In *The Many Dimensions of Chinese Feminism*, Ya-chen Chen discusses the question “What is feminism in the Chinese cultural realm?” (p. 193). A central claim of the book is that many treatments of “Chinese feminism” in fact tend to treat mainland feminism as representative of “Chinese feminism” *tout court*, and it pleads for a wider and more comprehensive analysis of the Chinese feminism that is “not one.”

The first and last chapters of the book are devoted to Chen’s analysis of the overall marginalization of Taiwanese and Hong Kong feminism in most (primarily Western) scholarly treatments of “Chinese feminism,” both in books (Chapter 1) and journals (Chapter 7). For Chen, this demonstrates that a kind of “feminist Orientalism” (p. 11) exists in much of the work on Chinese feminist thought, with an over-emphasis on transfers of Western theories to China without adequate attention to the “two-way transfer of academic feminism between the East and the West” (p. 18).

Chapter 2 challenges the accuracy of the claim that Chinese feminism can be characterized as having “three waves” (May Fourth, Mao-era, and post-1995), examining various moments of historical contingency and variation in Taiwan and Hong Kong as well as on the mainland. Much of this chapter looks at the ways in which “Western feminism is a sort of Western knowledge appropriated to modernize China” (p. 32), and how this knowledge’s “reception...was entirely controlled by the Chinese, not Western feminist theorists” (p. 34). Through a discussion of various political and social contexts, this chapter looks at the diversity of ways that feminism has existed in the “Chinese cultural realm” (p. 31) with respect to gender issues as well as historical developments.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the role of feminism in the Taiwanese and Chinese academies, respectively, based on interviews conducted by the author. These chapters present a particularly compelling picture of how feminism has, or more often has not, been accepted in academic power structures, with often vivid detail of the struggles faced by scholars seeking to employ feminist approaches in their work,
including the difficulties of the “feminist” label itself in both Taiwan and the PRC (pp. 81-88, 113-124). These chapters also include important information about some of the internal conflicts between Taiwanese and mainland feminist scholars.

Chapters 5 and 6, also through a paired comparison, analyze the 1990s reception of French feminist theories in two important literary journals—Zhongwai wenxue (Chinese and Foreign Literature) in Taiwan, and Wenyi lilun (Literary and Artistic Theories) in the PRC. Both of these chapters survey the overall content of these journals as a way of demonstrating the centrality of French feminist thought to the overall discussion of feminist theorizing in the 1990s. Chapter 5 engages in a long summary of each of the articles published on the subject in Zhongwai wenxue in the 1990s, as well as seeking to explain the apparently greater interest in Taiwan at this time in French as opposed to Anglo-American feminist theorizing, asserting that the latter were “less refreshing and surprising for Taiwan” (pp. 157-158). In the case of the PRC, Chen argues that French feminist theory’s appeal can be explained primarily by the post-Tiananmen political environment, and by Chinese scholars’ resulting inclination to “take refuge in French theorization” rather than what she regards as the more activist and practical strains of American feminist thought (pp. 188-189).

These latter chapters unfortunately also highlight what for this reader is one of the primary shortcomings of this book: its own tendency, despite similar critiques of other work on “Chinese feminism,” to conflate the broad meaning of that term with a fairly narrow set of instances. The book overall would benefit greatly from more analysis of the power imbalances she rightly observes, as well as of the substance and content of the cross-fertilization of Chinese and Western feminisms. Chapters 3-6 would profit from more searching analyses of the substances and significances of feminism’s presence in the academy and literary journals, especially as a way of understanding the nature of the Taiwanese and mainland receptions of Western feminist theories and methods. Her own methodological emphasis on interviews in Chapters 3 and 4, and on surveying only literary journals in Chapters 5 and 6, are likely the primary reasons for this analytical lacuna.
Therefore, this book is itself a victim of its own wide-ranging ambition. By seeking to survey “Chinese feminism” in diverse geographical and historical contexts, Chen neglects a deeper, substantive discussion of the content of Taiwanese and mainland feminisms. This would allow for a greater understanding of the “two-way transfer between the West and the Chinese cultural realm” (p. 211) which the author so justly desires.

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