In a recent article by Kay Schaffer and Song Xianlin, a specifically ‘indigenous Chinese feminism’ is probed and situated in the varied sites of women’s activism, embracing rural women’s stories, new historical fiction, popular novels and blog sites as well as poststructuralist personalised writing. Translations into a Chinese feminist politics of difference are seen as both a product of, and a catalyst for, the local re/emergences of women’s familiar traditions and women intellectuals’ engagement in trans-national discourses. Translating Feminisms in China could be said to historicize what might be termed a body politics of difference. In their introduction, the two editors, Dorothy Ko and Wang Zheng, make it their argument that ‘... feminism is always already a global discourse, and the history of its local reception is a history of the politics of translation’ (p. 1). Contributors brought together for this volume provide illustrations for these processes of translation from different places and eras in a chronology of four distinct phases within the history of Chinese women, spanning the period from late-nineteenth century China to contemporary times.

The introduction by Ko and Wang presents, importantly, an overall assessment of the trajectory of the concept of nüquan (women’s rights or power) and an argument for its historicization, a discussion of the relationship between ‘media and feminist visions of modernity’ and of the ‘female body as a battlefield for contending discourses’ (p. 4). It is their contention that the conceptual and linguistic ‘messiness’ of feminist terminology in the Chinese language has to be understood, on the one hand, within the volatile events in world history through which the modern Chinese nation state shaped its claim to equal sovereignty and, on the other hand, within a diverse and changing map of women’s local histories of translation and indigenization. This volume constitutes an important addition to on-going debates on the translation and translatability of ‘feminisms’ across borders and will be certain to arouse interest also outside the area of Chinese Studies.

In the contribution by Mizuyo Sudo on ‘Concepts of Women’s Rights in Modern China’, the theme of translation is squarely placed within the cultural and political influence exerted by Japan over late-nineteenth century Chinese intellectuals, in fact itself a ‘mediation’ of the impact of Western modernity on Japan. Western ideas and concepts had been translated and adapted into Japanese language itself deeply enmeshed in Chinese cultural, intellectual and linguistic heritage,

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and in turn re-translated into Chinese political culture. It was a time when power and progress appeared to side with a rapidly modernizing Japan and thus shaped its reception by the Chinese intelligentsia in the waning days of late-Qing China. Among the neologisms of ‘rights’ and ‘power’ that interpreted state, nationhood, monarchy, people and humanness, women were accorded a first discursive space in the reformist writing of that time. In this fascinating study, Sudo shifts our attention to one of the core concepts of the Chinese women’s movements, niúquan, away from its more conventional association with women’s progress via women’s liberation to four of its most prominent advocates/reformers. She presents the vigour of debates which, whilst it allowed for unprecedented women’s exercise of political agency also foreshadowed entrenched traditionalist reservations by (on the whole male) activists. The earliest debate had its roots in Jin Tianhe’s conception of women as ‘mothers of the nation’ and in the critical reception of this paradigm by some of his contemporaries. Other polemical positions that were put forward in subsequent debates advocated women’s full equality with men in terms of rights and exercise of these rights, claimed women’s full participation in social and gender change, and also altogether rejected any call, as most famously embodied in the writing of the anarchist He Zhen, for a linkage of women’s rights to the nation’s rise to prosperity. As Sudo brings out so well in her article, whatever the differences among the four models presented that would have such lasting impact on subsequent developments in China, their ultimate fate was subject to overriding assumption at the time that ‘women’s rights’ were inextricably linked with paramount aspirations of the ‘nation’ and of ‘natural rights’. The tensions surrounding women’s ownership of the fruits of social change, she argues, which complicated Chinese reformers’ ideas of ‘natural rights’ and of a sovereign nation state, were in large part due to unresolved issues that had beset the origins of the ‘women’s question’ in European intellectual and social history. Progressive ideas of rights claimed by all had ever sat uneasily with entrenched notions of gender divisions as a basis for a nation’s path to wealth creation.

Carol Chin makes Chinese feminists the authors of translation in her article ‘Translating the New Woman: Chinese Feminists View the West, 1905-15.’ She explores the impact of an American-type ‘modernity’ on Chinese discourses on changing ‘Chinese women’ in order to strengthen a weakened nation state. It is the author’s argument that Chinese women would have walked their own path to modernity, without ‘Western’ influence; that whatever influence was received from America was ‘translated’ selectively by Chinese intellectuals, ever conscious of and in touch with their native self. ‘The Chinese could create their own modern identity (or identities), and even if the results resembled Western modernity in many respects, they would have arrived at them by their own process’ (p. 43). And again, she says ‘Although Chinese feminists looked to American women for inspiration, they were not attempting to translate American culture into the
Chinese context, nor were they merely imitating the foreign models. Rather, they were engaged in appropriating images of American women in their quest to construct their own modernity’ (p. 43). Chin concludes in her discussion of the contemporary radical press and of its coverage of representations of modernity across the East/West divide as well as of the suffrage movement in the USA and in Europe that in relation to the situation of foreign women, ‘… the gap between their own situation and that of the American and British suffragists must have struck Chinese readers as wide indeed’ (p. 51). The final section seeks to ‘re-translate’ ‘Chinese feminist’ images from within the Western gaze – and Chin finds this gaze ‘shocked’ (at women’s ways of being modern and very much their own women), ‘surprised’ (at feminists in China moving forward and ahead of women in America and in Europe), and as impervious to American influence. There is no single, uniform representation of ‘the new Chinese woman’, Chin maintains. Women in early nineteenth century China were still in a flux, she says, but they also were in search of a modernity that grew out of their own tradition rather than out of an influence alien to their own ideals and aspirations.

Yung-chen Chiang continues the exploration of Western influence on the Chinese women’s movement with her chapter on ‘Womanhood, Motherhood and Biology: The Early Phases of the Ladies’ Journal, 1915-25.’ Foregoing a popular assumption among scholars that the emergence of nationalism constitutes a driving force of women’s history, Chiang builds on Tani Barlow’s thesis that global feminism found resonance and roots also in Chinese discourses of the time. A case study of The Ladies’ Journal (Funü zazhi) – which ran between 1915 to 1931 – culminates in her argument that taking into account perspectives given by gender discourses in Japanese and European (including Scandinavian) intellectual circles, ‘can offer insights on how nationalism, socialism and science mediate the transmission of global gender discourses in modern China, and how women in contrast to men interpreted and deployed these discourses to articulate their own concerns and subjectivities’ (p. 97). Chiang’s careful analysis shows the vibrancy of the intellectual debate, a sheer ‘cacophony’ of voices, with its varied contexts and viewpoints which foreshadowed so many of the debates in subsequent decades – whether embracing issues of sexual morality, motherhood, eugenics, or national ‘health’ debates and their implications for women’s control over their own body. But she also demonstrates that Chinese women intellectuals participated in these debates from within highly personalized concerns. On the whole, men dominated both debate and translation of salient intellectual currents. They settled ideological positions and translated core political ideas to shape the directions of the nation under the banner of progress and a science-propelled modernity. Ultimately, this would dilute the urgency of the ‘women’s question.’

Translation discourse on jianmei (robust beauty) provides Yunxiang Gao with the opportunity to delve into contemporary preoccupations with skin, garments, hair-style, body posture
and physical mobility. Conflicting positions on modernity, pathways to national reform, perceptions of the ‘West’ and of relative strength of the nation are explored in a nuanced analysis. In her chapter on ‘Nationalist and Feminist Discourses on Jianmei (Robust Beauty) during China’s “National Crisis” in the 1930s’, Gao uses the Shanghai weekly women’s journal Linglong as ‘a multi-vocal space for women’ (p. 109) to interrogate shifting connotations of the concept of ‘robust beauty’ in relation to a diverse female readership’s questions, responses and observations on current fads and fashion. Coming from different parts of urban society, these readers together with writers and editors presented a perfect screen for philosophical discourses, educational missionizing and polemical propaganda that turned in particular Europe and the USA into both mirror and catalyst for new directions at home. A sophisticated textual analysis (an analysis of a nation’s inscriptions on the female body) treats of shifting local notions of feminisms, stereotyping (with ‘an interesting twist of racial dynamics’, p. 115) of ‘Western’ and ‘Chinese’ female beauty, of an emerging culture of physical fitness tied to the ‘fitness’ of the nation and of internal dissension over local emulations of alien ideals that sat uneasily with physical, cultural and social realities in which the readers of Linglong found themselves. Gao shows how in the discourse of modernity and progress subtle subtexts of prejudice and discrimination were never far from the surface. Thus, ultimately, in rejecting the fashion of perms, high heels and make-up, the rejection entailed a denigration of prostitutes. In counter-discourses launched by urban writers against officials’ increasingly restrictive attitude towards urban fashions as ‘bizarre’ dress during the New-Life Movement, references to benefits to health and social morality of more ‘simple’ social morality and of ‘natural’ states of being became subtly associated with the lower ranking order of China’s ethnic minorities. As Gao says, this was a discourse ‘fraught with ambiguities’ (p. 130), and it would have been interesting had she been able to uncover these ambiguities at greater length. Gao gives us an excellent study of emerging feminist voices involved in critical debate at both national and international levels, facing political forces that pulled women in different, sometimes diametrically opposed, directions of loyalty and service. Her ability to uncover the nuances of underlying ideological and political sub-texts adds to our understanding of complicated legacies which still today play into feminist translations of identity and belonging.

Kimberley Ens Manning revisits one of the most formative periods in the historiography of Chinese women’s history, the period of political consolidation of the Communist Party in the 1950s. Under the title of ‘Making a Great Leap Forward? The Politics of Women’s Liberation in Maoist China’, Manning makes ‘different forms of agency’ during the Great Leap Forward the focus of her critical attention. It is her argument that the ‘origin and consequences of gendered struggles in post-revolutionary China’ (p. 139) must be sought in the different institutional and socio-political
circumstances that women found themselves in. The translations that could be said to have emerged from the legacy of the All-China Women’s Federation’s subservience to the overriding national project of political consolidation are encapsulated in a value system Manning calls ‘Marxist maternalism.’ Interviews of local cadres, officials and ordinary women as well as county archival sources helped the author to present a complex and multi-vocal construction of ‘women’s liberation’ and of the making of the revolutionary subject. Manning holds that this reflects on the deficiency of institutional transmissions of ideological diktats but also on the contingency of place and subject experience, always also a collective experience. Ultimately, the widely divergent remembering of the nature of the Great Leap Forward and of its impact on women’s pathways to liberation draws our attention to different notions of liberation and of the place of suffering in bringing about social and gender transformation. Manning ends with the observation that the All-China Women’s Federation ‘has been and continues to be made up of women (and men) who offer divergent visions of the nation’s future’ (p. 158). This is due to differing perceptions, Manning says, by members of the older generations of how much society cares to understand their contributions in the Maoist era to the cause of the country’s progress, and appreciates their dedication and suffering. Deeply felt nostalgia for lost ideals also infuses informants’ recollections of the past. Manning concludes that given the diversity of life experience and their intersections with varied political and institutional contexts, neither then nor now can we speak of a homogenously constituted ‘history’ of women to which could be ascribed a unity of ideas, values and practices.

Also concerned with the late 1950s, Gao Xiaoxian turns her attention to the gendered division of labour in rural society with her chapter ‘”The Silver Flower Contest”: Rural Women in 1950s China and the Gendered Division of Labour’. Based on local archives, official documents and individual testimonies from local women including cadres, Gao gives us a case study of women’s entrance into the political economy of the Maoist state which demonstrates what are enduring areas of interest to scholars: areas of complicity between the national and the feminist project (the term ‘feminism’ is not used by Gao) and their abiding tension as the patriarchal nature of the state reveals itself at points of conflict of interest. Previously invisible members of society, peasant women, emerged into prominence as social actors and as popular symbols of a state in the making. Gao’s riveting account of labour models and model teams undergoing social and personal transformations in the course of all-out physically punishing work in competitive cotton production for the new society makes for interesting reflections on Manning’s conception of tension between ‘suffering’ and ‘maternalist protection’ as a pathway to women’s liberation. Gao’s grim rendering of women’s unconditional launch into socialist production gives us a harrowing description of women’s heroic effort to increase cotton output even if it was at the expense of their health. We
hear of the ubiquity of prolapsed uterus afflicting women who were not granted maternity leave. Returning to work almost immediately after giving birth and labouring under punishing conditions, they were compelled to push up their uterus with belts fastened to the neck. When these ‘lumps’ developed a pungent smell, it attracted rats into women’s beds (p. 183). Gao concludes on a pessimistic note, drawing attention to lingering unchanged perceptions of, and attitudes to, rural women held by many Women’s Federation cadres up to present times. As in the time of the Silver Flower Team, rural women are symbolic and ideological sites which, whilst part of the greater expanse of socialist development and modernity, are rendered as of old the passive recipients of paternalistic largesse. Conceptually, methodologically, strategically, the nature and extent of women’s ‘liberation’ are framed by demands from the state and decreed downwards. As far as rural women are concerned, Gao suggests, whatever translation of new ideas and practices has come to them, this process has always been shaped by others.

Jin Yihong’s study, entitled ‘Rethinking the “Iron Girls”: Gender and Labour during the Chinese Cultural Revolution’, continues with questions over the state’s mobilization of women workers, its implications for a gendered division of labour as well as for gender relations and, more directly, for women themselves. Symbolic of the liberation discourse during the Cultural Revolution, the role models known as Iron Girls came to exemplify the influential Maoist decree that ‘men and women are the same’. Indeed, its influence reaches into Chinese Communist Party rhetoric shaping current gender politics. The Iron Girls, as Jin’s study demonstrates, became a useful, ideologically effective propaganda tool for the Party to resolve tensions over labour deployment but also served other purposes, extending control by the work unit over women and family. The pressure to outdo each other made these Iron Girls teams highly competitive, demanding however of their members enormous suffering and sacrifice. In a perceptive analysis of women’s own evaluation of their role and the benefits reaped from such dedication, Jin notes women’s emphasis on obligation, duty and sacrifice over entitlement to rights. She brings out the difference between rural and urban Iron Girls, with the former taking on additional responsibilities and jobs, without being relieved at home from traditional domestic tasks. Moreover, a devaluation of traditional ‘female duties’ increased the pressure to perform in ideologically worthy roles. Whilst the opening up of new employment brought with it new excitement over increased social and physical mobility as well as joy over working within groups of like-minded women, as Jin’s accounts demonstrate so well, the physical costs and domestic tensions made these Iron Girls teams short-lived. As the name indicates, in the rural areas, only unmarried girls could enjoy the liberty of employment not granted to married women. This was otherwise in urban areas where childcare provisions and changing popular attitudes saw married women join the ranks of labouring classes. The study most effectively
explores the party/state’s mobilization and use of the ideological banner of ‘liberation’ of women for its own purposes but also shows how, within patriarchal constraints particularly salient in rural milieus, women of the lower working classes found the space, albeit limited, to unsettle gender relations. The Cultural Revolution model of women’s liberation was infused with pain, dedication and hope – but, so Jin points out, even if the Iron Girls lost some of their ideological propaganda value, their part in the country’s iconography of female heroism endures.

The concluding contribution ‘Who is a Feminist? Understanding the Ambivalence towards Shanghai Baby, “Body Wiring” and Feminism in Post-Women’s Liberation China’ comes from Xueping Zhong. Zhong draws on the novel Shanghai Baby by the author Wei Hui for explorations of ambivalence on the part of Chinese women writer/critic intellectuals over the politicization of a ‘feminist’ identity as alien or native to their own culture and genealogy of writers/activists. Their influence over readers and public media makes them critical to an investigation of translations of feminism. The context is set by the changing landscape of gender politics since the late 1970s, and by ‘a ”cultural turn” [borrowed from Frederic Jameson] in the post-Mao era’s rethinking of women’s and gender issues’ (p. 216). At the heart of the interrogation lies the question of feminist positioning within changing post-Mao gender politics and transnational feminist discourse rather than a question of identification of feminists among women writers. Zhong probes the moment of the ‘cultural turn’ in Chinese women’s literature and against the shifting perceptions by international feminists of the place and associated meanings of ‘feminism’ in Chinese women’s historical trajectory. The author argues that a narrowing of the imaginary shaped by reconnection with a sexualized ‘femininity’ (its other pole being ‘masculinity’) has pushed aside a more materialist feminist analysis of gender relations among Chinese feminists which, she says, must regain its important place in feminism today. Ambivalence expressed in official government circles but also among intellectuals are in tension with mass media fascination with a tantalizing female sexuality made accessible to the consuming public, and with the marketability of an erotized female body. Zhong brings us an analysis of multiple layers, whether in examining the perplexity of feminist intellectuals over directions and meanings of Chinese feminism/s, the deepening of state paranoia over assertions of a self-conscious female sexuality, the commercialized voyeurism that markets the female body as another object of (consumable) desire, or the intrusive international consumer market in China that makes critical engagement with body writing both critical and urgent. In this nuanced and sophisticated argument, Zhong shifts the question as to who is a feminist to a question of how feminism is constituted. She carefully outlines an on-going debate over female sexuality and female sexual desire to which different generations of Chinese women writers contribute from within their respective histories and life experiences of gender change.
Zhong bypasses the pitfalls of attempts at definition of the feminist position so as to argue for a holistic understanding of a feminist *positioning* in terms of which ‘we recognise the limits of sexual transgression [as exemplified in the ‘body writing’] as a form of social resistance in a sexist market economy’ (p. 240). To be moving beyond the sameness/difference binary, Zhong contends, that is, moving beyond the ‘cultural turn’ that has wedged too many intellectuals between Western constructs of feminism and Maoist social engineering, must entail for Chinese feminists *both* the continuation and building on historical socio-economic and political gains achieved by previous generations of feminists as well as the opening up of innovative intellectual and cultural discourses.

The editors have selected contributions from a wide range of positions and disciplines to create a stimulating ‘cacophony’ of voices, analyses and interpretations. They have also ensured that whether in internationally held debates or in a nationally constructed politics of difference we pay critical attention to those processes of translation which shape, align, dominate and problematize feminism/s locally and transnationally.

(Maria Jaschok, University of Oxford)