

REVIEW ESSAY

THE SILENT HALF SPEAKS

Fiction's Family: Zhan Xi, Zhan Kai, and the Business of Women in Late Qing China. By ELLEN WIDMER. Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series 99. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016. 352 pp. \$49.95 (Hardcover).

The Precious Raft of History: The Past, the West, and the Woman Question in China. By JOAN JUDGE. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. 416 pp. \$30.95 (Paperback).

Burying Autumn: Poetry, Friendship, and Loss. By YING HU. Harvard East Asian Monographs 391. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016. 400 pp. \$49.95 (Hardcover).

Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China. By LOUISE EDWARDS. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 280 pp. \$29.99 (paperback).

Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1964. By ZHENG WANG. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016. 400 pp. \$34.95 (paperback).

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It wasn't so long ago that histories of China's rocky transition to modernity featured a small and entirely male cast of characters. In the works of the first generation of American Sinologists, from John King Fairbank to his most famous students such as Joseph Levenson, a few men, from late Qing statesman Li Hongzhang 李鴻章 to reformers and revolutionaries like Kang Youwei 康有為, Sun Yatsen 孫中山, and Liang Qichao 梁啟超, loomed large over the narrative of the Chinese revolution. Into this lacuna Mary Rankin's rediscovery of the late Qing female martyr Qiu Jin 秋瑾 came as a thunderbolt. Her work opened up the possibility that perhaps the problem wasn't the absence of women in China's revolution but the failure of scholars to look for their contribution. Rankin's 1968 article on "The Tenacity of Tradition," and her subsequent book *Early Chinese Revolutionaries* paved the way for a far more nuanced and complicated new social history of modern China.¹

Rankin's pioneering work opened the door for the subsequent generations of Sinologists to attempt what had seemed impossible—to find women's voices among the dense forest of male literati writings. Susan Mann succeeded in this when she wrote about the talented women of the Zhang family, revealing lineages of women from literati families in the late imperial period.² Within the confines of Confucian notions of female virtue, these women exchanged poetry and letters among their network of female relatives. In the prolonged absence of husbands and fathers on distant official postings, they raised children, ran their households, and handled the family accounts, in

¹Mary Backus Rankin, "The Revolutionary Movement in Chekiang: A Study in the Tenacity of Tradition," in *China in Revolution: The First Phase, 1900–1913*, ed. Mary Wright (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 321–28; *Early Chinese Revolutionaries: Radical Intellectuals in Shanghai and Chekiang, 1902–1911* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

²Susan Mann, *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

addition to continuing their literary efforts. It suddenly seemed possible to recover the lives of women, or at least a small segment of elite women, and the role they played in the larger historical context.

On a different front, during the politically turbulent decades in the 1960s and 1970s, inspiring posters came out of mainland China featuring women welders, tractor drivers, and miners. The Communist revolution appeared to have achieved gender equality in an egalitarian socialist society.³ For feminists in the West, the images both inspired and bewildered. How did the Chinese manage to attain equality in so short a time? When mainland China opened up in the late 1970s, Western scholars finally had the chance to seek answers to this question in person and to conduct fieldwork and archival research. The pioneering gender historian Christina Gilmartin interviewed a generation of Nationalist and Communist women who had supported the Guomindang Party (GMD) and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) from their early days.⁴ The stories of women with these political affiliations did not end in triumph, however. Most of the early women leaders found themselves shunted aside and their goals of gender equality subsumed by their party's political agenda. Research in the ensuing decades confirmed Gilmartin's early conclusions that the glossy images propagated in posters concealed a far more complex and equivocal place for gender during both the Republican period and in the People's Republic. Chinese women who participated in the May Fourth Movement and subsequently joined either the Nationalist or the Communist Parties found their hopes of equal political participation delayed and eventually disappointed.⁵ The gender revolution that appeared on the cusp of success in the early twentieth century remains unfinished today.

Politically and socially, Chinese women have not fared well since Reform and Opening began in the late 1970s. Women's place in the workplace has increasingly been eroded as the party has stepped back from the radical egalitarianism of the Maoist years. The market economy brought back open discrimination against women in education and the workplace. On television and social media, lurid tales of mistresses and angst over the so called "leftover" women—urban women, often with good career and financial prospects, who have found it difficult to find suitable marriage partners and have remained single into their thirties—tapped into deep-seated social anxieties about the place of women in society.⁶ Such fears are not new. The rise of New Women in the early twentieth century similarly fed the prurient interest of the popular press and the wider reading public.⁷ At the same time, grassroots activists in women's rights movements have found themselves under attack from a state that views them as challengers to the Party and its domination over all aspects of civil society.

The current period of rapidly shifting mores in many ways unexpectedly mirrors another transitional period from a century ago. As if on cue, a flood of new works has come out giving voice to the varied and essential role women played in China's modern history. These accounts range from deeply researched histories of individuals and families to broad surveys of entire genres of writing on women. Ellen Widmer's examination of the Zhan family and Ying Hu's linked biographies of

³Gail Hershatter, "Disquiet in the House of Gender," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71, no. 4 (Nov. 2012): 873–94.

⁴Christina Gilmartin, *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

⁵Zheng Wang, *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); David Strand, *An Unfinished Republic: Leading by Word and Deed in Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

⁶Leta Hong-Fincher, *Leftover Women: The Resurgence of Gender Inequality in China* (London: Zero Books, 2016).

⁷Bryna Goodman, "The New Woman Commits Suicide: The Press, Cultural Memory, and the New Republic," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 64, no. 1 (2005): 67–101.

the revolutionary Qiu Jin and two of her closest friends bring out the deeply personal and intimate details of women who lived through changing times. Joan Judge's broad survey of writing by and about women in the late Qing at the turn of the twentieth century organizes a tangled web of writing into four distinctive perspectives. Louise Edwards highlights the essential role women played in creating a militarized society in the twentieth century. Zheng Wang's study of the politics of concealment deployed by feminists in the post-1949 era illuminates how feminists operated behind the scenes to push forward their agenda and accomplish some of the signal achievements for gender equality during the Maoist years. Taken together these five works present a rich tapestry of modern China, one in which women are no longer silent, but the active agents of their own fates.

In her new work, *Fiction's Family*, Ellen Widmer traces the fortunes of the Zhan family through the writings of the two parents: Wang Qingdi 王慶棣 and Zhan Sizeng 詹嗣曾 and two of their sons, Zhan Xi 詹熙 and Zhan Kai 詹埏. The "fiction's family" of the title refers to both the writers and their creations: Wang and Zhan's family, who survived repeated devastation during the Taiping Rebellion; the Wei family, a creation of the elder son Zhan Xi's 1897 novel, an early example of the late-Qing novel; and finally a "family" of genres that formed the core of the younger son Zhan Kai's considerable body of published works, including newspaper editorials, courtesan guides, and reformist novels. The literary output of the Zhan family tracks the opening of late Qing society to growing influences from around the world and ballooning opportunities for publishing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Like their forebears, the elder Zhan and Wang corresponded with a network of close friends and published volumes of poetry, not for profit but for circulation among a small circle of people largely in their own social class and region. By the time of Zhan Xi and Zhan Kai's generation, writing had become a full-time profession in the larger cities of Beijing and Shanghai. The Zhan sons moved between their hometown of Quzhou in western Zhejiang Province and the new worlds opening up in Shanghai. Both sons wrote reformist works. Published in 1897, Zhan Xi's deceptively titled *Love Among the Courtesans* (*Hua liu shen qing zhuan* 花柳深情傳) attacked the three vices of opium, examination obsession, and bound feet. A decade later in 1907, his younger brother published *China's New Heroine* (*Zhongguo xin nü hao* 中國新女豪) and the similarly plotted *Women's Power* (*Nüzi quan* 女子權). Both men followed careers very much of their time around the turn of the twentieth century, when advocacy of women's issues in a variety of genres became fashionable for men of progressive and literary leanings.

The availability of materials determined Widmer's focus on the younger Zhans. Yet from snippets of poetry we see in the book, it is Wang Qingdi, the mother, who lived the more poignant life. Born in 1828 in Hangzhou, Wang spent the greater portion of her early life in Sichuan, where her father had been posted as a prefect. In an idyllic youth, Wang achieved a small measure of fame as a poet in Sichuan Province. Parental affection and concern is discernible in their marriage choice for their precocious and talented daughter. They arranged a companionate marriage for her to Zhan Sizeng of Quzhou, a young man who had already begun to acquire a reputation as a locally known poet (Widmer, 22). Husband and wife exchanged poems and shared literary interests, and with the help of his friend, she became a published poet around 1857.

In another time, perhaps, they would have had a long and unremarkable marriage, but the nineteenth century was not an unremarkable time. The Taiping Rebellion led the family to flee their Quzhou home multiple times in the 1850s and 1860s. Work forced Zhan Sizeng to spend most of his life from 1873 away from his wife. Scattered unpublished poems after 1872 show Wang becoming increasingly unhappy and bitter. In the late poem, "Living in Poverty, with Feeling," she tossed off the shocking line that "a lasting marriage is a kind of evil retribution" (Widmer, 37). From these poems and entries in the local gazetteer, we catch a glimpse of a woman of great talent who grew increasingly disappointed with her life and the constraints of being a gentlewoman of the late Qing.

Wang's life would have been quite different had she been born several decades later. The turn of the twentieth century was a vertiginous time of rapid change, during which an influx of foreign ideas and works of translation mixed uneasily with reevaluations of the Confucian cosmology and traditional modes of expression. Joan Judge, in *The Precious Raft of History: The Past, the West, and the Woman Question in China*, gamely attempts to make sense of the cacophony of voices from this period. Judge recognizes the fluidity of the existing epistemologies, as well as the imports from the West and the global trends of secularization, globalization, and temporalization (Judge, 3). As in other parts of the world, writings by and about women were a central part of this rapidly changing discourse, and they were central to China's transition to modernity.

The discussion of women riffed on China's own distinct history and understanding of gender roles. Judge builds on the scholarship of gender historians like Rita Felski for Western feminist theorists, Deniz Kandiyoti for the Middle East, and Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid for India. At the same time, she acknowledges that "The Chinese woman question can best be understood not as part of some vaguely universal phenomenon of epochal change, however, but as the product of China's own distinct history" (Judge, 7).

In order to organize the bewildering amount of material coming out in print in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Judge separates approaches to the woman question into four "chronotypes," or four different ways writers engaged with history, which she terms eternalist, meliorist, archeomodern, and presentist approaches. The four chronotypes are based on the way writers viewed both distant history and the recent past, as well as new ideas imported from abroad. Writers from all four chronotypes engaged with history and the common late imperial figure of the chaste woman, as well as with competing visions of women's education and relationship to newly formulated ideas of the nation. At times the lines between the four chronotypes blur or overlap, and Judge argues that the distinction between these varied views only come across in examining the full range of materials available at the time.

Given the flourishing publishing industry at the turn of the century, this survey of materials proves a daunting task. Widmer's account of the various publications by the Zhan sons makes clear the multitudes of writers and the spectrum of works available during this period in both traditional forms like local gazetteers and new media forms, ranging from newspapers to textbooks that catered to the new Western-style schools opening across the country. Judge's attempt to tackle this spectrum of writings uncovers the multitude of ways that the woman question was central to how both men and women at the turn of the twentieth century viewed Chinese modernity.

The difference between Chinese and Japanese engagement with the characters of "good wife wise mother" highlights both the distinctive and global context of late Qing Chinese writings on women. Coined in Japan during the Meiji period from a compound of classical Chinese characters, the meaning of the compound differed considerably from its Chinese components. Upon the return of the "good wife wise mother" compound to China, Chinese writers responded with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Judge argues that "despite resonances with early Chinese sources and traces of later Western influence, the concept is best understood as a product of its own transnational moment in history" (Judge, 113). Chinese writers had a variety of responses, with some embracing the Japanese appropriation of the nineteenth-century European model of femininity while others looked to the Confucian origins of the good wife and wise mother ideal.

By the turn of the twentieth century, as growing numbers of Chinese women themselves went abroad, particularly to Japan, a subset of the group looked to transcend "private, life-cycle-bound feminine time and inset themselves into public, linear, masculine time—to join men in bearing daggers to defend the nation" (Judge, 187). These writings helped bridge the divide between gentle women like Wang Qingdi, who yearned for but never transcended their prescribed roles in life and someone like Qiu Jin in the subsequent generation, who moved beyond private despair to take public action and embrace a martial and previously exclusively male ideal.

Judge delves into the complexities of the women's question at the turn of the century and the assorted publications which sought to shape the question of women's place in a distinctly Chinese modernity. This background is essential for understanding Qiu Jin's life. Following the model of the linked biography first used by the Grand historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 in the Han dynasty, Ying Hu's work examines not only the most well-known female revolutionary of the late Qing, but also the lives of her two close friends, Wu Zhiying 吳芝瑛 and Xu Zihua 徐自華. Wu and Xu actively shaped the memory and interpretation of Qiu Jin's life after her early death at age thirty-two. They did so while still appealing to the various traditional cultural modes they had grown up with and which supposedly had been swept away by the revolution. By revealing the rich context of these women and their friendship, Hu illuminates a forgotten world at the cusp of incredible turmoil and transition.

All three women were born within a few years of one another in the late 1860s and 1870s, in the waning years of the "talented women" of elite literati families and before the rise of the New Woman in the early twentieth century. Qiu Jin, the most famous of the trio, anchors their linked biographies, but Wu and Xu both come fully alive in Hu's work. Wu Zhiying was born in 1867 in Tongcheng County, Anhui Province, the famed seat of Tongcheng classical prose. Unlike her friends Qiu Jin and Xu Zihua, Wu had a long marriage to a companionate husband Lian Quan 廉泉 (1868–1932). Husband and wife shared a passion for poetry and calligraphy and promoted each other's works. From 1897 to 1904 Wu Zhiying followed her husband to make their home in Beijing, where Wu established a reputation as a calligrapher. Wu would become known for the Slender Golden Style of calligraphy, first developed in the Song dynasty. Among her works was an elegantly handwritten title and preface to the textbook on geology by her friend, the American missionary Luella Miner (Hu, 56–58).

Xu Zihua came from a family of literati-officials and merchants in the township of Shimen, Huzhou Prefecture, Zhejiang Province. Encouraged by both her mother and paternal grandfather, Xu exhibited literary talent early on, and regularly exchanged poetry with relatives, including a female cousin who passed away one year before her marriage (Hu, 75). In 1893, Xu married Mei Yunsheng, who came from a scholarly family but did not advance beyond the county-level examinations. Tellingly, husband and wife did not exchange poems or other writings. In 1900, after seven years of marriage, most of which Mei spent way from home on business, he passed away, leaving Xu a widow with two children at the age of twenty-eight (Hu, 85). From here Xu's life began to diverge from the tightly scripted role of the cloistered widow celebrated in late imperial accounts of virtuous women. She returned to live with her natal family instead of remaining at her husband's home. When a merchant opened a women's school in Nanxun in 1906, he sought out Xu Zihua as the head instructor. Less than a decade after the first Chinese-run women's school opened its door in 1898, Xu embarked on a new career as a teacher, which provided her both a new calling and some financial security (Hu, 90).

Ying Hu tracks the lives of the three women and their friendships much as they themselves did – through snippets of poetry, each rich with allusions to other poems and writings. Her singular accomplishment is making comprehensible a world strange and lost to us today, when poetry is no longer current as a mode of communication. In Hu's capable hands, the lines of poetry come alive as the deeply intimate and poignant remnants of the three women and their linked lives. The details of Qiu Jin's short but outsized life are relatively well-known. She was married in 1896, at the age of twenty-two, to Wang Tingjun 王廷鈞, the son of a wealthy merchant family, who shared none of her interests in books and writing. After two failed attempts to pass the lowest levels of civil examinations, Wang's family purchased a position for him in Beijing (Hu, 113). The move proved disastrous for the marriage but fortuitously introduced Qiu Jin to Wu Zhiying, when the former and her family leased an apartment from Wu's husband. Some time between the dissolution of her marriage and her escape to Japan, Qiu Jin began to cross-dress, leaving behind a series of famous photographs of herself in men's clothing, often holding daggers.

When she returned from Japan at the beginning of 1906, she taught briefly at Xunxi [Nanxun] Women's School, where Xu Zihua had become the headmistress (Hu, 156). Friendship, based on the model of sworn brotherhood in classical Chinese literature, fit uneasily with traditional notions of female obedience first to parents then, following marriage, husband and in-laws (Hu, 128). Poetry established the connection between the women and helped to cement a friendship that transcended even death.

In the dead of night on July 15, 1907, Qing troops executed Qiu Jin. She had received word of her friend Xu Xilin's 徐錫麟 confession of an assassination plot against top Manchu officials and execution days earlier and had made no attempt to flee, despite the pleas of friends and family. Instead of a confession, her last written words played on the character for her name, *qiu* or autumn. Qiu's flair for the dramatic failed in her final moments and she left behind instead an elegiac wisp of a line of poetry, "autumn wind, autumn rain, fill one's heart with melancholy" (Hu, 179). For months after the execution, Qiu Jin's body lay exposed to the elements outside of town, mixed with the bodies of paupers and other executed criminals. Given the circumstances of her death, her husband's family was notably not eager to get involved. That task fell to her friends Wu Zhiying and Xu Zihua, who immediately went to work to mold the public opinion of Qiu Jin's death and begin the process of commemoration. Wu and Xu carefully framed the first biographical sketches of Qiu Jin to recover the singularity of her life as an individual instead of an executed and still unburied criminal.

As a widow, but with the public persona of an educator, Xu eventually took over the running of the Qiu Jin Society. In the later years of her life, Xu lived to see it become relatively easy for women to publish their writings without the male stamp of approval from their husbands or sons. Qiu Jin and the interpretation of her life, meanwhile, continued to change according to the political tides, an instability reflected in her ever changing "final resting place." From her death through the Republican era, her body underwent three interments and two periods of storage above ground, followed by four more reburials during the Communist era.

The world explored in the preceding works—the world of genteel women who wrote poetry, and of their successors who challenged society through the use of traditional modes of expression—rapidly disappeared in the subsequent generation of New Women. For the following generation, Qiu Jin's heroic actions became something of an embarrassment. These New Women faced their own challenges, but also lived in a society constantly at war, in which femininity and masculinity were useful strategies for militarization and propaganda.

In *Women Warriors and Wartime Spies of China*, Louise Edwards explores the ways real women's lives became part of a public narrative of the twentieth century. Edwards argues that for Chinese women in the twentieth century, political instability, civil wars, and invasion created the opportunity for women to seize alternative public roles through participation in war. Edwards backs her argument with chapters on a series of women whose transgressive actions progressively opened up public roles for women.

Edwards examines a range of women whose political affiliations and familial background spread across the spectrum of Chinese society in the first half of the twentieth century. Xie Bingying (1906–2000) escaped an arranged marriage to join the frontlines of battle and become a prolific writer. Born a year before Qiu Jin's early death, Xie's life trajectory spoke of her independence and spirit, but also of the rapid changes in society in the preceding decades. No longer was she willing to accept the inequality of treatment between sons and daughters as part of the social norms. She did not fight alone—in her protest against parental expectations Xie was supported by her brothers. The CCP guerrilla fighter, Zhao Yiman (1905–1936), became a household name when the People's Republic of China (PRC) commenced the memorialization of wartime heroes. Captured by the Japanese on a mission in October 1936, she was tortured and interrogated by the Japanese, then executed on July 5, 1937. Soon after the Communist established a new state, the film *Zhao Yiman* premiered, on July 1, 1950, to mark the twenty-ninth anniversary of the

founding of the CCP. Thus began Zhao's journey from a real woman to a mythical creation of the CCP propaganda machine.

Zheng Pingru's short life and sensational death (1918–1940) served as the basis for Ang Lee's 2007 film *Lust, Caution*. Zheng had graced the cover of the pictorial magazine *Young Companion* in 1937, and she embodied youth, sex, and glamour. Her death at age twenty-three at the hands of the pro-Japanese Shanghai Security Police, and the post-war trial of the men responsible for her execution as a spy, provided endless fodder for the popular press. Liu Hulan, a teenage girl from a small Shanxi village, was beheaded in the winter of 1947 during the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists. Within weeks of her execution, the CCP mobilized her story to rally support for its cause.

Women and, through the teenaged Liu Hulan, children, became the attractive representations of a militarized society. The early death of most of these subjects made their memorialization ripe for exploitation by the state propaganda machine. Zhao Yiman, for example, left behind a one-year old son before joining the mission that resulted in her capture and death. That detail was initially a minor footnote to her martyr status, yet by the turn of the twenty-first century, her image was wholly remade into that of a tender mother who only reluctantly left behind her child as part of her sacrifice for the nation. From the perspective of the party, Zhao and Liu's early deaths conveniently freed their image for the remaking.

The work of an active propaganda machine aside, Chinese women undeniably enjoyed a burst of progress during the early decades of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Zheng Wang's new work centers on feminists like Chen Bo'er, a left-leaning movie star in the 1930s who went on to become a founder of the socialist film industry of the PRC and Shen Zijiu, the editor-in-chief of *Women of China*, the only nationally circulated women's magazine in the early years of the PRC. Under the leadership of these women officials, Chinese films and early PRC journals both featured women as the protagonist and active agents of their own fates. Both women were members of the Executive Committee of the All-China Democratic Women's Federation (ACDWF, later ACWF) from its founding in 1949. As an officially recognized organization of the Chinese government, ACWF was placed in charge of promulgating the 1950 marriage law as well as subsequent major campaigns which touched upon the lives of Chinese women.

By centering her narrative on these women who served as officials in the socialist state, Wang seeks to recover the history of socialist state feminists. Wang argues that neither the top down nor the bottom up approach adequately addresses the way that state feminists operated and pushed through a gendered agenda. Instead, they accomplished a great deal through "camouflaging a feminist agenda with dominant Party language," what Wang calls the politics of concealment (Wang, 17). For example, state feminists in the 1950s disguised their gender claims using the term "anti-feudalism," a major item on the Party's official agenda.

Women officials worked tirelessly to promote their agenda behind the scenes and declined credit for their achievements. Their efforts resulted in some of the best-known advances in gender equality during the Maoist years, yet precisely because of their policy of concealment, they subsequently received little or no credit for their work. These state feminists may not have received credit, but women officials produced tangible results. Wang points out that, "From land reform, the 1950 Marriage Law, and paid maternity leave, to the law to protect women and children's rights in the post-Mao reform era, every pro-woman policy or legislation resulted from women officials' successful maneuvering behind the scenes, rather than from some favor granted by a benevolent patriarch" (Wang, 47).

Wang's narrative goes a long way to explain the galvanizing images of Chinese women from the 1960s and 1970s, not as part of a deceptive state campaign but as an important component of Chinese feminists' efforts to promote gender equality. Chen Bo'er worked tirelessly to develop a nascent Chinese film industry that featured women in leading roles, many based on life stories of actual Communist women. The editorial staff at *Women of China* made the decision to place

real working women on their covers in the 1950s and 1960s. During these years, *Women of China* featured the first woman locomotive operator, Tian Guiying, the first women pilots, electricians, welders, and so on (Wang, 97–98).

Wang argues that these images went beyond representations of transformations in a new socialist China and were part of a concerted effort by state feminists to challenge sexism inside and outside the Party (Wang, 99). One of the most popular features of the magazine *Women of China* was forums on specially selected topics, which attracted letters and discussion from women across the country. It was one such forum that drew a scathing response in the October 1964 issue of *Red Flag*, one of the Party's official publications, entitled "How Should We Deal with the Women Question" (Wang, 113). In the ensuing political struggle, *Women of China* had to shut down its public forums and then suspend publication altogether at the end of 1966, as the country descended into the Cultural Revolution.

Women of China resumed publication in 1978. The magazine continues to be published, but its recent covers offer a deeply dispiriting window on the current position of state-sanctioned feminism in China. In order to compete for market share, the magazine has changed unrecognizably from its days of featuring women electricians and soldiers on its front covers, offering up instead the same sexualized images of women's bodies as its commercial competitors.

How does one explain this new wave of scholarship amid gloomy news of the Chinese government's crackdown on feminists and signs of regression for women's rights? These new works are not just women's histories, separate and cloistered from mainstream narratives. Rather, they demonstrate that discussions about and by women helped to shape modern China and form the connection across a spectrum of social issues in a rapidly transforming society. So much about contemporary Chinese society would be incomprehensible without understanding the histories these works explicate from a century ago to the recent past. From this perspective, the Chinese government's current suppression of seemingly innocuous grassroots feminists underscores the importance of women to the fabric of Chinese civil society. From its founding, the CCP successfully deployed women in the service of its agenda. Despite the absence of women from the current leadership and highest echelons of the Party hierarchy, at some level the CCP still recognizes the hidden power of women. Similar anxieties played out about women's place in a modern nation in the late Qing and the role of New Women in the first half of the twentieth century.

One story from Zheng Wang's work provides a glimmer hope. In 1963, a group of twenty-three adolescent girls formed a brigade to help their village, Dazhai in Shanxi Province, in the recovery efforts from severe flooding. The brigade, named the Iron Girls, became nationally famous along with the elevation of their village in 1964 as a model collective. One of the girls, Guo Fenglian, was in turn rapidly promoted and received by Premier Zhou Enlai and Chairman Mao himself (Wang, 226). Then in 1978, at the CCP's Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee, the political tide turned, and the Iron Girls were cast aside as an outmoded representation of the "masculinization" of women in the Maoist years. Guo disappeared from public view. Her story, however, did not end as another tragic tale of a life stunted by unpredictable political tribulations. Guo re-emerged in the 2010s as the CEO of Dazhai Conglomerates, a billion-yuan company, and resumed her membership in the Standing Committee of the National Congress (Wang, 240). At a time when the history of socialist feminists has largely been erased, Guo's second life as a captain of industry in the market economy serves as a rare reminder that their legacy has not entirely disappeared.