

REVIEW

JEN-PENG LIU 劉人鵬, *PINGQUAN DE YINGZI: XIANDAI ZAOQI ZHONGGUO XINGBIE LUNSHU* “平權” 的影子：現代早期中國性 / 別論述 *SPECTRES OF EQUALITY: EARLY MODERN CHINESE DISCOURSES ON GENDER/SEXUALITY*. TAIPEI: NATIONAL TAIWAN UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2025. 400 PP. ISBN: 9786267768181.

Contemporary discussions of gender, which often assume a linear trajectory of progress, would benefit from a fuller understanding of the historicity of the concept of equality. Jen-peng Liu's *Spectres of Equality: Early Modern Chinese Discourses on Gender/Sexuality* offers such a timely and historically grounded intervention. Drawing on an impressive array of late Qing texts, Liu's book examines various previously marginalised narratives of gender and sexuality that extended beyond the concept of equality in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century China. This analysis exposes the limitations of contemporary definitions of *pingquan* 平權 (equality) by foregrounding the historical entanglement of the concept of *nannü pingquan* 男女平權 (gender equality) with the global advance of “colonial modernity and private property” (p. 1) since the nineteenth century. Interdisciplinary in nature, Liu's book makes important contributions to modern Chinese intellectual history, modern Chinese cultural and literary studies, and gender studies.

The book comprises eight thematic chapters, organized into three parts, all of which draw on research articles Liu has published over the past two decades. Examining the writings of a diverse range of male and female intellectuals, the eight chapters unfold along two interconnecting analytical threads: early socialist thought (broadly defined) and the conceptual framework of *zhong-jian-wu* 中間物 (thing-in-between).¹ Existing literature on the history of early Chinese feminist thought has largely emphasised the intimate relationship

¹ The English translation for *zhong-jian-wu* is based on the recent *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* special issue on “thing-in-between”, see *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2025).

between feminism and nationalism in late Qing and early Republican China,² while scholarly attention to the interplay between feminism and socialism has focused primarily on the post-1949 period or on the early years of the Chinese Communist Party in the 1920s.³ By turning to the interconnectedness of late Qing gender discourse and socialist thought, Liu problematizes existing accounts of Chinese feminism and underscores the intellectual breadth of early gender discourses in China. Within the context she examines, socialism functions as an umbrella term encompassing anarchism, communism, utopian socialism and Marx and Engels's scientific socialism (p. 9), which had not yet acquired a fixed meaning. Its intertwined relationship with early gender discourses is difficult to discern today, as Liu rightly points out, precisely because it is far removed from our contemporary "structure of feeling," which often casts socialism, revolution, and utopia in a negative light (p. 22–23). As Liu shows in her book, the recovery of these hard-to-trace entanglements—obscured by present-day dominant narratives of gender and of modernity—underscores the need to historicise contemporary understandings of equality and subsequently to critically reassess the neoliberal capitalist political economy that structures the present (p. 25).

This recovery, or rediscovery, of late Qing narratives of gender and sexuality long marginalised by the course of history is made possible through Liu's conceptual framework of *zhong-jian-wu*. Inspired by Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and developed from Liu's earlier scholarship,⁴ *zhong-jian-wu* offers a way of viewing history that "pays due attention to understanding becoming, generation (coming-to-be) and vanishment (passing-away), in the concrete historical process" (p. 35).⁵ From this perspective, one seeks to "recognise and understand various forms of life in the always 'in-between' process, instead of seeing knowledge as something fixed to be a measure of governing" (ibid.).

2 See, for example, Charlotte Beahan, "Feminism and Nationalism in the Chinese Women's Press," *Modern China* Vol. 1, No. 4 (1975): 379–416; Liu Huiying 劉慧英, *Nüquan, qimeng yu minzu guojia huayu* 女權、啓蒙與民族國家話語 [Feminism, Enlightenment and Discourses of State-Nation] (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2013).

3 See, for example, Zheng Wang, *Finding Women in the State: A Socialist Feminist Revolution in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1964* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016).

4 Wing-Kwong Wong 黃詠光, Hsing-Wen Chang 張馨文, Jen-peng Liu 劉人鵬, Naifei Ding 丁乃非, eds., *Wangliang wenying II: zhong jian wu* 罔兩問景 II: 中間物 [Penumbra Query Shadow II: Thing in Between] (Hsinchu: National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University Press, 2022).

5 All translations are my own unless otherwise stated. The English translation of the quoted passages is taken from Wing-Kwong Wong, Naifei Ding, Hsing-Wen Chang, and Jen-peng Liu, "Thing-in-between (*Zhong-Jian-Wu* 中間物)," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2025): 1–8. doi:10.1080/14649373.2025.2453386.

Part One of the book challenges familiar linear narratives of historical progression from tradition to modernity by bringing to light several previously neglected "things-in-between". Chapter One explores how *yin* (淫, loosely translated as obscene/obscenity) functioned as a discursive means for articulating meanings later expressed by the modern terms "sex" or "sexology," through a close reading of Tan Sitong's 譚嗣同 (1865–1898) *Renxue* 仁學 (*Theory of Benevolence*, 1898). Another "thing-in-between" examined in this chapter is the early Chinese translations of John Stuart Mill's writings on feminism, which, although often classified within contemporary historiography as liberal feminism, was in fact interpreted within a socialist framework in late Qing China. Chapter Two traces the disappearance of the disabled female bodies in late Qing discourses on women's education. By comparing 1870s newspaper articles that included disabled women in discussions of women's education with Liang Qichao's 梁啟超 (1873–1929) famous essay "Lun nüxue 論女學" (On Women's Education, 1897), Liu succinctly observes that Liang's narrative of women's education became a paradigmatic form precisely because his writings "reduced the complexity of local reality to simple binaries such as the West versus the East and Women versus Men" (p. 80). As Liu reminds us, the popularity of Liang's paradigm is not simply the result of male writers dominating late Qing discussions of women's education, but should instead be understood as a powerful element of the "narrative structures of colonial modernity" (p. 100).

One of the major strengths of Liu's book is its careful situating of texts and ideas within the textual milieu of their time, thereby uncovering connections that are not immediately visible or have been previously overlooked. Part Two and Part Three of the book, in particular, showcase the ways in which globally circulating socialist thought informed late Qing gender discourses—another significant *zhong-jian-wu*. In Chapters Three, Four, and Five, Liu offers a compelling analysis of He Zhen's 何震 (ca.1884–ca.1920), also known as He-Yin Zhen 何殷震) essays published in the Tokyo-based journal *Tianyi* 天義 (*Natural Justice*, 1907–1908), showing how her anarcho-feminism located the question of women's emancipation beyond binary frameworks of "Chinese versus West and Men versus Women" (p. 119), and how her vision of women's emancipation entailed a complete restructuring of existing social, economic, political, and geopolitical orders. Since Peter Zarrow's pioneering research on He Zhen's anarcho-feminism, He Zhen has attracted increasing attention from scholars such as

Xia Xiaohong 夏曉虹 and Liu Huiying 劉慧英.⁶ The publication of English translations of her works in 2013 further expanded the reach of He Zhen's writings among international readers.⁷ While reaffirming key insights of earlier scholarship, including the mutually constitutive relationship between anarchism and feminism in He's writings and He's critique of contemporary Chinese intellectuals' blind admiration of Western-derived modernity, Liu's book also offers new insights through close readings of previously understudied texts, such as "Nüzi fei junbei zhuyi lun 女子非軍備主義論" (On Feminist Antimilitarism, 1907). Analysing "On Feminist Antimilitarism" alongside a series of relevant texts composed by He and her fellow anarchists (Chapter Five), Liu demonstrates how He Zhen's feminist antimilitarism was not the result of a humanitarian pacifism, but an integral part of her anarchist vision that aimed to abolish the state and capitalism—a "politically motivated antimilitarism" (p. 207). He's feminist antimilitarism was both rooted in and in dialogue with the historical realities of her time, including the global advance of imperialism, the socialist and anarchist antimilitarism movements in Europe, and her intellectual engagement with Japanese anti-war anarchists such as Kōtoku Shūsui 幸德秋水 (1871–1911). Similarly, in her analysis of Kang Youwei's 康有為 (1858–1927) *Datong shu* 大同書 (*Book of Great Unity*), Liu demonstrates how socialist thought informed new imaginings of gender relations. While *Datong shu* envisions a world free of hierarchical discrimination and divisions, which would be unimaginable under capitalism, its "unapologetic" adherence to the logic of contemporary eugenics and racial superiority theory presents a perplexing picture of conflicting ethics (p. 292). Liu maintains that this paradox can only be understood by recognising that the gender narratives in *Datong shu* were deeply entangled with the advances of colonial modernity in the late nineteenth century, with its paradoxical ethics epitomising the epistemic violence of that modernity.

Throughout her book, Liu consistently emphasises this need to situate narratives of gender and sexuality within the specific historical contexts in which they emerged, as these narratives both shaped and were shaped by different and evolving strands of thought, as well

6 Peter Zarrow, "He Zhen and Anarcho-Feminism in China", *Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 47, No. 4 (1988): 796-813; Liu, *Nüquan, qimeng yu minzu guojia huayu*; Xia Xiaohong, *Wanqing nüzi guomin changshi de jiangou* 晚清女子國民常識的建構 [The construction of women's national knowledge in the late Qing] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2016).

7 Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl, and Dorothy Ko, eds., *The Birth of Chinese Feminism: Essential Texts in Transnational Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

as by the positionality of the individual author. Not coincidentally, this historicising approach is also shared by many of the intellectuals Liu examines in this book, such as He Zhen and Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 (1869–1936), who rejected universalising definitions of *geming* 革命 (revolution) and *pingdeng* 平等 (equality) (Chapter Six). In Liu's analysis, the discourse of *huijia feihun* 毀家廢婚 (abolishing family and marriage) in late Qing China similarly functioned to reveal the historically constructed nature of the family and marriage system as the foundation of an oppressive social order grounded in private property ownership (Chapter Eight).

These strengths notwithstanding, there are a few areas where Liu's argument could be further developed. In Chapter Four, Liu argues that "He Zhen or *Tianyi*'s feminism and anarcho-communism cannot be divided into two opposing and competing political positions; rather, they were theoretically mutually constructive and resonated with each other in terms of perspective" (p. 134), and that "from the very beginning, the political stance of *Tianyi* was that gender equality and anarchism ran in parallel, with no precedence of one over the other" (p. 139). However, as Liu Huiying notes, the essays published in *Tianyi* gradually shifted towards anarchism, while discussions of gender issues declined over time.⁸ While Liu Huiying's observation that *Tianyi*'s increasing emphasis on anarchism does not undermine Liu's broader analysis of He Zhen's writings, attention to the discursive afterlife of He Zhen's anarcho-feminism opens up new questions on how and why anarcho-feminism came to "disappear." Tracing the narrative strategies of the late Qing novel *Nüyuhua* 女獄花 (*Female Prison Flower*, 1904), written by the female writer Wang Miaoru 王妙如 (ca.1878– ca.1904), Liu makes a compelling and comparable case in Chapter Three that the novel discursively displaced a more radical revolutionary path towards women's emancipation (the *geming* path) with a vision of gender equality (the *pingquan* path) achieved through women's education, modelled on Western-derived, colonial modernity's linear imagination of progress. The path of revolution disappeared as the *pingquan* path managed to discursively "suppress it, control it, and absorb it" (p. 24). Given that anarcho-feminism remained an ephemeral strand of feminist thought and never assumed a dominant position in China's long twentieth century, to what extent was it similarly "suppressed, controlled, and absorbed" by other intellectual traditions?

Another instance where closer attention to the discursive afterlives of the 'thing-in-

8 Liu, *Nüquan, qimeng yu minzu guojia huayu*, 122.

between” might prove fruitful is the book’s brief discussion of the discourse of free choice marriage in the late Qing. Liu notes that in Wang Miaoru’s *Nüyuhua*, “the revolutionary aspirations embodied by the character Sha Xuemei 沙雪梅 are largely reframed as a pursuit of ‘free choice marriage’ in order to enjoy romantic love” (p. 111), and that gender equality in the novel is grounded primarily in a new ideal of heterosexual romantic love (p. 112). In contrast to Liu’s more sustained analysis of women’s economic independence, where she productively juxtaposes He Zhen’s writing on women’s economic revolution in 1907 with Lu Xun’s later essay “What Happens after Nora Leaves Home 娜拉走後怎樣”, this discussion of late Qing discourse of romantic love remains relatively underdeveloped. It thus invites further inquiry into how Wang Miaoru’s novel may have anticipated or foreshadowed later May Fourth valorisations of romantic love and free choice marriage. In this context, Haiyan Lee’s classic work on the discourse of love in modern China appears especially pertinent.⁹

Structurally, while the eight main chapters are tightly packed, Chapter Six feels slightly out of place. It aligns with the book’s overarching conceptual framework of *zhong-jian-wu* and reinforces the importance of historicising familiar concepts such as equality and revolution, yet it engages only minimally with late Qing gender discourse. Nevertheless, despite this minor unevenness, Liu’s book is an impressive and ambitious study that successfully brings to light a wide range of late Qing narratives of gender and sexuality—including, but not limited to, the mutually constitutive relationship between socialist thought and feminism—that have long been overshadowed by dominant narratives of capitalist modernity and Eurocentric historiographies of feminism.

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9 Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900–1950* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).