

Introduction: Theorizing Femininities and Masculinities

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The last two centuries have witnessed tremendous upheavals and transformations in every aspect of Chinese culture and society, from national politics to everyday life. At the level of everyday life, some of the most obvious and remarkable of these transformations have affected, or occurred in, the realm of gender. What are the links between broad political and economic trends and trends in notions about gender? Have elite and popular visions of the differences between the sexes tended to overlap or diverge? How have gender distinctions related to other kinds of distinctions, such as ones associated with ethnicity, class, and generation? How have images of the ideal female and male changed over time? Alternately, have there been changes in categories of the abnormal—that is, those categories defined by images of women and men who must be viewed with suspicion due to their failure to conform to the codes of proper femininity or masculinity?

In this book, we explore questions of this sort while treating gender as more than simply a collection of roles, symbols, and behaviors that are always attached to two incommensurable sexes. The authors of the following chapters approach gender as an important organizing principle of an entire worldview. As such, it certainly shapes understandings of sex and sexuality, but it also helps structure many other aspects of Chinese life, such as the way political power is exercised and contested and the way that the lines between Han and non-Han ethnic categories are drawn. It is the polymorphous, plural nature of gender constructs—which take on varied contours over time, among different social groups, and when put to divergent purposes—that generates the femininities and masculinities of our title. We have chosen these words for their vagueness. What exactly is femininity or masculinity—what anatomical details, behaviors, discussions, and ideas make a woman into a woman and a man into a man? The answer differs

from setting to setting. Thus, we do not seek a universal definition, because we believe that in China, as in all other places, the most interesting and significant thing is the fact that unique judgments about femininity and masculinity are made by specific people in particular contexts.

One goal in producing this book is to help readers frame answers to the questions we have posed above, but we also want to give them skills and information that will aid them as they ponder similar queries of their own making. Our strategy has been to pull together an eclectic mixture of accessible and illuminating studies, most of them specially written for this volume, some reprinted here as a testament to their enduring value. Half of the chapters focus primarily on femininity, while half concentrate on masculinity; but all implicitly, and some of them explicitly, draw attention to the fact that we must view these categories as constructed in relationship to each other. In concert, the chapters of this book not only provide a wealth of interesting detail but also illustrate the plural nature of femininities and masculinities invoked by our title. The book also demonstrates, by alternating between looking at subjects traditionally associated with feminism (such as family life) and topics only rarely viewed through the prism of sexual difference (such as banditry), that gender studies are more than just a supplement to mainstream accounts. A serious appreciation of the forging and contesting of ideas about masculinity and femininity can help us better understand all aspects of the way both public and private lives have been, and continue to be, transformed in China.

We have tried to be as wide-ranging and inclusive as possible in constructing this volume, but we have placed most emphasis on certain periods, themes, and approaches. In terms of chronology, contributors focus primarily on the recent past. Aside from casual references to earlier epochs, our authors concentrate on the era of Qing dynasty rule (1644–1911), the Republican period (1912–1949), and the Communist era (1949–present).¹ In terms of themes, an interest in charting change over time, as well as in drawing attention to patterns of continuity, is central to many chapters. In terms of approach, we have looked mainly to authors whose works evoke a sense of how femininity and masculinity in China are constructed and performed as *lived experience*, as opposed to represented in artistic works or dealt with in formal government policies. In addition, most contributors are either historians (Theiss, Sommer, Mann, Glosser, Hershatter, Ownby, Honig, Furth, Evans, Wasserstrom) or anthropologists (Chen, Jankowiak, Schein, Litzinger, Brownell). The book contains only two chapters by specialists in literature (Liu, Larson) and a single one by a pair of political scientists (Perry and Dillon). Practitioners in other disciplines (such as sociology) have also made important contributions to what is now the flourishing interdisciplinary field of Chinese gender studies, but are not represented in the selections in this book. The breakdown by disciplines is in part a reflec-

tion of the backgrounds of the editors. But it is also in part a result of the emphasis, alluded to above, on how femininity and masculinity operate as experiential categories as opposed to objects of representation or factors that contribute to the formation of state policy.

The focus, topical variety, and disciplinary mix of our reader make it different in one or more ways from each of the various noteworthy collections of essays on gender and China that appeared in the 1990s. For example, both *Gender Politics in Modern China: Writing and Feminism* and *Body, Subject, and Power in China*—the first of which was edited by historian Tani Barlow and the second of which was coedited by her and Angela Zito, a specialist in Chinese religion—focus much more than we do here on issues of representation.² Meanwhile, what sets our volume apart from another collection—*Marriage and Inequality in China*, coedited by anthropologist Rubie Watson and historian Patricia Ebrey—is our attempt to look at the role of gender in aspects of life unrelated to familial concerns.³ And our determination to pay equal attention to the experiences of men and women sets our reader apart from edited collections such as *Spaces of Their Own: Women's Public Sphere in Transnational China* and *Women and Chinese Patriarchy: Submission, Servitude, and Escape*.⁴ The same thing also distinguishes this volume from what is perhaps the most wide-ranging and ambitiously constructed of recent collections, *Engendering China: Women, Culture, and the State*, the subtitle of which is revealing.⁵ Each of the aforementioned books contains individual chapters that are quite similar to ones found in the present volume—indeed, one of our chapters (Hershatter's) first appeared in *Engendering China*, another (Mann's) in *Marriage and Inequality in China*—but when taken as a whole, this volume is quite different.

Moreover, our focus here on the interplay between ideas and practices associated with femininity and masculinity also makes the present reader different from the most important earlier contributions to Chinese gender studies, for those, too, tended to focus almost exclusively on male views toward women, or on the experiences of women only. This was the case with several pathbreaking single-author works and edited volumes published in the 1970s and 1980s. A short list of the most significant of these would have to include *Women in China* and *Women in Chinese Society*, each of which appeared in the mid-1970s and played a crucial role in laying the groundwork for the emergence of Chinese gender studies as an academic field.⁶ And the major monographs and surveys on gender, as well as document collections pertaining to gender, that appeared prior to the 1990s tended as well to pay little attention to masculinity. This was true of major overviews such as *Feminism and Socialism in China* by anthropologist Elizabeth Croll and *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution, 1850–1950*, by historian Ono Kazuko, as well as collections of documents such as Emily Honig and Gail Hershatter's *Personal Voices: Chinese Women in the 1980s*.⁷ And even now, though other

works have begun to appear that deal more extensively with issues associated with masculinity, still the most impressive individually authored works on gender tend to focus on women. This is true of such sophisticated and important recent additions to the literature as Harriet Evans's *Women and Sexuality in China: Female Sexuality and Gender since 1949* and Wang Zheng's *Women in the Chinese Enlightenment: Oral and Textual Histories*.⁸

The dissimilarities between the works mentioned above are enormous when it comes to issues such as the way sexual difference is approached. For example, in most early works, male and female are treated as unproblematic categories grounded in biology. By contrast, in Evans's and Wang's recent works, which draw upon the insights of deconstructivist feminist theorists such as Judith Butler, the complex links between bodies and ideas about bodies, as well as the defining and contesting of gender categories, comprise central subjects of exploration.⁹ Nonetheless, the tendency to carry out old and new sorts of explorations of gender by focusing mostly on women and concepts of femininity has remained a constant in Chinese studies and is one that this volume seeks to reconsider.

Within the parameters we have set for ourselves, which are not unlike those that inform some very useful recent volumes dealing with gender dynamics in other parts of the world, readers will find a diverse array of authors and types of chapters.¹⁰ This is a diversity that attests to the eclectic goal of our enterprise and the healthy state of the field a quarter of a century after its establishment. One sort of variety has to do with theoretical approach, for our contributors stand at different points on the spectrum running from positivist to postmodernist. In addition, they rely on varied kinds of sources—from legal records to informal interviews to popular magazines to medical texts. And although most of the contributors are known already for their scholarship on gender, there are a few whose contributions to this volume have taken them into new territory. In some cases this is because their previous work has not focused on gender (Perry, Ownby), in others because they have not typically written about masculinity (Larson, Chen).

Having provided this general sketch of the book and what differentiates it from many contributions to the field of Chinese gender studies we now turn to the goals of the remaining sections of this introduction. We begin by discussing the broad developments in feminist scholarship that form the background for this book, paying particular attention to the way they have affected historians of China. We then describe how analytical waves in gender studies that transformed the field during the 1970s and 1980s intersected with those that were simultaneously occurring within Chinese studies, focusing in this part on the other discipline we know best, anthropology. The third section positions this book relative to current trends in Chinese gender studies and describes in more detail the structure of the main body of the book. The final section explains our understanding and use of some

key terms (such as *sexuality*) and explores some of the problems that arise when applying the language of Anglophone gender studies to China (such as the need to rethink some assumptions about categories). In this final section, we go on to outline the distinctive features in the recent history of Chinese gender, which will be illustrated in later chapters.

FROM WOMEN'S STUDIES TO GENDER STUDIES

For several decades, there has been an ongoing tension within academic feminism between two basic approaches, which we represent here as oversimplified extremes. One approach begins with the problem of inequality and then proceeds to critique patriarchy. Adherents to this “inequality-patriarchy” approach take for granted the immutable existence of two biologically differentiated sexes and ask how power is divided between those on opposite sides of the divide. The other approach begins with the issue of difference and then proceeds to focus on constructions of gender. Practitioners of this approach do not take for granted an immutable male-female divide but rather see “man” and “woman” as socially and culturally created categories, the borders between which may be contested. They stress the possibility of “third genders,” people who are typed as neither male nor female but as something that stands apart from or combines elements of the two. They also insist that gender-bending (or blurring) behaviors and identities of some sort can be found in virtually all cultures, and that these are worthy of scholarly attention.

The contrast between the two approaches can manifest itself in varied ways, leading scholars either to focus on different issues (cross-dressing, for example, is typically of more interest to those in the latter group than to those in the former) or to deal with the same problem in divergent ways.¹¹ One way to illustrate the kind of divergence that can occur where a common problem is identified is to think about the history and recent reemergence of female infanticide in the Chinese countryside. One obvious starting point for feminist discussions of China has long been the killing of daughters and the general preference in many villages for male as opposed to female children, which is rooted in patrilineal residence traditions and the endurance of lineage structures organized around fathers and sons. For those who take what we have called the inequality-patriarchy approach, the favoring of male offspring is a clear example of a case in which subtleties of gender categorization are irrelevant. This is a situation in which a biological criterion is being used to determine whether or not a person's life is valued, and in the process women are oppressed. Case closed.

However, those who begin with a concern for difference—while by no means excusing the practice of female infanticide—might not frame the issue quite the same way. They might call attention to comments in some of

the literature that describe women within certain villages as being treated as less than “whole people” (*quanren*) until they bear sons. The scholars might then explore what we can learn about the politics of difference from this division of women into two different categories—those who have and have not produced sons—where a woman who has not produced a son is somehow denied the full status of her gender.¹²

In a nutshell, the inequality-patriarchy approach begins with four main points: (1) the fact that, throughout recorded history and across cultures, we find many cases in which men have monopolized positions of power or in other ways exercised domination over women; (2) the claim that systematic domination of females by males justifies the creation of a field, women’s studies, devoted to examining critically this process of domination while honoring or simply bringing into the open the experiences of formerly or still voiceless members of the oppressed group; (3) the ethical claim that imbalances of power between the sexes are immoral; and (4) the assumption that scholars should try to elucidate the workings of, celebrate resistance to, and contribute to the destruction of patriarchal systems. *Patriarchy* originally referred to a system in which older men, as heads of households, possessed the ultimate authority over all members of their households. Often, though, it is invoked as a catchall word for all systems based on widespread inequalities between the sexes. This approach, if taken to the extreme, can be unsatisfying for several reasons. Adherents to it can fail to take into account cultural and historical differences in relationships between the sexes. They can fail to question the experiences of males, leaving men as universal subjects even as they try to question the negative stereotypes attached to women as the polar opposite of men. They can make it too easy for feminist positions to be marginalized by nonfeminists as works that need be taken seriously only by scholars working on women’s roles. And they can make patriarchy seem static, as opposed to something continually undergoing change and being re-created in new ways.

Although it avoids most of these problems, the “gender studies” or “difference” approach also has its pitfalls if applied too simplistically. An interest in difference and gender systems can pull us away from focusing on the political dimensions of relations between the sexes, the unequal power relations that lead to the domination of women by men in so many cases. It can lead as well to just the sort of marginalization of feminist scholarship that it claims to be avoiding. Some critics also complain that, in the end, one can simply end up talking mostly about the experiences of men, and this is what is already done often enough by academics unaffected by or resistant to feminism. Various trends within gender studies are also seen as troubling. One is the tendency of practitioners to devote attention to subjects far removed from the experiences of ordinary women (such as the gendered dimensions of elegant poems written by male authors for male audiences).

Another is a tendency to focus on issues that have little to do with the political struggles that could bring about change (such as representations of sexual behavior in elite medical texts).

There are, it should be stressed, some very basic institutional, procedural, and conceptual implications attached to these two different starting points. For example, the two approaches can lead students of recent Chinese history in very different directions, and not just where the preference for sons in villages is concerned. The inequality-patriarchy approach can lead to focusing most of our attention on understanding why inequalities between men and women have seemed so stubbornly resistant to regime change, or to looking primarily at failed efforts to oppose the imposition of patriarchy by new ruling groups. It can also inspire work that is concerned above all simply with bringing into the historical record the experiences of powerless women. The gender studies approach, by contrast, can lead to asking whether, despite the appearance of continuity given by epoch upon epoch of male domination of women, visions of sexual difference have in fact changed more dramatically over time than was previously supposed. It can also lead to work that emphasizes the varied ways that women and men occupying different places in social hierarchies benefit from, resist, or otherwise experience various types of patriarchy. A brief survey of the ways that feminist historians approached the Communist Revolution from the early 1970s to the early 1980s, on the one hand, and from the mid-1980s through the 1990s, on the other, illustrates this point. We see here, in very general terms, a shift from a period when a fairly straightforward inequality-patriarchy approach held sway to one in which a concern with issues of difference became much more pronounced.

WOMEN'S STUDIES AND GENDER STUDIES IN HISTORIES OF CHINESE WOMEN

Between the early 1970s and early 1980s, feminist social historians and historically minded social scientists in closely related fields produced a number of important books and articles that focused on the question of why, after taking power in 1949, the Communists failed to liberate women. This needed explanation, these scholars stressed, not just because it was something that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had promised to do but also because many of the men involved, including Mao Zedong, had written passionately in their youth about the injustices of patriarchy, as had radical young women of the day. How had young male participants in the New Culture Movement of the second and third decades of the twentieth century, for whom the subordination of women within "Confucian" family structures had seemed symptomatic of all that was wrong with the old order, ended up governing a patriarchal state? This was the kind of question asked by many

talented and resourceful feminist scholars, including contributors to the major edited volumes of the time. Both *Women in China* and *Women in Chinese Society*, but especially the former—perhaps in part the result of the fact that so many of its chapters were by historians or historically minded sociologists—devoted chapters to the “woman question” and Communist attempts to solve or avoid solving it.¹³

The explanations for the CCP’s failure to liberate women (or at least liberate them completely) offered by historians such as Delia Davin and Patricia Stranahan varied considerably.¹⁴ And so did those of scholars in related disciplines who asked similar questions—such as sociologist Judith Stacey.¹⁵ When trying to account for the continuing subordination of women under Communism, some authors favored social or cultural and others economic or strategic explanations. Some found the key turning point in a pre-1949 stage of the Communist movement, others in the era after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Some were much more, others much less forgiving of the CCP for its failure. What bound all of these early works together was a tendency to treat “Chinese women” as belonging to a single basic category and to see continuities relating to the unequal distribution of power between men and women as the main thing to be analyzed.¹⁶

More recently, the situation has changed quite dramatically. Some of the same scholars mentioned above have been affected by novel trends and have published works that diverge from their earlier ones, and new generations of feminist historians have begun to make their mark by placing the Communist Revolution in different sorts of frameworks linked to gender. It is not just that interpretations of the CCP’s approach to the “woman question” have changed, though some have, but also that varied ideas have been put forth concerning the kinds of issues that must be addressed. Wang Zheng, Christina Gilmartin, and some of the contributors to this volume (Glosser, Hershatter, Honig) have been among those who have reshaped the literature on this topic. They have done so in some cases by devoting more attention to describing the complex elements that constituted the patriarchal gender system that existed before the Revolution—the system against which New Culture Movement activists railed but which also shaped the outlooks of these young men and women. They have also explored the affiliations, such as class and regional ties and voluntary bonds created through sworn sisterhoods, that linked or divided particular groups of women. And some have looked as well at the issues that are the focus of this book: namely, the ways that ideas about femininity and masculinity were re-configured as well as re-created in different phases of the Revolution.¹⁷

Some scholars, such as Tani Barlow and, again, contributors to this volume (especially Evans), have introduced a new element into the study of the “woman question” by tracking the linguistic dimensions of the moves between various types of patriarchal systems. They have argued that an im-

portant story to be told lies in the refashioning of terminologies and categories associated with gender, including that of “woman” itself.¹⁸ This kind of scholarship fits in well with the direction taken by some historians of Chinese nationalism, such as Prasenjit Duara, who have expanded on ideas about the gendering of China (as a country) put forth by literary critics and anthropologists.¹⁹ These historians have noted that, if we are to take gender categories as seriously as we should, we must ask how not only individuals but also larger communities are typed as feminine or masculine or seen as incorporating elements of both. Their work, like that of the historians referred to in the preceding paragraph, complements and builds on pioneering and justly influential studies of gender and history that focus on other parts of the world. The most notable of these, in many ways, remains Joan Scott’s classic 1984 essay, “Gender: A Useful Category for Historical Analysis.”²⁰

Happily, what we have seen in historical works on Chinese women has not been a shift from one pole to another, a complete rejection of old approaches in favor of new ones. Instead, what has reshaped the field has been a series of moves toward giving increasing numbers of factors their proper due. There has not been a swing from focusing only on inequality to focusing only on difference, but rather, creative efforts have been made to incorporate a concern with both into our understanding of China’s revolutions. At the same time (though moves here have been slower), scholars have begun to pay more attention to categories (such as that of the biological or sworn brother) and experiences (such as how it feels to be a father) associated with men and masculinity.²¹ We have reached a point where most feminist historians have been sensitized to issues of both power and meaning and do not feel a need to choose between viewing a problem through the lens of inequality-patriarchy and that of difference-gender—and the same is true of feminist scholars in other disciplines. Most of them, including nearly all of those cited in the previous several paragraphs, would claim to fall between the poles. Certainly, many see themselves as using interpretive strategies associated with both camps.

This is definitely how the editors of this book see ourselves, and the structure of this volume is meant in part to reflect this. The contributors, almost without exception, see themselves, and would be seen by many, as occupying some sort of middle ground between the inequality-patriarchy and difference-gender approaches. For example, Hershatter’s chapter on prostitution in early-twentieth-century Shanghai and Janet Theiss’s on widow chastity in the Qing period present arguments that, although sensitive to difference, fit in well with some discussions that focus on patriarchy. This is in part simply because they deal with practices that could clearly be exploitative of women. Other chapters, such as Matthew Sommer’s on male homosexuality and David Ownby’s on Chinese bandits, complicate this pic-

ture and raise doubts about the “women’s studies” paradigm in its extreme form. This is because they show how *men* can also be marginalized, victimized, and oppressed by hierarchical gender systems that legitimate power only in certain categories of men, excluding other men in a process that is both similar to and different from the ways in which women are excluded. Indeed, one of the significant themes that recurs in several chapters in this book is the pitiful plight of the marginal male. Unmarried, homosexual, or otherwise socially marginal men were in many cases dealt with more harshly by the law and regarded as more of a threat to legitimate, heterosexual male power than were any categories of women. An analysis that concentrated only on the power differences between men and women would gloss over or indeed completely miss this point.²²

Having described some broad scholarly developments within feminism, as well as the way they have affected the study of one major topic linked to China, we turn to a more focused discussion of the discipline of anthropology. The purpose of including this discussion is to provide users of this book with a sense of the particular disciplinary histories that inform the work of the majority of contributors. Shifting from a focus on historical studies to a concentration on anthropological ones will also allow us to restate in a more nuanced way some of the points made above about changing scholarly fashions and the ebb and flow of interpretive tides.

WOMEN’S STUDIES, GENDER STUDIES, CHINESE STUDIES, AND ANTHROPOLOGY

In the past several decades, there have been two main movements, relating to gender studies, in the discipline of anthropology: the first involved simply paying more attention to women’s experiences; the second involved problematizing gender. These, we should stress, overlapped as well as followed one another. And, curiously, China specialists have sometimes been ahead of and sometimes behind the disciplinary tide.

In this volume, when discussing anthropological developments we look mostly, in the interests of convenience, at those that took place within, or that directly affected, the Anglo-American academic world in which the contributors were trained. Within the discipline as a whole, gender studies got their start in the early 1970s, when the women’s movement began to make its presence felt within the academy. The first important text, *Woman, Culture, and Society*, arose out of an undergraduate lecture course organized by a collective of female graduate students at Stanford in 1971. Challenged by the lack of materials and theories for the course, Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere brought together a collection of chapters that explicitly focused on women; it was published in 1974. One year later, the second foundational text was published, *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, edited

by Rayna Reiter. This first phase has been labeled the “anthropology of women” phase because its main accomplishment was to write women into the ethnographic record.²³

The anthropology of China has always existed somewhat separately from the discipline as a whole because of its close links with the interdisciplinary mongrel of sinology. Until (perhaps) recently, sinologists have shared an interest in concrete information about Chinese history, language, culture, and society but not necessarily an interest in the latest theories or developmental trends emerging out of the separate disciplines. The effect on the anthropology of China has been that developments in sinology, more than developments in anthropology as a whole, have shaped it. With some exceptions, anthropological theory has contributed little to China studies, and China anthropologists have contributed even less to general anthropological theory.

Consistent with this trend, the anthropology of Chinese gender has followed a trajectory somewhat different from that of the anthropology of gender as a whole. Surprisingly enough, however, it might be argued that an interest in the lives of women was established in the anthropology of China (with the 1968 publication of Margery Wolf’s *The House of Lim*) around six years before women got full-fledged attention in the discipline as a whole (with the 1974 publication of *Woman, Culture, and Society*). Since it is unusual for China anthropologists to *lead* a trend in the field as a whole, rather than lagging behind it, we might wonder what caused this anomaly. One of the more important factors, interestingly, is best described as a fluke of sorts, in the sense that it resulted largely from the interests, career path, and talents of a particular gifted individual, Margery Wolf.

The significance of her publications in the development of Chinese anthropological writings on gender is difficult to overstate: they began appearing at a time when very little was being done on the subject and, through their combination of skillful analysis and accessible style, proved enormously influential. Wolf’s first book, *The House of Lim: A Study of a Chinese Farm Family*, was a novelistic account of the dramas of everyday life in the Lim family, a fairly well-off Taiwanese farm family on the verge of household division when Margery and her then-husband, Arthur, lived with them, from 1959 to 1961. Still popular today, it is often assigned in courses on China and on the anthropology of gender because of the evocative way in which it illustrates the joys, disappointments, and complexities of women’s lives. Four years after that volume appeared, Wolf published *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan*, which was written in a style halfway between the novelistic style of *The House of Lim* and the academic style common in the discipline at the time (for example, the entire book cites only ten references).²⁴

Wolf thus disregarded two academic paradigms at the same time—the first being the focus on the lives of men, the second being the natural-

scientific writing style. She was able to do this because she was not herself pursuing an academic career. She had no advanced degree, and she had lived in the field as the wife of an anthropologist engaged in more “scholarly” labor. Unlike career-oriented scholars, she was able to write about the things that moved her without worrying about convincing her dissertation committee and her colleagues that it was a worthy topic. Still, she began *The House of Lim* by almost apologetically stating, “I am not an anthropologist.”²⁵ Her modesty seems to have turned into defiance by the time of *Woman, Culture, and Society*, a work to which she contributed a chapter.²⁶ In the notes on contributors, we read, “Margery Wolf has no academic degree and is a candidate for none.”

We find a curious parallel between this development in anthropology and another in history. Here, too, an early work by an idiosyncratic and thoughtful scholar who happened to be an exceptional prose stylist played an important role in drawing attention to issues of gender. The significance and popularity of Jonathan Spence’s *The Death of Woman Wang* (1978) is similar in some ways to that of Margery Wolf’s *The House of Lim*.²⁷ In both cases the books in question were presented as works of nonfiction even though they contained very speculative sections (the novelistic aspects of his re-creation of the worldview of an obscure Chinese woman would earn Spence both devoted fans and some harsh detractors), and in both cases the works quickly found their way onto many a course syllabus. In contrast to Wolf, however, Spence did not follow up this study with a series of increasingly sophisticated analyses of gender. Instead, he simply moved on in other directions. Moreover, Spence’s work did not become a takeoff point for further work on gender by historians. Although many scholars working on gender (including Theiss in this volume) have followed Spence’s lead in using legal cases, folktales, and accounts of exemplary lives in gazetteers as windows through which to look at male-female power relations, the book is more often used as a tool for *teaching* about Chinese gender (or perhaps really just about the plight of Chinese women) than as a building block for scholarly analyses. A final point worth making about Spence’s book is that although it appeared early enough that it had little competition as a work a teacher could assign students to give them a feel for ordinary female life experiences in imperial China, it did come out a full decade after Wolf’s first book. One reason this matters is that, between the late 1960s and the late 1970s, several important collections of essays devoted to the subject of Chinese women were published.

One of the most influential of these, called simply *Women in China*, was described by its editor, historian Marilyn Young, as having a very basic aim. The volume’s goal, she wrote, was to “draw together some recent essays on women so that students may have, in a convenient form, a sense of the range of problems, answers, and questions” being asked by scholars, influenced by

feminism, who “share neither a common ideology nor methodology, but only the central query: what *about* women?”²⁸ Several of the contributors to this collection employed ethnographic interpretive approaches, but only one contributor, Norma Diamond, was actually based in an anthropology department at the time. Most of the authors, as already noted above, came from fields such as history and sociology.

A second ground-breaking and oft-cited collection to appear at almost the same time, *Women in Chinese Society*, was decidedly more anthropological in focus, though historians and literary specialists contributed to it. Co-edited by Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke (a historian who wrote two chapters for the Young collection), it contained chapters by four other anthropologists besides the author of *The House of Lim*.²⁹ The interdisciplinary format of these two early volumes has, as we have stressed, characterized all subsequent edited collections on Chinese women.³⁰

The strength of the personalities of several individual North American scholars (including Wolf, Young, and Witke), as well as of their counterparts in other parts of the world (such as Delia Davin in Britain)—along with the growth of the women’s movement at that time in countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom—was undoubtedly key to the early emergence of Chinese gender studies.³¹ There were, however, other contributing causes as well. One, which was flagged early on by some contributors to the volumes just cited, was the considerable attention that many Chinese revolutionaries (male and female alike) had at some point in their careers paid to the “woman question” in their writings.³² Another factor worth noting, one that has special relevance for anthropology, is the long-standing tendency of scholars in China itself as well as the West to assume that family and marriage served as central mechanisms of Chinese society. Decades before gender studies or women’s studies had made places for themselves within the academy, social scientists had taken it for granted that it was impossible to understand China without understanding lineage structures. They had logically assumed that it was impossible to understand these structures if the sharp contrast between male and female roles was not analyzed carefully.

The impact of this orientation within anthropology was considerable, and acknowledging it helps us place Margery Wolf’s work in a more comprehensive framework. For example, it is worth noting that, comparatively early on, male anthropologists who were themselves Chinese had begun writing about the lives of women with more sensitivity and detail than was common to either male Euro-American anthropologists writing about China or to anthropologists in general writing about other societies. Fei Xiaotong, for example, was trained by one of the early key figures in British anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski, whose extensive publications on the Trobriand Islanders are today noteworthy in part for their almost total in-

attention to the lives of women. Yet Fei's *Peasant Life in China* (1939) contained insights into the lives of women, which, although brief, evoked a powerful sense of female subjective experiences, particularly surrounding marriage. Another example is Martin C. Yang's ethnographic and semiautobiographical account, *A Chinese Village* (1945), which provided a great deal of detail about women's lives and their relationships with other members of the extended family, both male and female.³³

Of course, if Fei and Yang paid more attention to women's affairs than did contemporary Euro-American male scholars, it may have been simply because growing up in the societies that they wrote about allowed them more access to women's lives. They could not help but realize that women played active and important roles in at least some aspects of village life. It is perhaps not unimportant that Fei located his dissertation research in the village to which his sister had been sent to help run a silk cooperative. And it is worth noting that his first stay there was during a period of recuperation after a serious accident in which he was injured and his new wife killed.³⁴ These connections might have heightened his awareness of women's lives, particularly the lives of young wives.

What exactly did Wolf and these early anthropologists of China contribute to our understanding of women's lives and the social structures that shaped these lives? One thing that Fei, Yang, and Wolf all emphasized was the way that patrilineal exogamy served to isolate women once they moved into their husbands' families as virtual outsiders. Their new position was not secure until they had given birth to a son—an act whose symbolic importance has already been noted above. Afterward, their dependence on their sons was great, something that was reflected in the attempts women often made to secure the affections of male offspring in order to have some kind of power base within the family. Wolf coined a term useful for appreciating the competing systems of affection within which women made sense of and tried to gain control over their lives. A woman and her children formed an informal "uterine family," which was separate from, and at times competed with, the formal patrilineal extended family and lineage. Wolf also discussed the importance of the informal gossip networks that women formed with other women—the "women's community," which functioned, as it still does today, as a control on men's behavior.

As important as these analytical contributions were, they fell short of illuminating the meanings of manhood or womanhood; hence, they are better thought of as belonging to the "anthropology of women" than to the "anthropology of gender" phase of the discipline. The next step was to understand the symbols, ideologies, metaphors, and so on that not only make a man into a man and a woman into a woman but also construct these categories in opposition to each other. In the discipline of anthropology as a whole, the germinal text of this "anthropology of gender" approach was

arguably Sherry Ortner's "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" This piece appeared, in some senses well before its time, in *Woman, Culture, and Society*. In it, Ortner utilized, "with all due respect to Lévi-Strauss," a structuralist approach to "try to expose the underlying logic of cultural thinking that assumes the inferiority of women."³⁵

More specifically, she proposed that women's universal second-class status was due to their association with nature; men, on the other hand, gained power from being associated with culture.³⁶ Over the years, this article provoked much discussion and response. In particular, it was argued that not all belief systems oppose nature to culture, and so the relation of women to this dualism cannot be taken for granted. Nevertheless, the strengths of Ortner's approach—her emphasis on "cultural logic" as a way of moving beyond naturalistic assumptions about biological sex, on female and male as categories culturally constructed in opposition to each other, and on detailed analysis of the local symbols and meanings attached to these categories—are evident in the fact that it remains vital today, albeit with some modifications.³⁷

A further fruitful development of Ortner's theorizing emerged with the publication of *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality* (1981), which she coedited with Harriet Whitehead. Several of the chapters in this book examined gendered roles that complicated the simple female/male binary by introducing a third category. In particular, Whitehead's chapter on "institutionalized homosexuality" among Native Americans was influential in proposing the *berdache* (typically, a man who dressed as a woman and performed women's tasks) as a third gender.³⁸ This brought to the attention of anthropologists the importance of considering all categories of gender and sexuality, rather than assuming that a simple heterosexual female/male division dominates all cultural constructions of gender. This shift from an anthropology of women to an anthropology of gender was mirrored, to a certain extent, within history since—as noted above—works by scholars such as Joan Scott also argued that the discussion should pay greater attention to how notions of difference are defined and contested. And, as also noted above, the impact of such works on studies of the gendered dimensions of the Communist Revolution was significant.³⁹ Initially, however, the shift in anthropology from women to gender, and from structure to meaning, was not echoed in the anthropology of China. Throughout most of the 1980s, then, work by anthropologists concerned with gender that focused on China tended to be behind rather than ahead of disciplinary curves.

Two early articles on China by anthropologists that were notable because they *did* focus on the symbolic meanings of gender are Emily Martin Ahern's "The Power and Pollution of Chinese Women" in *Women in Chinese Society* and Gary Seaman's response to it, "Blood Bowls and Black Dogs: The Sex-

ual Politics of Karmic Retribution in a Chinese Hell" (1981).⁴⁰ Ahern's article looked at ideas, held by members of a Taiwanese village, about the polluting powers of menstrual blood and postpartum discharge. Linking these potent symbols to Wolf's work, she suggested that they might be perceived as dangerous because they are associated with childbirth, an event that threatens the boundaries of the (patriarchal) family. She suggested that women do not consciously use their power of pollution against men, and asked whether men might use it against women, concluding that they do not. Seaman disagreed, arguing that men encourage negative beliefs about women's sexuality in order to rationalize women's lower social status and control the threat that women pose to male-centered groups. Interestingly, Ahern's article was reprinted in Arthur Wolf's *Studies in Chinese Society* (1978) and is more widely read and cited than Seaman's. And so, even when a pair of corresponding articles existed, the article that focused on women received greater attention.⁴¹

Emily Martin Ahern (now Emily Martin) went on to do other work that took a symbolic approach, but in general the anthropological studies of Chinese gender tended to concentrate on social structural issues rather than on symbolic meanings. Also, within China studies generally, there has been no systematic interest in gender-crossing until recently. From the symbolic perspective, eunuchs should have been an obvious category that contributed to an understanding of sexual meanings by complicating the female/male distinction. However, eunuchs have not been studied as much as one might expect. The published works have almost all been politically oriented: their central problem has been to outline the role of eunuchs in imperial court politics.

Charlotte Furth's research on accounts of sexual anomalies in the late Ming also dealt with these questions—and her attempts to wrestle with the third-gender possibility remain the most important produced within Chinese studies to date.⁴² Accounts of men who changed sex and turned into women were regarded as suspect, she claimed, but those of women who changed into men were not. She noted that once a person was socially defined as male, he had a good deal of latitude in the sexual roles he might play. He could not, however, be taken as a concubine, whereas a eunuch could. This would seem to be evidence that a eunuch was not regarded as a true male in every sense. Furth argued that social gender overshadows sexuality in the definition of male and female but not completely. Further, she felt that there was no room for an intermediate sex or gender in the late Ming gender system.

In the late 1980s, an interest in the ethnographic representation of emotions emerged in anthropology.⁴³ As William Jankowiak noted in a recent review essay, however, representations of emotions are rare in writings about Chinese gender, which tend to strip such accounts of a feeling for