
This book offers a comprehensive account of the vibrant roles of Chinese women in the development of modern journalism in three decades of reform and revolution by tracing the profiles of women journalists from the late nineteenth century to the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. According to Ma, Chinese female journalists can be grouped into four generations with varying aspirations, which emerged from the major political movements of that era. The first generation of women journalists were reform-minded gentry women who began to politicize the roles of mothers and wives by linking women to national strengthening. Their association of women with national affairs initiated a space for women’s public voices focusing on gender equality in education and women’s political participation. The second generation (1903-1913) was made up mostly of women who had studied in Japan. They took a more radical approach, using vernacular Chinese to express political ideas as well as their demands in the fields of education, career, and marriage. They were joined by a group of northern journalists from the families of court officials. Although politically moderate in their relationship with the Qing government, the latter were no less radical in their demands for education, independence and equal rights. The third generation of women journalists had a special relationship with the May Fourth movement, and the majority were female students from modern schools in major urban centers. Informed by the contemporary radical reconsideration of the Chinese Confucian tradition and liberal ideas, they explored women’s identities as independent social beings outside the domestic realm, affirming their rights to education, careers and suffrage. Against the backdrop of the National Revolution (1924-1927), women from the GMD and CCP began competing with non-partisan women to define feminist issues and priorities. The fourth generation, which emerged in the 1930s, had professional training. They generally showed a broader interest in social issues, acting as mediators between different
opinions. Instead of being divided by differences in political views, they tended to form professional alliances in support of feminist and patriotic causes.

Ma’s contribution to the body of scholarship revising the CCP official history of women’s movements takes painstaking efforts to reveal the social, cultural and political activism of a wide spectrum of women including “liberal feminists, Christian women, women suffragists, and female reformers”, who all used the instrument of modern journalism. Ma declares that “partisans of either the Nationalist Party (GMD) or the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) were only part of the story” (p. 4). Her findings add a comprehensiveness hitherto lacking in histories of Chinese women in the public sphere. Although the major concerns of Chinese women journalists changed with the transformation of their political and social environment, they were able to unite based on shared interests and political needs and complement each other’s campaigns, thereby enhancing women’s voices.

The author’s research on women’s journals and her reading of Chinese women’s published writings are extensive and solid. As part of her analysis of more than one hundred women’s periodicals between 1898 and 1937, Ma has dug out biographical information on women journalists who have deliberately been overlooked until now. Her research is strengthened by her use of the extensive scholarship on the history of Chinese women and gender studies. From a firmly grounded feminist perspective, she emphasizes the roles of women as producers of culture and proposers of feminist ideas.

Another significant contribution of this work is the uncovering of patterns in Chinese women’s published writings from 1898 to 1937. Ma suggests that these can be divided into three distinctive but continuous stages featuring changes in “nationalist rhetoric, state policies, cultural trends, economic conditions, and the power relations between the state and society” (p. 22). The initial stage was from 1898 to 1911, when the first generation of women journalists adopted the arguments and vocabulary of the nationalist discourse to propose the ideal of nüguomin (women citizens), which challenged the male formulation of “good wives and wise mothers.”
The use of journals to campaign for women’s self-reliance, self-respect and privacy created a terrain for the formation of autonomous feminism and women’s movements. The second stage, from 1911 to 1923, was the formative one according to Ma. It was characterized by the active political agenda promoted by women journalists to champion feminist concerns such as women’s suffragist rights, women’s rights to education, a career, and freedom of movement in public. During this period, journalistic objectivity became irrelevant to the women involved. For them, the political agenda of spreading their own interpretation of gender norms took top priority. The third stage, from 1924 to 1937, was the mature phase in the development of women’s journalism. According to Ma, female journalists and their publications manifested diverse feminist voices while maintaining a feminist resistance to state control. Consequently, women’s journals were more willing to overcome their feminist and political differences to form alliances while adhering to journalistic ethics. Ma’s categorization of women’s journalism and her analysis of feminist thoughts expressed in women’s print media present a picture of Chinese feminism rich in variety and complexity.

Ma’s work is a long-awaited contribution to the study of Chinese women’s history, filling a major gap in our knowledge of women in Republican China. It is the first piece of systematic historical research on the changes and continuities in women’s journalism, a topic that has attracted much scholarly attention – but mostly focused on a particular portion of women’s journals. Based on a painstakingly extensive reading of women’s journals, Ma’s research offers an exciting opportunity to recognize the variations, continuities and consequences of Republican women’s journalism. She deserves special credit for her extensive introductions to the different women’s periodicals and her unearthing of previously-ignored biographical information on women journalists. Unfortunately, her initial attention to the geographical differences between southern and northern women journalists is not sustained, giving way instead to a detailed reading of the women journalists’ interpretation of the relationship between women and Chinese society. Nonetheless,
Ma’s work is a must-read for graduate students and scholars who are interested in Chinese women’s history, print culture, late Qing society, and the history of Republican China.

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