

Introduction

Women and Temporality

In the fall of 1898 a woman by the name of Li Run was informed that her husband, Tan Sitong, had been executed in the coup that ended the Hundred Days' Reforms. Li had worked with Tan to promote women's education and end the practice of footbinding. At the news of his death, she traveled to the capital of their native Hunan Province and protested the execution by slitting her neck with a dagger in the presence of the governor. She did not die until the next morning, however, when she reopened her wound, calling out with venom the name of the official who had overseen her husband's execution. She was buried with her teeth broken, her hands clenched, and the character for dagger formed in blood on her chest.

"Tan liefu zhuan"

(Biography of the Heroic Woman Tan), 1899

The author of this account, published in an influential reform journal, proceeds to invest Li Run's dramatic story with profound historical resonances. Noting that Li had herself compiled a collection of biographies of past women martyrs, he uses one of the entries from this collection to illuminate his biography of her.¹ It is the story of Lady Zhang (fl. 1550) of the Ming dynasty, who had protested the wrongful death of her husband, the famous remonstrating official Yang Jisheng (Zhongmin, 1516–55), by slitting her throat with a dagger in front of the imperial palace.² Li's martyrdom, which so closely echoed Zhang's, also became legendary. Her biography was included

in major compendia of primary sources in the early twentieth century and repeated in later secondary materials.³ These include the most comprehensive history of modern Chinese women to date, Ono Kazuko's *Chinese Women in a Century of Revolution*, which appeared in English translation in 1989.⁴

What is most fascinating about Li's biography, however, is that it is completely apocryphal. Li Run did not die in 1898 but in 1925. Rather than sacrifice her life for her husband, she devoted it to female education, directing a school she founded in eastern Hunan Province from shortly after Tan's execution until her own death twenty-seven years later.

This bifurcated story of Li Run's life highlights one of this book's pivotal themes: the authority of history and the weight of politics in signifying Chinese women's lives. Li's biographer vindicated Tan Sitong and the 1898 reformers by situating Li within a genealogy of righteous female martyrs. He confirmed Tan's political loyalty by asserting Li's marital fidelity, invoking the age-old homology between minister and state, wife and husband: Tan had died for his country just as Li had died for Tan. Li Run's doubled story thus offers insights into the politically driven process of transforming women in historical time into exemplars in paradigmatic time. It also exposes disjunctions between metatemporal categories of women—such as the righteous female martyr—and the temporal lives these categories allegedly contain.

The account is rife with the gender paradoxes, strategic historical appropriations, and competing national meanings that marked the turn of the twentieth century, a key moment in the unfolding of Chinese modernity. Both the "woman question" and the question of history are central to understanding the politics of this moment. This book maps the gender categories and historical imaginaries that underpinned these politics. It examines the ways ideas of woman, history, and nation are imbricated with one another, and probes the impact of these imaginings on women's everyday lives.⁵ Its aim is not to reassert but to elucidate the complexity of the era by tracing patterns and seeking meanings in the intricate weave of Chinese modernity.

Chinese Modernity

Modernity is an amorphous concept. It slides across chronologies, absorbs a range of contents, and is qualified with a plethora of adjectives. Modernities can be repressed, contested, colonial, competing, hygienic, lost—to give a few examples from the recent field of East Asian studies alone. Inundated by such coinages and saturated with the often obfuscating theoretical litera-

ture on the topic, I was committed to never using the word in this book. I maintained this conviction throughout the first but not the final draft. This is partly for reasons of communicability. It is mostly, however, because the term—perhaps due to its amorphousness—best encompasses the specific processes that are central to understanding China at the turn of the twentieth century.

I use modernity to refer to the interaction among three processes: secularization, globalization, and temporalization. Although these labels resonate within broader discourses on modernity, they denote processes with distinctive meanings both in late imperial China and in the context of this book. First and foremost, they were not unidirectional. Confucian and “progressive” values, local and Western ideas, conceptions of past, present, and future, were mutually determining. Existing epistemologies were not fixed entities replaced or overwritten by alternatives. Rather they were fluid points of departure that were transformed and often revitalized in interaction with these alternatives.

On the highest level of abstraction, secularization refers to changes instigated by the mid- to late-nineteenth-century encounter between Confucian ritual teachings (*lijiao*) and “advanced,” foreign-inspired (*wenming*) ideas.⁶ While not the doctrine of a deocentric, churchlike organization, Confucian ritual teachings did have certain quasi-religious elements. They were a source of ultimate value based on ancient texts and notions of correlative cosmology that guided human behavior and proper social relations.⁷ These teachings were, however, this-worldly rather than other-worldly, their truths immanent rather than transcendent.⁸ This social embedment is manifest in an important locus of late imperial ritual teachings—and a crucial nexus of analysis in this book—the “regime of feminine virtue.”⁹ A woman who adhered to this regime followed Ming and Qing dynasty interpretations of ancient principles of gender propriety such as the strict separation of the sexes and a rigid division of the inner (*nei*) and outer (*wai*) spheres. In upholding these principles, she allegedly contributed to the preservation of not only familial and social but also cosmological order.

These gender principles were variously upheld, reinterpreted, or summarily dismissed at the turn of the twentieth century. Western missionizing, the Opium (1839–42, 1856) and Sino-Japanese (1894–95) Wars, and intensified diplomatic and intellectual exchanges had disrupted the Confucian view of a self-contained and correlative cosmos, and demanded a more secular recontextualization of notions of polity, society, and womanhood.¹⁰ In the

words of a 1906 women's textbook, the "absurd" notion that China represented "all under Heaven" (*tianxia*) now had to be refuted: the terminal political community had shifted, in Joseph Levenson's famous formulation, from "all under Heaven" to the nation-state (see Figure 1).¹¹ The great Qing dynasty (1644–1911) had become in the eyes of many of its subjects, a nation among nations; the Han people, one race among many; the clan one of a number of possible modes of social organization. At the same time, individuals—both male and female—were increasingly disembedded from the nested worlds they once inhabited. The family no longer served as the singular context for female self-definition as women—once idealized as the cloistered guarantors of a concordant cosmos—were interpellated as national subjects and assumed unprecedented public roles.

The secular idea that had most profoundly disembedded Chinese women at the turn of the twentieth century was public education.¹² It was the public rather than the education component that posed the greatest threat to the regime of feminine virtue. According to the ancient principles underpinning the regime, gender differentiation was reinforced by distinct male and female educational trajectories. The "Domestic Regulations" (*Nei ze*) section of the *Record of Rites* (*Li ji*) stipulated that boys would leave home

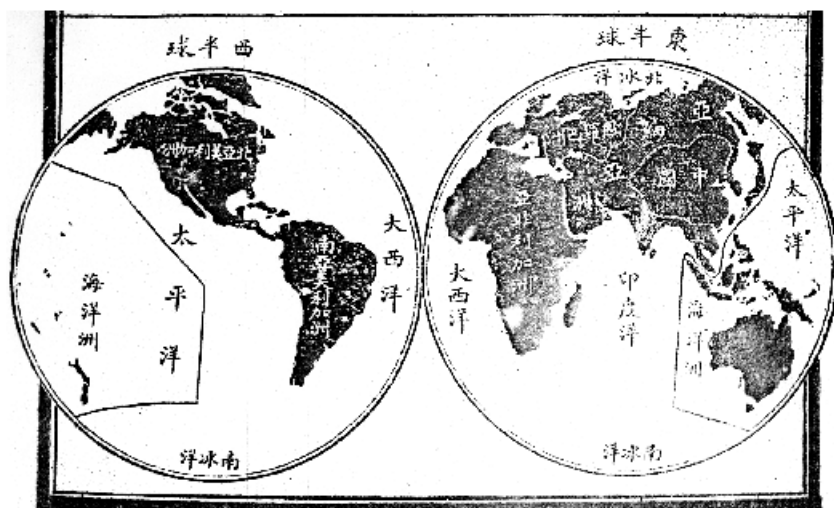


Figure 1 Textbook image used to help female students reject the "absurd" notion that China represented "all under Heaven"

SOURCE: Xie Chongxie, 48b

to attend school at age ten while girls would remain in the household and receive instruction from female tutors.¹³ Although the content of household instruction expanded considerably over the next two millennia, it was not until the turn of the twentieth century that the movement for formal female education directly challenged the institutional model put forward in the *Record of Rites*.¹⁴

Reluctant supporters and passionate promoters of this movement held widely varying views of women's education. For some, its purpose was to reproduce ritual principles, for others to train mothers of citizens, and for still others to instill revolutionary ideas. Even the more secular of these educational visions did not necessarily nullify the regime of virtue's principles, however. The notion of female service to the cosmos via the family as righteous mothers and steadfast wives was, for example, transformed into the notion of female service to the nation as patriotic mothers and loyal citizens. This blurring of epistemes was further apparent in the ways novel secular and ancient ritual pedagogies were enabling or constraining for female students. While nationalism created new conditions of possibility that many women willingly embraced, those conditions were limited within well-defined national rubrics. In contrast, adherence to rigid Confucian principles could earn them the moral capital necessary to constitute themselves as individual historical subjects.

Similar fusions are evident in the translation of new global models, the second process central to Chinese modernity. The foreign ideas that inspired secular change in China at the turn of the twentieth century did not supplant an existing conceptual universe. Rather, forward- and outward-looking Chinese of the period translated these ideas into the historical lexicon of that universe. This "host" language of Chinese history is more difficult for us to learn than the "guest" language of the modern West, which is, after all, a "dialect" of our own. Knowledge of the vernacular languages the Chinese used to decode and interpret new secular ideas is, however, crucial to understanding how those ideas were appropriated and assimilated. Similarly, a grasp of the concrete micro-processes through which Western ideas were mediated is essential to our understanding of the more abstract macro-processes of ideational translation.

Meiji Japan (1868–1912) played a critical role in the mediation of Western ideas and in the unfolding of Chinese modernity. Western political, social, and gender theory reached China primarily through Japanese translations of European and American works. Sixty percent of the estimated 533

books translated into Chinese between 1902 and 1904 were from Japanese, for example, while only 16 percent were from English and 3 percent from French.¹⁵ The translators of these works were usually Chinese living in the highly politicized overseas community in Tokyo and Yokohama. Among them were exiles from the Qing government (including Tan Sitong's surviving co-reformers), publicists, and, over the course of the first decade of the twentieth century, thousands of male and hundreds of female students. Japan offered the members of this community more than a translated repertoire of Western ideas, however. It also provided its own East Asian models of nationhood and womanhood that highlighted relative deficiencies in Chinese political and social practices. Ultimately, Japan stood as a crucial temporal benchmark. Chinese men and women who learned from, traveled to, and compared their nation with the Meiji state often mapped the historical distinction between an evolved present and an archaic past onto the cultural and spatial distinction between China and Japan.¹⁶

As this mapping of China's relations with Japan suggests, globalization and secularization in late Qing China (1890–1911) were closely linked to new modes of temporalization. These disrupted times—ravaged not only by imperialist wars, but by the Taiping (1851–64) and Boxer (1899–1901) Rebellions—disrupted conventional notions of time, jolting China into national consciousness and provoking shifts in time consciousness.¹⁷ Individuals who held widely divergent visions of China's national future attempted to initiate change in the present by reappropriating elements of “the past” in politically significant ways.¹⁸ This past, which was never entirely cohesive or homogenous, became an increasingly fractured and heterogeneous cultural resource that often opened up, rather than foreclosed, new possibilities for both nation and women.

Chinese modernity was, thus, the outcome neither of a sharp rupture with “tradition” nor of a zero-sum game between East and West—reductive binaries that have been widely discredited if not fully overcome in the literature on this period.¹⁹ Instead, it was the product of an intricate triangulation among myriad visions of the Chinese past, a plethora of imagined futures, and current global forces generally reified as “the West” and largely mediated by Japan. Forward-looking turn-of-the-twentieth-century Chinese men and women promoted new ideas by translating them into local historical knowledge. They advanced novel Western-inspired agendas by seeking new meanings in their own history. Linking cognitive innovation to historical restitution, they produced the new by creatively (re)producing the old.²⁰