

Rethinking JOSA(H)

In these short pieces, scholars reflect on the impact of articles published in the Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia, now the Journal of the Australian Society for Asian Humanities.

Creating space for feminist subjectivity and feminist history in China Studies— reflections on T. Kobayashi’s ‘Chang Chu-chün for Women’s Rights’ (1976)

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When JOSA published Kobayashi’s article in 1976, universities considered feminism to be a radical fringe movement. At Sydney University in 1973, two graduate students, Liz Jacka and Jean Curthoys, proposed a new course on feminist philosophy only to have it rejected by the Professorial Board.^[1] The issue generated such heat that an extended strike of staff and students ensued on the need for democratizing the university.^[2] In 1974 at the Australian National University students occupied the Chancellery for 24 hours demanding women’s studies courses. The success of the course the protests secured led to the ANU hiring Susan Magarey to design the first Women’s Studies major in any Australian university in 1978.^[3]

So, at the time of Kobayashi’s research Women’s Studies had marginal institutional traction, feminists were derided as either deviant, bra-burning man-haters or mad. Perceived as a direct threat to the established structures of academia, families, and workplaces, they faced derision and abuse. Publishing on women’s history or feminist history was a risky career move in the 1970s and for much of the 1980s and academics undertaking this research often first felt the need to ‘prove themselves’ in more conventional fields before moving to research ‘women’.

In this climate, one wonders why a male academic would take up the challenge of writing about a leading female advocate of women’s rights in Chinese history. How would the topic be handled? Kobayashi’s opening paragraph provides an inkling: ‘Since I am not a devoted feminist, I should like to deal with the subject mainly in the light of modern Chinese history.’ The awkward ‘I am not a feminist so...’ caveat could have led along the path of belittling the feminist frame, but rather it marked Kobayashi’s willingness to take unconventional women seriously as figures worthy of scholarly investigation and to take feminism seriously as a movement deserving historiographical treatment. In his article Kobayashi builds a biographical portrait of Zhang Zhujun (Chang Chu-chün) 张竹君 (1876-1964), narrating her early life experience, engagement with Christianity, medical training, activism in the 1911

revolution, welfare service provision and publishing—and explores how each connected to the larger project of promoting women’s standing in society.

Kobayashi’s awkward, but explicit mention of feminism in the opening is an indicator of what is to follow. Although distancing himself from feminists throughout the article, he builds the space for a feminist subjectivity in Chinese history (for Zhang Zhujun specifically but for her contemporaries as well). And he also frames an academic arena in which Chinese feminist history can be marked out. Kobayashi’s tentative tone belies its role in building a historical Chinese feminist voice and a scholarly field for Chinese feminist history. In his biographical study Kobayashi tests Zhang’s activities against an idea of ‘real feminism’ while never explicitly discussing what this ‘feminism’ might be. This exploratory process presents the potential feminist terrain across which JOSA’s readers are invited to survey. Initially, Kobayashi examines what this ‘real feminism’ is *not*. For example, he describes Hu Shi and Li Ruchen as ‘not really the forerunners of the modern feminist movement’ (p. 62), and the equality of the Taiping Kingdom as ‘hardly be[ing] included in the modern women’s rights movement’ (p. 63). Kang Youwei’s anti-footbinding campaign similarly ‘strictly speaking, in itself, it was not a feminist movement to assert women’s rights’ (p. 63).

Kobayashi’s desire to establish the boundaries about what is in and what is out of ‘real feminism’ takes as given that there is a feminist movement (somewhere out there) that *can* be tracked and that warrants our attention. While hardly revolutionary today, in 1976, this was a significant step to building the robust field of women’s history in China Studies we currently enjoy. Why? because the very existence of a distinct Chinese feminist movement was largely denied or disregarded in the historiography of China. By framing the research problem through the question of ‘Who is a feminist and who is not?’ he asserts the existence of the Chinese feminist as historical actor, even if he declares himself not to be a feminist.

Next, Kobayashi builds the subjectivity of the modern feminist as a critical judge of the historical past. In writing of Liang Qichao’s advocacy of women’s education for the purposes of raising better sons, Kobayashi says this ‘must enrage modern feminists’ (p. 65). While collapsing a diversity of possible feminist positions into one, Kobayashi is nonetheless also establishing the ‘modern feminist’ as an actor, both political and scholarly, in the appraisal of historical events. The field that is worthy of research also has its guardians.

As the paper continues, the feminist movement and its female actors become more clearly defined for JOSA’s readers at a historical moment when they too were ‘feeling their way’ through a major social and political shift. Kobayashi establishes what will become in many later histories of the Chinese women’s movement, the image of an ‘acceptable’ Chinese feminist—the woman who was *really* a nationalist and a patriot. The logic runs that while feminists existed in China, they were the good type. ‘Unlike the feminist movement in other countries’ that rebelled against men, Chinese feminists wanted to meet the needs of the nation and were ‘not hostile at all towards enlightened men’ (p. 77). In establishing China’s first feminists as the ‘good sort’ that recognised the bigger picture of nation-building, Kobayashi reflects orthodox narratives of women’s history emerging from the PRC and ROC. But he

also creates simultaneously the possibility of the *other* type of historical feminist actor—the hostile one. Chinese women’s feminism is situated in relation to a global movement in which exists a putative pure or true feminism. China’s feminism might be the ‘good’ type but it is not the ‘real thing’. This conception of a uniquely Chinese feminism still circulates today in myriad guises and usually serves to contain and moderate contemporary feminist activism by appealing to ‘Chinese feminine values’ that are more refined than the supposedly more confrontational feminists of the west.

Kobayashi’s article is one of the first to bring Zhang Zhujun to western readers’ attention and was completed before the vast range of materials on women’s history became available from the late 1980s. As a result, while this article is no longer the ‘go to’ piece on Zhang that it was in the 1976, Kobayashi’s willingness to write on her life as a ‘Chinese feminist’ and within the frame of ‘a history of Chinese feminism’ forms an important part of the building of credibility for feminist academic history as a field and the value of researching feminist historical actors.

[1] For Curthoy’s piercing critique of the state of academic feminism see Jean Curthoys, *Feminist Amnesia: The Wake of Women’s Liberation* (London: Routledge, 1997).

[2] Lewis d’Avigdor, ‘Let the Lunatics Run their Own Asylum: Participatory Democracy at the University of Sydney, 1960-1979’, Bachelor of Arts (honours) thesis, June 2011.

Available at:

https://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/handle/2123/7759/d'Avigdor,%20Lewis_2011.pdf;jsessionid=7F8CD98A654E8AAF2F40E202F6B9B994?sequence=1 (accessed 29 September 2021).

[3] Lyndall Ryan, ‘Women’s Studies in Australian Higher Education: Introduction and Brief History’, *The Australian Universities Review* 34.2 (1991): 2-7.

About T. Kobayashi

Toshihiko Kobayashi, a graduate of the University of Tokyo, taught at the Departments of Oriental Studies and of Asian Studies at the University of Sydney for over 40 years. He died in 2017 at the age of 93.