empirical work to contribute more vitally to a more creative theorisation about sex and bodies in contemporary China.

## **Conclusion**

Each of the above books carefully navigates boundaries between the empirical and the theoretical, and each attempts to stay within self-imposed limits of analytical

interpretation. Together, they take the story of Chinese women's lives up to the present and successfully fill in the textures and concerns of some portion of these women, as they confronted the new and rapidly changing historical pressures and priorities of the twentieth century. By the same token, the studies try very hard not to reflect upon one of the most fraught theoretical problems of this historical period, what is often (if controversially) called modernity. The careful avoidance of this concept (I think Judge uses it as a normative term once or twice) amounts, it seems to me, to a missed opportunity for the ambitions of Chinese gender history. While one need not confront the problem of 'modernity' as such, nevertheless some theorised sense of what links these Chinese women's struggles and concerns to a larger set of theoretical insights is lacking, even though all of the components of theorisation are present – politics, temporality, the need for comparison and equivalence, the past as history, narrative and historical method, and so on. It seems clear that He Zhen's totalising is perhaps not appropriate for today's specialised academic boundaries; yet the problem of what she presciently called 'livelihood' (*shengji*) permeates each of the studies here reviewed. For He Zhen, 'livelihood' named the intertwined totality of the ideological, social and economic conditions of human life at a particular time and in a particular place (China and the modern world). For my part, I would propose that her concept of 'livelihood' could be a good place to start the massive task of theorising about modern China and what is 'new' about modern Chinese women.

## Notes

1. For these remarks, I am deeply indebted to my collaboration with Lydia Liu and Dorothy Ko on He Zhen's work, thought and life. We have taught and thought He Zhen together for several years now; without Dorothy, Lydia and our students' intelligence and commitments, she would have remained obscure and unintelligible to me. For more on He Zhen, see Rebecca E. Karl, 'On Women's Labor: He Zhen, Anarcho-Feminism, and Twentieth-Century China', *Labyrinths* 15/16 (2009), available at <<http://www.unb.br/ih/his/gefem>> (accessed 26 May 2011). I also want to thank Dorothy for reading and commenting on this essay in draft form.
2. See Hu Ying, *Tales of Translation: Composing the New Woman in China, 1899–1918* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2002); Joan Judge, *The Precious Raft of History: The Past, the West, and the Woman Question in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008) (reviewed here).
3. However, while Mann writes, 'the Zhang women whose lives fill this book also show us how changes in nineteenth-century China – changes wrought by war, colonialism, economic crisis, and political strife – affected women's consciousness, their life chances, and what they chose to write about' (p. 196), she does not do enough analytical work to pry open what might be different about her characters' lives in light of their situatedness in the nineteenth century. Often, historical specificity is slighted in order to make more general points about 'talented women' across the centuries.
4. This type of analysis derives from Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel', in Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 84–258.
5. See Dorothy Ko, *Cinderella's Sisters: A Revisionist History of Footbinding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 1–68.

Timeline of Chinese History. Pre-1600 BC, China is charted mainly by legends and prehistoric evidence. The ancient China era was c. 1600â€”221 BC. The imperial era was 221 BC â€” 1912 AD, from China's unification under Qin rule until the end of the Qing Dynasty, the Republic of China era was from 1912 until 1949, and the modern China era from 1949 until the present day. Read on for a snapshot of China's historical timeline and some key events.Â In the Han Dynasty, a bureaucratic system in which promotion was based on merit was established and Confucianism was adopted by the state for national governance. Whatâ€™s more, agriculture, handicrafts, and commerce developed rapidly. During the reign of Emperor Wudi (r. 140â€”87 BC), the Han regime prospered most. Status of Women in China. Chinese girls in the 19th century Women have played key roles in Chinese history. Several women served as empress. The Dowager Empress Jixi was one of the worldâ€™s powerful and longest ruling leaders.Â According to the Encyclopedia of Sexuality: â€œIn its earliest history, China was a matriarchal society, until Confucius and Mencius defined the superior-inferior relationship between men and women as heaven-ordained more than two thousand years ago. In traditional Chinese society, women should observe the Three Obediences and the Four Virtues. The lives of women in China have changed significantly due to the late Qing Dynasty reforms, the changes of the Republican period, the Chinese Civil War, and the rise of the People's Republic of China. Achievement of women's liberation has been on the agenda of the Communist Party of China since the beginning of the PRC. Mao Zedong famously said, "Women hold up half the sky." In 1995, Chinese Communist Party general secretary Jiang Zemin made gender equality official state policy. Although China has